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Is Context-Sensitivity Elimidable? Some Remarks

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I. Introduction

A sentence is *context-sensitive* iff its truth-conditions can vary across occasions of use even as the sentence's standing meaning in the language remains fixed.¹ For instance, the truth-conditions of the sentence 'It's big' vary according to what's being referred to, when the sentence is uttered, what the comparison class is, etc. Context-sensitivity is a pervasive feature of natural languages—which ought not to be surprising, given the efficiency and flexibility it yields. Moreover, a certain amount of context-sensitivity seems necessary for the acquisition of a first language: consider, for example, the role of ostensibly presented exemplars in learning sortals and adjectives.

Still, one might think context-sensitivity a ladder that *in principle* one could throw away—that is, one might think that a mature language user could *in principle* say whatever she wanted to say using only context-*insensitive* means.² Let's label this the *Replacement Thesis*:

For any human first language, for all expressions of a proposition in that language via a context-sensitive sentence, there exists a context-*insensitive* sentence in that language that expresses that proposition.

For any occasion of utterance of a context-sensitive sentence, that is, in principle one can *replace* the context-sensitive sentence with a context-*insensitive* sentence without change of content.³

“Without change in content”: assessment of the Replacement Thesis would seem to require some conception of content-identity. Absent agreed-upon criteria, how could one assess whether some would-be replacement in fact preserved content? Such criteria, however, are controversial. Even in cases of so-called “essential indexicals,” there is room to dispute whether failing to pass some proposed test of content-identity reveals in fact a difference in proposition expressed or rather just a difference in means of expression.⁴ There are, however, two takes on the Replacement Thesis that might purport to bypass such disputes—and they are what I propose to discuss in these remarks.

The first holds that the Replacement Thesis is easily established by a method of stipulation: for each use of a context-sensitive expression, one can simply stipulate that some other expression possess context-*insensitively* the semantic value the context-

¹ Or, the truth-conditions of the proposition expressed in uttering it. Henceforth, I'll just let myself be sloppy in this way when nothing hangs on it.

² Mature language users continue to learn new words, grasp new concepts, etc. Perhaps at least sometimes this *requires* the use of context-sensitive language. But let's put this to one side.

³ To reduce wordiness, I'll sometimes speak of SENs instead of context-sensitive sentences and of INSENs instead of context-*insensitive* sentences. So, the thesis says that uses of SENs can always be replaced in principle by INSENs. Notice, incidentally, that the thesis maintains that one can replace—or, eliminate—*sentence* context-sensitivity: it's consistent with this that the replacing sentence itself contain a context-sensitive sub-sentential constituent (whose semantic value is in some way fixed intra-sententially).

⁴ See Perry [1979] and Stalnaker [1981]. Further complications arise if the phrases 'expresses the same proposition as' and 'has the same content as' are themselves context-sensitive.

sensitive expression possesses on that particular occasion. I argue that this method in fact does *not* avoid substantive commitment concerning content-identity; and so, however it may fare in the end, it at least does not provide as *easy* an argument against the Replacement Thesis as many suppose.

Seeing that the Replacement Thesis is at least not *obviously* true softens one up a bit for the second take. It argues *against* the Replacement Thesis by an appeal to what's sometimes labeled *Contextualism*,⁵ the thesis that:

(practically) all sentences are context-sensitive.

If Contextualism is true, then—no matter the conception of content in play—there simply aren't context-*insensitive* sentences around to act as replacements. A full critical assessment of Contextualism is beyond the scope of this paper. I content myself with drawing out some of its consequences, showing along the way how one might parry two possible objections to Contextualism—viz., that it threatens the objectivity of scientific claims, and that it precludes an account of semantic competence that would accommodate such phenomena as productivity.

The objective, then, is not to settle how content should be construed and whether Contextualism is true—nor, therefore, whether context-sensitivity is eliminable; but rather to clarify aspects of these questions and their interrelations. It's hoped as well that the remarks on stipulation and on the possibility of providing a context-sensitive account of semantic competence are of independent interest.

