

# Contextualism, Minimalism, and Situationalism\*

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On the current semantic market we have two main competing positions concerning the way linguistic communication exploits contextual features. The main debate turns around the notion of what is said. If we assume, following the tradition, that an utterance  $u$  expresses a proposition  $p$  and that  $p$  is *what is said* by a speaker uttering  $u$ , the debate turns on the nature of  $p$ . On one end of the spectrum we have (radical) *contextualism*. People belonging to this camp hold the view that each utterance is contextually bound and what is said (and communicated)—the proposition expressed—ultimately depends on the context of use. On the other end of the spectrum we have *minimalism*. The friends of this position hold the view that an utterance of a non-indexical sentence (i.e. an utterance of a sentence deprived of indexical expressions) always expresses the very same proposition; the latter is insensitive to the discourse situation in which the utterance occurs. Thus, if an utterance  $u$  does not contain indexical expressions it always expresses the proposition  $p$  regardless of the context in which  $u$  occurs. What the utterer of  $u$  (semantically) says using a non-indexical utterance is context *insensitive*.

Both views face difficulties. While contextualists face problems proposing a semantic theory of successful communication, minimalists end up denying some very plausible intuitions. In other words, contextualists have difficulties in spelling out the very nature of the proposition which gets communicated (the very nature of what is said), while minimalists have difficulties taking on board ordinary speaker's intuitions. The view I propose, *situationalism*, incorporates the merits of contextualism and minimalism without facing the difficulties these extreme positions face. In common with minimalism I endorse the view that what is said (i.e. the proposition expressed) can be truth-evaluable without having to undergo an enrichment process. Along with contextualism I endorse the view that the truth-value of the proposition expressed can vary with the context (the discourse situation) in which it occurs. That is to say, a change of the discourse situation involves a change in the truth-conditions and may thus entail a change in the truth-value of the relevant utterance. I shall end up arguing that situationalism fits better with our cognitive faculties.

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## 1. Language and Context

In reflecting both on how humans linguistically interact among themselves and on how they entertain thoughts about their surrounding and their conspecifics, one cannot but recognize that they exploit the context (or situation) they find themselves in. When one indicates a red ink pen in front of someone and asks “Please pass me that pen,” one succeeds in drawing the audience’s attention toward the relevant pen. If we change the context and instead of a red ink pen we have a blue ink one, the audience’s attention would be directed toward the blue ink pen and our subject would end up writing with a blue ink pen instead of a red ink one. In short, if we change the context in which one uses one’s words, we may end up changing the objects one thinks and talks about. When I call home and ask my partner whether there is some chardonnay in the fridge, I am asking about the presence or absence of chardonnay in *our* fridge: I am not concerned about the chardonnay in, say, Jane’s fridge nor the chardonnay in my colleague’s fridge. If my partner is not sure, she may take a look. She does not go, though, to look into our neighbors’ fridge; she looks into *our* fridge. The identity of the fridge is never called into question. Both my partner and I took for granted that the relevant fridge was our own fridge. The context of our linguistic exchange makes this clear. It is as simple as that.

So far so good: no one—or at least no one I know—objects that when people linguistically interact, their communicative success also depends on the context in which their utterances and thought episodes occur. But here is where philosophers and linguists start to disagree. For, although everyone accepts that linguistic interaction relies on the context of utterance, people tend to disagree on the way the latter enters the scene. In particular people disagree on the way context affects the semantics of what is said. What is said is usually taken to be a proposition. Following the tradition popularized by Kaplan (1977), I assume that what is said corresponds to a proposition. When singular terms are involved (e.g. proper names and indexicals) the proposition expressed is a singular proposition whose constituents are the referents of the singular terms appearing in the utterance expressing it. In short, I shall assume that what is said by an utterance *u* corresponds to the proposition *p*. The latter is either true or false.