II. For Replacement: Stipulation⁶

I begin my discussion of the first take with a remark of Stalnaker. He notes that it seems:

easy to eliminate context-dependence [since for] any proposition expressed in context *c* by sentence *s*, we may simply stipulate that some other sentence *s'* shall express, in all contexts, that same proposition.⁷

This remark might seem to provide a rather painless proof of the Replacement Thesis. Certainly, it's often the first response one hears when semanticists converse about Contextualism.

Natural language sentences, however, necessarily have syntactic structure. One can stipulate, perhaps, that some syntactically simple item *refer* context-insensitively to some proposition, but not that it *express* it (and if that stipulation succeeds, the item will

⁵ Cf. Recanati [1994].

⁶ This section expands a few paragraphs from my dissertation. See Gross [1998, pp. 18-9].

⁷ Stalnaker [1984, pp. 151-2] in response to van Fraassen's claim [1980, p. 118] that counterfactuals don't belong to an objective scientific description of the world because they are "essentially" context-sensitive. In fairness to Stalnaker, one should note that his remark occurs after he has outlined and begun defending a particular (and particularly coarse-grained) conception of content. His own use of the argument from stipulation thus might not be intended to side-step substantive questions of content-identity. In any event, this published remark usefully articulates a commonly held sentiment.

be a noun, not a sentence). Consider, however, the following *Context-Sensitive Constituent Thesis*:

A context-sensitive expression is so in virtue of the context-sensitivity of some syntactically simple constituent of that expression.⁸

In other words, the context-sensitivity of some complex expression can always be pinned on one its parts. If this thesis obtains, then one might modify Stalnaker's suggestion as follows:

for any proposition expressed in context *c* by sentence *s* containing context-sensitive constituent expressions e_1, \dots, e_n , we may simply stipulate that some other syntactically appropriate lexical items e_1', \dots, e_n' shall possess, in all contexts, the semantic values that e_1, \dots, e_n possess in *c* (where 'semantic value' is intended here to encompass anything relevant to content determination).

The Context-Sensitive Constituent Thesis is actually highly controversial. It would be rejected, for example, by Perry, who admits contextually-determined unarticulated constituents into the structure of a proposition (unarticulated in the sense of not corresponding to any syntactically realized constituent), as well as by Sperber and Wilson, who include pragmatic processes of free enrichment among the determinants of content (free in that they are not constrained by syntactically realized constituents).⁹ Suppose, though, that more complicated variants of the Context-Sensitive Constituent Thesis could be formulated that would satisfy the proponents of these and other approaches and so enable us to modify appropriately Stalnaker's original suggestion. Would we then possess a quick and easy argument for the Replacement Thesis?

It might be objected that stipulatively introducing new terms involves an extension, and thus a change, of language, while the Replacement Thesis requires that utterances of SENs be in principle replaceable by INSENs of the *same* language. But even if one grants the extremely fine conception of language-individuation implicit in this response, it would seem that the objection can be easily neutralized by modifying the Replacement Thesis as follows to yield what (for reasons soon to be obvious) I'll label the *Narrow Scope Replacement Thesis*:

For any human first language, for all expressions of a proposition in that language via a SEN, there exists an INSEN in an *extension* of that language that expresses that proposition.

⁸ Roughly, a sub-sentential *constituent* is context-sensitive iff its *contribution* to truth-conditions can vary across occasions of use even as its standing meaning in the language remains fixed. Note that a constituent counts degeneratively as a constituent of itself. This allows a pithier formulation of the Context-Sensitive Constituent Thesis. A version of this thesis is defended in Szabó [1995], where it is labeled the *Context Thesis*.

⁹ See Perry [1993] and Sperber and Wilson [1986].

Note, however, that what I'll label the *Wide Scope Replacement Thesis* does not follow from this—that is, from the *Narrow Scope Replacement Thesis* we *cannot* conclude that:

For any human first language, there exists an extension of that language such that, for all expressions of a proposition in that language via a SEN, there exists in the extension an INSEN that expresses that proposition.

The difference is simply the difference between ‘for all . . . , there exists’ and ‘there exists . . . , for all’. Of course, from the former, the latter does not follow. Even if we could always extend our language to include a context-insensitive replacement for any given utterance of a SEN, it would not follow that there exists some *one* extension of the language in which anything we now can say could be said using only context-insensitive means.

Just as obviously, from the fact that the *Wide Scope Replacement Thesis* doesn't follow from the *Narrow Scope Replacement Thesis*, it doesn't follow that the *Wide Scope Replacement Thesis* isn't *true*. What is made manifest, however, is that the easy method of *stipulation* can't establish the *Wide Scope Replacement Thesis*. For, if we were to introduce a new context-insensitive replacement for each (possible) *use* of a context-sensitive term, the language's lexicon would soon exceed human capacities. Each extension of the language, taken on its own, would perhaps be unobjectionable; but taken together, they would yield a language of which there could be no competent human speaker. (This just helps remind us why it's no surprise that natural languages are so pervasively context-sensitive.)

A natural response is to seek a more systematic way of replacing uses of SENs with INSENS, instead of by brutally introducing a new term for each (possible) use. For example, one might try replacing context-sensitive locator terms (e.g., ‘here’, ‘there’) with definite descriptions of a spatial grid (‘the unique position five units to the east, four units to the north, and three units below origin A, given orientation B’). But, as I hope the example makes clear, such more systematic approaches would clearly force us to address the issues of content-identity that the method of stipulation promised to bypass. (Moreover, it's unclear whether all contextual variation in content can be comprehended as specifiable variation along specifiable dimensions. Consider the context-sensitivity of ‘is nice’.)¹⁰

Still, it might be held that the easy method of stipulation at least establishes the *Narrow Scope Replacement Thesis*: we can always replace some *particular* use of a SEN by a content-preserving INSEN. Even that, however, is not so obvious. I've already mentioned that some would reject the *Context-Sensitive Constituent Thesis*. Perhaps some would go further and deny as well that there exists any variant that could serve its purpose. But even with the *Context-Sensitive Constituent Thesis* (or some variant) in place, one might question whether the required stipulations would be successful. Stipulative definitions, after all, aren't *guaranteed* to succeed just because we're clear and explicit in introducing our new term. For example, a would-be stipulation could introduce inconsistency.

¹⁰ There would also be the question of whether the proposed replacements really were context-insensitive—but I get ahead of myself.

It will be asked: OK, stipulations aren't in *general* guaranteed, but what *particular* reason is there to think anything might go awry with the stipulations *under discussion*? Well, here are just two possibilities, about which I'll try to say enough, not to defend them, but simply to establish their credentials as ideas worth considering: the point, recall, is to show that the supposedly *easy* method of stipulation must in fact take on substantive commitments concerning content.

So, first, suppose you held the following *Reflexive Content Thesis*:

There are expressions such that a part of the semantic value of the expression, at least on some occasions of use, is the expression itself.

Consider, for example, the sentence:

Giorgione was so-called because of his size

That the truth-value of this sentence differs from that of:

Barbarelli was so-called because of his size

suggested to Quine that the name 'Giorgione' (at least as used above) has "two implicit roles," a remark we may gloss roughly (for our purposes) as suggesting that it contributes to the proposition expressed by the first sentence, not only a particular person, but also the word itself.¹¹ And perhaps parallel positions could be defended for mixed quotations such as:

Quine says that quotation 'has a certain anomalous feature'

or for attitude ascriptions and related constructions. But if there are cases in which the semantic value of some context-sensitive expression *e* includes the expression itself, then no stipulation that some new expression *e'* context-insensitively contribute to content what *e* contributes to content in context *c* could succeed: the very fact that a different expression was being used would guarantee a change in semantic value. Of course, the possible cases I have mentioned are highly controversial;¹² but, again, my point is just that the method of stipulation requires taking a stand on them.

A second way one might question the success of some such stipulations adverts to an account of vagueness I have discussed elsewhere.¹³ The basic idea is that whether an utterance of a sentence containing a vague predicate expresses a proposition is context-sensitive, since in different contexts the following necessary condition on the expression of a proposition may or may not be satisfied:

¹¹ Quine [1960, p. 153].