If we assume that an utterance expresses a proposition, the contextualism vs. minimalism debate can be rephrased around the disagreement both camps have on the very nature of the proposition expressed (i.e. about what counts as what is said). And this, as I understand it, is where the quarrel among the members of both camps actually takes place. As I already mentioned, on the one side of the disagreement

spectrum we have the ones that may be characterized as (radical) contextualists while on the other side we have the ones that can be characterized as the minimalists.<sup>1</sup>

Before going further, it is worth noticing that everyone accepts that natural language presents expressions (so-called indexicals) which succeed in selecting an object of discourse and thought only relatively to the context of utterance. No one disagrees, for instance, on the fact that if we change the context (the agent) the first-person pronoun ‘I’ changes reference.<sup>2</sup> Everyone tends to agree that the linguistic meaning of an indexical is invariant and operates on some contextual aspects to select an item of discourse. The same for ambiguity, ellipsis, polysemy and vagueness: to detect, for instance, whether an utterance of ‘bank’ refers to the financial institution or the riverside, the audience must rely on some contextual clues.<sup>3</sup>

As the terminological characterization suggests, people belonging to the contextualist camp tend to sympathize with the view that each utterance is contextually underdetermined and that the success of the communication rests on the way the utterance gets semantically enriched and ends up expressing a truth-evaluable proposition. In other words, the very same utterance of a non-indexical sentence may express different propositions depending on the context in which it occurs.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, one proposition may be true while the other is false. The relevant intuitions run as follows. In characterizing Jane, who happens to be 175 cm, one can say: “Jane is tall”. If the circumstance in which this utterance occurs regards the class of people registered to enter the gymnastic competition, this utterance may well express something true, while if it concerns the women enrolled in the university basketball team it is probably false. So, the contextualist story goes, an utterance like this is incomplete or underdetermined and, as it stands, does not express a truth-evaluable proposition. In order to express a truth-evaluable proposition, this utterance must somehow specify the relevant comparative class. In one context it would end up expressing, say, the proposition *that Jane is tall to register for the gym competition*, while in another context it may express the proposition *that Jane is tall to play basketball in the university team*, and so on and so forth. Furthermore, imagine that a

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<sup>1</sup> The champions of contextualism are the relevance theorists (Sperber & Wilson 1986, Carston 2002, etc.), Recanati 2004, Bezuidenhout 2002, Travis 1985, 1989, Searle 1978, 1980, etc. Among the minimalists we have Borg 2005, Cappelen & Lepore 2005, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly, among indexical expressions we have personal pronouns (‘my’, ‘you’, ‘she’, ‘his’, ‘we’, ...), demonstrative pronouns (‘this’, ‘that’), complex demonstratives (‘this pencil’, ‘that brunette in the corner’, ...), adverbs (‘today’, ‘yesterday’, ‘now’, ‘here’, ...), adjectives (‘actual’ and ‘present’) and possessive adjectives (‘my pencil’, ‘their car’, ...). More on this list later when I shall discuss the minimalist proposal. The list I am proposing is inspired by Kaplan (1977, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> If one looks in the dictionary, under the entry for an indexical expression one is likely to find a rule suggesting how to use it. Under ‘I’, for instance, one reads (see the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) that it is used to refer to “the speaker or writer”, under ‘here’ that it is used to refer to “this place or position”, under ‘this’ that it stands for “the thing or person present, close at hand, indicated, already mentioned, understood”. The rules listed in the dictionary come close to Kaplan’s characters (1977). For more on the way indexicals fix their reference according to a rule of use see Perry (2001: ch. 2) and Corazza (2004: ch. 1).