¹² A plausible position is that it's the use of 'so' that introduces the name 'Giorgione' into content, rather than its being part of its own semantic value. See Forbes [1996]. For general discussion, see Recanati [2000].

¹³ See Gross [1998, Chapter IV] and Gross [2000].

(C) It is a reasonable *pragmatic presupposition* that the predicate, as used, partition the contextually relevant domain of discourse.

According to this view, such a presupposition is generated by the use of any predicate. On certain occasions, however, there is also generated the contradicting presupposition that the predicate, as used, does *not* partition the contextually relevant domain. In particular, this occurs when the predicate's vagueness becomes contextually salient—say, when a borderline case is under consideration. But when this contradicting presupposition is generated, the presupposition in condition (C) can no longer be deemed reasonable; and thus the sentence, in that context, does not express a proposition. So long, however, as the sentence is used in a context that doesn't generate the contradicting presupposition, it *can* (assuming nothing else is amiss) express a proposition. Since such sentence context-sensitivity turns on features of a constituent vague predicate, the vague predicate is itself context-sensitive in that it expresses a property when used in some contexts, but fails to in others.¹⁴

Now, suppose on some occasion I use the vague, and thus (according to this view) context-sensitive, predicate 'small' to describe the very short basketball player Mugsy Bogues. I say:

Mugsy is small.

Here's how one would presumably attempt to stipulate away the context-sensitivity:

The term 'schmall' shall context-insensitively express the property just ascribed to Mugsy Bogues using the context-sensitive term 'small'.

But notice that, if (C) is a necessary condition on the expression of a proposition, then 'schmall' will be context-sensitive as well. For, when I ascribed smallness to Mugsy, nothing in my use of the term determined a sharp boundary between those to whom I would apply the term and those I wouldn't. So, if 'schmall' captures what my use of 'small' expressed on that occasion, then it must also be vague and thus context-sensitive: trying to stipulate that it *not* be can't change that. This argument assumes that other views of vagueness are incorrect—for example, epistemicism, the view that such uses of vague predicates *do* determine sharp boundaries, their vagueness consisting in our (perhaps irremediable) ignorance thereof.¹⁵ But, again, the point is to demonstrate that the supposedly easy method of stipulation in fact must take on substantial commitments, in this case concerning the nature of vagueness and thus the content expressed by vague sentences.

Let me underscore that both the Reflexive Content Thesis and the view of vagueness based on (C) entail only that *some* expressions resist context-insensitive replacement, which of course would be sufficient to refute the Replacement Theses.¹⁶ But denying the Replacement Theses does not require affirming their contraries: you can

¹⁴ Typically this is not the *only* way in which it's context-sensitive.

¹⁵ Epistemicism is defended in, for example, Williamson [1994].

¹⁶ Assuming, as I am for simplicity's sake, that no other constituents of the sentences at issue act on the reflexive or vague expressions in such a way as to neutralize the properties discussed above.

entertain the possibility that not all utterances of SENs can be replaced by INSENs while yet dismissing the idea that *none* can. I turn now, however, to a position that *would* affirm the contraries of the Replacement Theses.

III. Against Replacement: Contextualism

According to *Contextualism* (the *second* view I said I would discuss):

(practically) all natural language sentences are context-sensitive.¹⁷

But, obviously, if all sentences are context-sensitive, there aren't even any *candidate* context-insensitive replacements for any given use of a SEN. The Contextualist would thus deny, not only the various Replacement Theses distinguished above, but further would affirm their contraries.

A variety of considerations have been adduced in favor of Contextualism. As advertised, I won't assess them here, but instead will draw out some of the position's consequences, responding along the way to some objections. I should, however, briefly mention what form the support usually takes. For, while the *brute acceptance* of Contextualism would provide a way of rejecting the Replacement Theses that side-stepped controversies about content, it's not so clear that one can provide grounds for Contextualism itself without entering into this fray.

Most typically, Contextualism is defended by a plausibility argument advanced on the basis of the (near) ubiquity of context-sensitivity among subsentential constituents. It seems that (practically) all noun phrases are context-sensitive: indexicals and demonstratives (for obvious reasons), quantifier and descriptive phrases (because of the contextual variability of domains of discourse), and even (according to some) proper names. And arguably the same can be established for verb phrases either on a case-by-case basis or more systematically by adverting, for instance, to vagueness and to unbounded polysemy.¹⁸ One can establish the context-sensitivity of these various expressions by displaying pairs of scenarios in which (1) a sentence containing the alleged context-sensitive expression is, in each scenario, asserted literally with standing linguistic meaning held fixed, but (2) one of the uses expresses a truth and the other a falsehood, and (3) there seems to be no other plausible source of context-sensitivity besides the expression at issue. Clearly, constructing a compelling case would require commitments concerning content. But it may be thought that the case can be made (at least one of plausibility) without incurring commitments that are *controversial*. Because I am setting aside consideration of Contextualism's arguments for another occasion, I will simply grant for the nonce the suggestion that the means used to establish such cases

¹⁷ To keep things manageable, I'll for the most part neglect the qualifier 'practically'. One would want to know, however, whether the existence of a class of exceptions would block drawing any of the consequences discussed below. A natural thought, for example, is that the "final" theories of at least certain foundational sciences can be stated context-insensitively.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., Recanati [1994], Travis [1981, 1997], and Moravcsik [1998]. I survey some of these varieties of context-sensitivity in Gross [1998, chapter 1]. On the more controversial case of proper names, see, e.g., Burge [1973] and Recanati [1993, Chapter 8], though I don't mean to imply that either endorses Contextualism, especially Burge.

would be allowed by all, or a large variety, of approaches to content. Suppose we press on to see what may follow.

We've just noted that Contextualism entails the denial of the various Replacement Theses so far discussed and moreover affirms their contraries. These consequences obtain as well for further variants of the Replacement Thesis. For example, Contextualism would deny Replacement Theses that required preservation of something *other* than content—and, again, it would affirm their contraries. Quine, though he upheld *some* version of the Replacement Thesis,¹⁹ was notoriously skeptical of notions of content. Presumably, then, he would not accept the *formulations* so far presented. Carnap, while perhaps more prepared to accept some relevant notion of content, might have questioned the interest of preserving *content* when “explicating” sentences for scientific purposes.²⁰ Pragmatists of various stripes might *mutatis mutandis* have similar qualms. However, no matter how one alters what the Replacement Thesis requires context-insensitive replacements to preserve, Contextualism will deny that such preservation is possible, there being no INSENs to draw upon.

Contextualism would also deny various *restricted* Replacement Theses, versions (that is) restricted to some special class of sentences, such as (say) those used to state scientific theories—and it would affirm their contraries.²¹ So, it's a consequence of Contextualism that there can be no context-insensitive formulation of a scientific theory, since there can't be a context-insensitive formulation of anything. Now, it's sometimes suggested that there would be a threat to the objectivity of scientific theories if it were not the case that they were in principle expressible via INSENs.²² The nature of the threat, however, is not so clear. Contextualism doesn't imply that one can state or express a scientific theory (or any other thought, for that matter) only from one type of context. Contextualism only implies that no sentence can be used to express the same proposition no matter the context. Suppose sentence S expresses proposition P in context c, but, being context-sensitive, does not express P in some other context c'. Contextualism does not preclude there being some *other* sentence S' that does express P in c'. And it doesn't preclude there being for *each* context *some* sentence that expresses P in that context. Again, it only precludes there being some *one* sentence that expresses P in *all* contexts. The consequence, therefore, is that the content of a scientific theory must be *variably expressed* depending on the context. But why should this threaten the objectivity of what is thereby variably expressed?

Of course, just because Contextualism doesn't *preclude* the use of a SEN's having what we might call *transforms* (that is, *other* SENs that express in other contexts what the use of the first SEN does in its), it doesn't follow that there *are* such transforms. Indeed, for some cases there is reason to think there are not. Consider some general physical claim I might intend by an utterance containing the expression 'all free falling bodies'. Suppose later, however, I find myself in a conversational context in part constituted by a *smaller* domain of discourse, one that's a proper subset of the domain in place during my

¹⁹ See Quine [1960, p. 194].