<sup>4</sup> It should be stressed that the examples proposed in favor of contextualism cannot be explained away because of ambiguity, syntactic ellipsis, polysemy, nonliterality and vagueness.

boxer is asked his weight in two different circumstances: once before registering for a match and another time before entering the elevator. Naked, in the morning, after the sauna and before breakfast, at the official weighing session our boxer registers 74 kg. After the weight session our boxer eats a copious breakfast; he washes it down with several orange juices and, to recuperate the liquid lost during the sauna, he drinks a few pints of water. Let us now suppose that in both circumstances our boxer's reply to the question "What's your weight?" is: "I'm 74 kg". In the first circumstance, while registering for the match, the boxer's reply is correct and what he says is true regardless of the fact that he is now well fed, fully dressed, carrying his gym bag and well in excess of 74 kg. For, to compete in the relevant category, the boxer's weight which matters is the one registered during the morning official weighing session. In the elevator circumstance, though, the boxer's reply may well be inappropriate, what he says can be taken to be false and our boxer even considered a liar. If, for instance, in the relevant elevator with a capacity of 220 kg there are already two people weighing on the whole 146 kg, the boxer weight that matters is not the one officially registered in the morning but the one he would actually carry into the lift. Hence, since the actual weight of the boxer (well fed, fully dressed and carrying the gym bag) exceeds 74 kg, his reply is not only false, it is also dangerous insofar as his presence in the elevator would make the total weight exceed the 220 kg security limit. Thus the very same utterance uttered regarding the very same state of the world (i.e. the boxer's actual weight) may be either true or false. Its truth-value depends on the discourse situation in which it occurs.

As far as I can see, there are two ways a given utterance can turn out to be true/false. An utterance *u* of "Jane is too tall", for instance, can be true in two main ways: (i) if it expresses the proposition *that Jane is too tall to be part of the gymnastic team* or (ii) if it expresses the proposition *that Jane is too tall* but the latter's truth-value depends on the discourse situation/context/circumstance/... in which it occurs. If one follows the first path, one accepts the traditional (semantic) view that a proposition is true/false objectively and eternally. Thus, for a proposition to be true/false eternally it must be completed or enriched—this should be captured by the bold addition.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, if one follows the second path, a given proposition can change truth-value with a change of the context/circumstance in which it occurs. Truth becomes, *pace* the traditional semantic position, a relativized notion. The contextualists I have in mind tend to follow the first branch of the dilemma. They thus

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<sup>5</sup> As Frege puts it (speaking of thoughts when we speak of propositions): "Now is a thought changeable or is it timeless? The thought we express by the Pythagorean Theorem is surely timeless, eternal, unvarying. 'But are there not thoughts which are true today but false in six months' time? The thought, for example, that the tree there is covered with green leaves, will surely be false in six month's time'. No, for it is not the same thought at all. The words 'This tree is covered with green leaves' are not sufficient by themselves to constitute the expression of thought, for the time of utterance is involved as well. Without the time-specification thus given we have not a complete thought, i.e., we have no thought at all. Only a sentence with the time-specification filled out, a sentence complete in every respect, expresses a thought, if it is true, is true not only today or tomorrow but timelessly" (Frege 1918: 53).

bring on board notions such as enrichment, saturation, etc. The position I shall defend, on the other hand, takes the second horn of the dilemma and holds that a proposition's truth-value can be relativized. More on this issue in section 4.

The friends of minimalism, on the other hand, hold that an utterance can express a proposition which is true or false regardless of the context in which it occurs. To be sure, they do not deny that some utterances (the ones with indexical expressions) express a proposition only relatively to a given context. The class of these utterances, though, is rather limited; it includes only utterances containing indexicals. According to the minimalist friends, the truth-conditions of our boxer's utterance "I'm 74 kg" do not change with the change of circumstances. It does not express two different propositions in both circumstances either. The boxer's utterance is true if and only if the boxer weighs 74 kg regardless of whether he utters it in the match-registration circumstance or in the elevator one.

In what follows I shall expose the merits and defects of both camps and I shall propose a third way which, for lack of a better term, I label *situationalism*.

## 2. Contextualism

Carston, no doubt, belongs to the camp of (radical) contextualists. She claims that each utterance is intrinsically underdetermined:

I shall argue against the 'underdeterminacy as convenience' view [the view that a fully context insensitive, complete, proposition or thought could always be supplied] and in favor of the essentialist view ... I think that public-language systems are intrinsically underdetermining of complete (semantically evaluable) thoughts because they evolved on the back, as it were, of an already well-developed cognitive capacity for forming hypotheses about the thoughts and intentions of others on the basis of their behavior. (Carston 2002: 30)

Since an utterance can be underdetermined in two main ways we have two different kinds of underdeterminacy. As we saw, an utterance can be underdetermined insofar as its truth-value may vary according to different discourse situations (this could be the case in our boxer's utterance discussed in the previous section). The contextualists I have in mind, though, hold that in both situations the utterance's truth-value varies because it expresses *different* propositions. An example should further help us to highlight the underdeterminacy involved here. Consider that there are a few drops of beer spilled in the fridge and that Jane utters:

(1) There is some beer in the fridge

*Situation 1.* Jon is thirsty and asks for some beer and Jane utters (1). Competent speaker intuition: Jane says something false.

*Situation 2.* Jon just finished cleaning the fridge and Jane utters (1). Competent speaker intuition: Jane says something true.

The state of the world in both situations is, though, exactly the same: the very same fridge with the very same drops of beer in its corner. The moral seems to be that an utterance like (1) is intrinsically or essentially context-sensitive.<sup>6</sup> To capture this fact, Travis, one of the champions of radical contextualism, introduces the notion of *speaker-use sensitivity* (S-use) and suggests that all utterances must be viewed as being speaker-use sensitive:

If ‘weight 79 kilos’ or ‘contains milk’ refers to a family of S-use insensitive properties, the question is what the members of this family might be. (Travis 1989: 23)

For an item to have a semantic property P is for it to be so that a reasonable (informed) judge would take it to have P. (Travis 1989: 48)

If the reasonable judge reacts differently to a sentence *S* on different occasions, then *S* has semantic *S*-use sensitivity. Searle, another main player on the radical contextualism team, puts it this way:

(...) in general the meaning of a sentence only has application (it only, for example, determines a set of truth-conditions) against a background of assumptions and practices that are not representable as a part of meaning. (Searle 1980: 221)

The literal meaning of a sentence only determines a set of truth-conditions given a set of background practices and assumptions. Relative to one set of practices and assumptions, a sentence may determine one set of truth-conditions; relative to another set of practices and assumptions, another set; and if some sets of assumptions and practices are given, the literal meaning of a sentence may not determine a definite set of truth-conditions at all. (Searle 1980: 227)

Further examples underlining how an utterance can be intrinsically underdetermined (or incomplete) can be furnished by:

- (2) Igor is not tall enough
- (3) Jane is late
- (4) Jon is too old<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “What words mean plays a role in fixing when they would be true; but not an exhaustive one. Meaning leaves room for variation in truth-conditions from one speaking to another.” (Travis 1996: 451)

<sup>7</sup> The list, though, does not concern merely comparative adjectives. Contextualists often cite examples involving quantifiers (e.g. “Every bottle is empty”), weather/time reports (e.g. “It’s snowing”, “It’s 3:15 pm”), knowledge attributions (e.g. “Jane knows that the train leaves at 3:15 pm”), etc.

In principle, these utterances can be completed in infinitely many ways. Yet nothing in the utterance itself suggests how the completion, expansion or enrichment should occur. In other words, no element in the utterance directs us toward one particular completion or another, for nothing seems to direct us toward a particular aspect of context.