²⁰ Cf. Carnap [1950, p. 3].

²¹ Again, further discussion would be required to accommodate the 'practically' hedge sometimes added to statements of Contextualism.

²² I've already referred to the remark by van Fraassen [1980, p. 118], to which Stalnaker is responding when he invokes stipulation, that “scientific propositions are not context-dependent in any essential way.”

earlier utterance: perhaps now the domain is contextually restricted to the free-falling bodies *we happen to have in our legal possession*. Then the original, more general claim simply can't be expressed, no matter what sentence you try.²³ (The example, incidentally, reminds us that changing contexts needn't involve, say, moving to a different locale—as if the context-sensitivity of sentences used to formulate some scientific theory entailed that the theory could only be put forth in certain *places*. A change of context can involve, among other possibilities, just making it conversationally clear that you don't intend to restrict the domain of discourse in a certain way.)

Perhaps then there are propositions that can only be expressed within certain contexts, that are thus “inaccessible” from others. Even so, it doesn't immediately follow without substantive auxiliary premises that such claims lack objectivity or are in some other way unsuitable for science. That others might not be in a position to express some proposition does *not* entail that, when *you* express it, what you have expressed is subjective, or perspectival, or dependent upon human interests.²⁴ Conditions on the *expression* of a proposition aren't therefore conditions on the *proposition expressed*.

Things become a bit more delicate, however, for a *certain* class of scientific theories—viz., theories that purport to explain cognitive capacities by ascribing tacit knowledge to the agent. Consider, for example, cognitivist theories of semantic competence. According to one common version of such theories,²⁵ part of the explanation of your ability to communicate successfully through a language is your (largely tacit) grasp of a compositional truth-theory from which can be derived the truth-conditions for the sentences of the language you speak. So, semanticists, in constructing a truth-theory for a language, are not just constructing a theory that states the semantic properties of a language; they are also articulating a theory speakers of the language *themselves* know.

Now, natural languages of course contain SENs; so, semantic theories must assign *variable* truth-conditions to such sentences. Standardly, it is assumed that the theory is itself stated context-*insensitively*; it is assumed, that is, that the meta-language need contain only INSENs even for articulating the variable truth-conditions of the object-language's SENs.²⁶ This is perfectly consistent with the denial of the Replacement Thesis. From the fact that a SEN does not have a context-insensitive replacement it does not follow that its truth-conditions can't be stated context-insensitively. Consider the following T-sentence:

For all utterances *u*, for all contexts *c*, if *u* is an utterance of 'I am in pain' in context *c*, then *u* is true iff the speaker in *c* is in pain.

Even if no INSEN could express just what a particular utterance of 'I am in pain' does, this T-sentence, for all that, might context-insensitively provide its variable truth-conditions. So, merely denying the Replacement Thesis does not yet provide any reason to question the standard assumption that a semantic theory can and should be stated context-insensitively. Indeed, maintaining the possibility of a context-insensitive

²³ Note that I've formulated the point without assuming the intelligibility of a “(semantically) unrestricted domain”. I discuss that issue in Gross [forthcoming].

²⁴ Nor, I think, are we committed to any form of “mysticism,” as Katz [1972, p. 126] suggests.

²⁵ See Larson and Segal [1995].

²⁶ See, e.g., Davidson [1976, p. 175] and Higginbotham [1988, p. 25].

semantic theory for a language containing context-sensitivity is consistent with affirming the *contrary* of the Replacement Thesis. That *no* use of a SEN can be replaced by a content-preserving INSEN leaves open the possibility that its truth-conditions can nonetheless be stated by some INSEN of the meta-language. However, someone who denies the Replacement Thesis and affirms its contrary can maintain this possibility *only* if her denial and affirmation is based on grounds *other* than those provided by Contextualism. For, if Contextualism is true, then, since there'd be no INSENs at all, there can be no context-insensitive formulation of a semantic theory. Contextualism does require that we question the standard assumption.