One can argue that ‘tall’, ‘late’ and ‘old’ trigger a completion. One can also claim (e.g.: Stanley 2000, Stanley & Szabo 2000) that comparative adjectives involve an implicit comparison class and, as such, must be understood as involving an argument place at the level of logical form (thus ‘small’, ‘late’ and ‘too old’ get represented at the LF level as ‘small *relative to x*’, ‘late *relative to x*’, ‘too old *relative to x*’). The important fact here is that the truth-conditions of utterances involving these expressions would also depend on the value of this implicit argument working like a kind of hidden indexical. If this is the case, the proposition expressed would contain as constituents the comparative class selected by the hidden indexical. If one rejects this move (like, e.g., Bach 2000, Carston 2002, Recanati 2002, to name only a few) one is likely to endorse the view that when context-sensitive expressions which do not fall under the class of indexicals are involved we face a case of *free enrichment*. The latter is not triggered by a syntactic element present either at the surface or logical form level of the utterance. Be it as it may, the result is that the truth-evaluable propositions which are expressed by underdetermined utterances like (2-4) contain the enriched content. They are thus fully fledged propositions which are eternally true/false.<sup>8</sup>

As far as I can see, one of the main questions the friends of free enrichment face is the following: how do we explain successful communication if the latter amounts to the grasping of an enriched proposition? One could claim that the success of communication merely rests on an available enriched proposition without the speaker and/or hearer having to grasp it. I have problems, though, in understanding this position. For, if what one says corresponds to an enriched proposition, one needs, some way or other, to be capable of conceptualizing it. That is to say, I have problems accepting the view that one could express a proposition one is not aware of expressing just as I have problems appreciating how one could understand a proposition without being aware of (grasping) it. To put it into a nutshell, I have difficulties understanding how the grasping of a proposition could be a non-conceptual activity. The friends of contextualism owe us an explanation concerning how one can grasp a proposition one is not conceptually aware of. Furthermore, even if we accept the view that successful communication rests on the expression and transmission of an enriched proposition,

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<sup>8</sup> Bach (1994), focusing on the distinction between what is said and what is communicated, defends the view that one does not express a fully-fledged proposition with an underdetermined utterance. Instead, one expresses a propositional radical, i.e. a kind of subproposition. This propositional radical lacks a truth-value; it must be completed before it gets evaluated and becomes a fully-fledged proposition. It is only the fully-fledged proposition, which is the result of an enrichment process (which Bach calls an *impliciture*), that is communicated.

the proposition one expresses with an underdetermined utterance may well differ from the one the audience ends up grasping. Actually it is possible—and even probable—that two persons never come to attach the very same proposition to a given underdetermined utterance. In uttering “Igor is too old” one may intend to say that he is too old to join the junior Arsenal football team and thus express the (enriched) proposition *that Igor is too old to join the junior Arsenal football team*. The audience, on the other hand, may come to entertain a different (enriched) proposition, say *that Igor is too old to join the Arsenal under-15 team*, and so on and so forth. A way out of this problem would be to recognize that, although the utterer and the audience do not grasp the very same (enriched) proposition, they nonetheless understand each other insofar as the propositions they end up associating to the underdetermined utterance are *similar*. In short, one can defend the view that the understanding of an underdetermined utterance does not rest on the grasping of a specific proposition and that the success of communication does not require the transmission of specific propositions and/or thoughts. To put it in a nutshell, contextual exploitation need not result in the formation and/or grasping of a specific proposition. People understand each other insofar as they grasp *similar* propositions. Furthermore, a speaker may not be aware of the very (enriched) proposition she ends up expressing/grasping. Actually, if one is asked what did she mean in uttering an underdetermined utterance, she may end up replying: “I mean that Igor is too old to play for the Arsenal junior team”, “I mean that Igor is too old to play in this year junior team”, “I mean that Igor is too old to play for the under-15 team” etc. It is worth stressing that all the potential enriched propositions have the same minimal proposition in common, i.e. *that Igor is too old*. In a word, the contextualist appealing to the notion of free enrichment is committed to the view that understanding rests on the grasping of the minimal proposition and some extra (unspecified) content coming to enrich it. The latter is likely to vary between the proposition (if any) intended by the speaker and the one (if any) grasped by the audience. Yet for understanding and communication to succeed, the enrichment must be similar enough. How similar it must be, though, remains unspecified. This is the price the friends of free enrichment must pay. It may ultimately turn out to be too expensive. Actually, since the enrichment involved in the interpretation of underdetermined utterances is not grammatically triggered in the way it is with indexical reference, it must be characterized as a pragmatic feature. The main fact seems to be that utterances like (2-4) can be completed in many different ways and thus that we can have, in principle, infinitely many enrichments. Even if we fix the discourse situation, an utterance like “Igor is too old” can still be completed in infinitely many ways and express infinitely many enriched propositions.