Well, we've already seen that Contextualism precludes the context-insensitive formulation of *any* scientific theory. So, why is there a special problem here? Above, I suggested that it's at least not obvious why either the fact that a proposition can be variably expressed or that it can be only expressed in certain contexts (that it can only be *limitedly* expressed) should threaten the objectivity or scientific *bona fides* of the claim. In the case of a cognitivist theory, however, there may be a problem at least with limited expressibility. Let's grant that there's no special problem for cognitivist theories posed by their being variably expressed: different sentences might be needed to express the theory in different contexts. Suppose, though, that the type of context-sensitivity involved is such that there seems no good reason to expect there to be, for each claim of the theory, and for each context, a sentence that would express it. Suppose, that is, that some proposition of a theory of semantic competence can be expressed in only certain contexts. This would seem plausible, given the discussion of available transforms above, since the axioms of a T-theory express general claims. The *prima facie* problem, however, is that, according to the cognitivist explanation, one needs access to these claims no matter what the context. For it's your *standing* knowledge of what the semantic theory expresses—together with your ability to track conversationally relevant contextual features—that enables you to engage successfully in linguistic communication.

I refer to this as a *prima facie* problem, because there do exist lines of response one might consider. For example, one might suggest that grasp of a semantic theory doesn't require that the theory can be expressed in language—or at least not that it can be expressed in language whatever the context. Or, one might suggest that (a) our tacit grasp of a semantic theory consists in a representation of it in the Language of Thought having the appropriate role in our cognitive economy; and (b) Contextualism isn't true of the Language of Thought. (This is open to debate: first, it's been argued that the Language of Thought just is the language we speak;²⁷ and, even if the Language of Thought is *not* a natural language, it would need to be examined whether any of the arguments mustered for natural language Contextualism applied *mutatis mutandis* to it as well.) Another strategy one might pursue would abandon, not only the possibility of a context-insensitive formulation of a theory of semantic competence, but also the thesis that our semantic competence consists in the grasp of some *one* semantic theory.²⁸ I'll close by briefly suggesting how this last strategy might run.

Consider, for example, this rough axiom for 'is green':

²⁷ See, e.g., Ludlow [1999, pp. 22-6 and 165-71].

²⁸ The idea glossed here of a context-sensitive theory of semantic competence is also briefly discussed in Gross [1998, pp. 70-5]. Others have also proposed allowing a context-sensitive meta-language, for example Ludlow [1999].

For all x, 'is green' applies to x iff x is green.

The predicate 'is green' is context-sensitive in a variety of ways: it's vague and thus amenable to sharpening in a context; it can apply to different parts of a thing in contextually varying ways; whether it applies can depend on what counts as the contextually relevant viewing conditions (how close to x is one supposed to be, in what sort of illumination), etc. Because the predicate is context-sensitive, so is the right-hand-side of the axiom of which it's a constituent. And because its right-hand-side is context-sensitive, so is the axiom itself. Let's take seriously the Contextualist's claim there's no way to eliminate this context-sensitivity. Still, a speaker could use something like this axiom, in any given context, to express the semantic value of the predicate in that context. All she would have to do is to relativize the axiom to the very context in which it was uttered, yielding:

For all x, 'is green,' as used in this very context, applies to x iff x is green.

If one generalizes this strategy to all the sentences that constitute the would-be semantic theory, what one winds up with is a set of sentences that express something different in every context, but that in any context express the semantic values the terms have *in that context*. Semantic competence, on this approach, would thus not consist in the grasp of what is expressed by some *one* semantic theory, but rather in having the capacity to grasp the proper semantic theory for any given context by properly deploying the context-sensitive axioms. Note, incidentally, that what would be grasped in each context would be compositional, so that an explanation of language's systematicity and productivity would still be available.

So, this would be one way a Contextualist could resolve the *prima facie* problem—one, however, that would require a substantial change in at least some prominent conceptions of linguistic competence.²⁹

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