When indexicals are involved, the story is different. For context must contribute in the expression of a specific proposition insofar as an indexical’s linguistic meaning directs us to some specific aspect of context. The latter ends up in the proposition expressed. If Igor utters “I’m 27”, Igor himself ends up in the proposition expressed, for the meaning of ‘I’ directly directs to the relevant contextual feature, in our case Igor. The same with a demonstrative sentence like “This painting is precious”. The

relevant painting ends up in the proposition expressed insofar as the demonstrative expression ‘this painting’ directs to the specific item of the context which ends up in the proposition expressed.

The general lesson we can bring home so far is that the motivation underlying contextualism is furnished by concrete examples (like the boxer’s weight or Igor being too old/tall). Furthermore, these concrete, everyday situations cannot be explained away by appealing to ambiguity, polysemy, nonliterality, etc. If one adopts the contextualist standpoint, it is quite easy to figure out distinct situations in which with a given utterance one ends up saying different things and (assuming that what is said corresponds to a proposition) one ends up expressing different propositions. Yet, it has been argued that, contrary to appearance, the contextualist position is empirically inadequate (see Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 87). To the discussion of this criticism and the defense of minimalism I now turn.

### 3. Minimalism

Minimalism can be characterized, roughly, as the view that the constituents of the proposition expressed must be triggered by syntactic elements present at the surface level of the utterance and directly conveyed by the meaning of the expressions appearing in the utterance. Semantic minimalism defends, among others, the following thesis (see Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 144):

1. That there is a proposition semantically expressed is presupposed by any coherent account of linguistic communication.
2. All semantic context sensitivity is grammatically (either syntactically or morphemically) triggered, i.e. articulated by a sentential component.
3. There are only a few context sensitive expressions in natural language and they all pass the *Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report* test (ICD for short).

The ICD test is, ultimately, what should help to determine whether an expression is context sensitive or not and, by the way, what ends up in the proposition *semantically* expressed, i.e. the minimal proposition. The ICD test can be characterized as follows (see Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 88):

#### *ICD*

Take an utterance  $u$  of a sentence  $S$  by a speaker  $A$  in context  $C$ . An Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report of  $u$  is an utterance  $u^*$  in a context  $C^*$  (where  $C^* \neq C$ ) of “ $A$  said that  $S$ ”.

According to the ICD test it is quite easy to establish whether an expression is context sensitive (i.e. it belongs to the class of indexicals) or not. Actually, if the occurrence of an expression *e* in an utterance blocks the disquotational indirect report (i.e. it makes the report of the relevant utterance false) then we have evidence that *e* is context sensitive (it is an indexical expression). On the other hand, if *e* does not block the disquotational indirect report it is context *insensitive*. Take for instance ‘I’ and ‘this’ in (5) and (6):

- (5) Jane: “I am rich”
- (6) Jane: “This is cute”

The ICD test gives us:

- (7) Jane said that I am rich
- (8) Jane said that this is cute

Since (7) and (8) do *not* capture what Jane said (i.e. as report of what Jane said they are false), ‘I’ and ‘this’ are context sensitive (indexical) expressions and, therefore, Jane’s utterances are context sensitive insofar as context helps in determining what ends up in the proposition expressed (i.e. what is said). The context sensitivity of Jane’s utterance is triggered by the presence of ‘I’ and ‘this’. Consider now:

- (9) Jane: “Igor is too old”
- (10) Jane: “Igor weighs 74 kg”

The ICD test would give:

- (11) Jane said that Igor is too old
- (12) Jane said that Igor weighs 74 kg

‘Too old’ and ‘weighs 74 kg’ need not be changed when going from direct discourse to indirect discourse, i.e. reports (11) and (12) are accurate, or so Cappelen & Lepore claim. Hence, the minimalist story goes, ‘too old’ and ‘weighs 74 kg’ do not belong to the class of context sensitive expressions and utterances involving these expressions are not, *pace* contextualism, context sensitive. What Igor is too old for and the situation in which Igor weighs 74 kg are not part of what Jane said and, as such, do not end up in the proposition she expressed. They are semantically insensitive.

A further criticism of contextualism can also be formulated as follows (see Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 91). If in two distinct situations, say in context C1 talking about an exam preparation and context C2 talking about going out to a party, Jane utters “Igor is ready”, the accurate reports, following ICD, would be:

- (13) Jane said that Igor is ready [said concerning C1]

- (14) Jane said that Igor is ready [said concerning C2]  
 (15) In both C1 and C2 Jane said that Igor is ready

Since all three reports are true (even if they occur in a radically different context from the one in which Jane's original utterances occurred), in the two contexts C1 and C2 Jane cannot have expressed different propositions as the contextualist holds. If the contextualists were right in holding that in C1 and C2 Jane expresses distinct propositions, reports (13-15) would not, contrary to appearance, be true. For they would not capture what Jane said, i.e. the proposition she expressed in C1 and C2. Cappelen & Lepore's moral is that since contextualism cannot account for this basic feature of linguistic communication it must be empirically incoherent.

Further examples undermining contextualism can be given by reports involving distinct agents. If Jane and Pia, in radically distinct contexts, utter the same sentence, say "Igor is ready", a report could be:

- (16) Both Jane and Pia said that Igor is ready

Yet, if Jane and Pia expressed different propositions, a report like (16) would be false. Thus, no matter the context of Jane's and Pia's utterance, they end up saying the same thing. Since the that-clause 'that Igor is ready' in (16) cannot express more than one proposition, it could not capture the alleged two distinct propositions the contextualist claims Jane and Pia originally expressed.

Taking stock. The minimalist's attack runs as follows: a that-clause in a report of the form "A said that *p*" captures what A said and picks up the semantically relevant (minimal) proposition, *p*. The latter is what is expressed by the corresponding direct discourse utterance. Since contextualism does not pass this reporting test it cannot deal with this linguistic communication data and it is, therefore, empirically inadequate.

It is amazing, to say the least, to claim that contextualism falls under the minimalist's attack on the ground that it proposes an empirically inadequate theory. My puzzlement or amazement is amplified if we keep in mind how the contextualist viewpoint is dictated by intuitions concerning the truth-values of some utterances. Actually, the intuitions supporting the underdeterminacy thesis proposed by the friends of contextualism concern the way these utterances should be evaluated.<sup>9</sup> Take, for instance, our example involving the few drops of beer in the fridge. If one utters "There is some beer in the fridge" it seems perfectly appropriate to say that what is said is true in the cleaning situation, while it is false in the drinking situation. At least, it seems hard to hold that what one says is either true or false regardless of the situation in which the utterance occurs. The contextualist intuitions, as I understand

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion and defense of the contextualist intuitions see Predelli (2005: ch. 4). Predelli, though, does not defend contextualism. He defends a traditional semantics viewpoint without endorsing minimalism. Although the position he defends seems to bear some resemblances to situationalism as I shall propose in the next section, I am not sure Predelli would endorse the position I end up defending.

them, do not concern the nature of the proposition expressed. They merely concern the truth-value of the utterance. If my interpretation of the contextualist intuition is on the right track the minimalist charge loses its bite and, as we shall see in the next section, it does not apply to the position I shall put forward.

Before going further it is also worth mentioning that the minimalist position put forward by Cappelen & Lepore dismisses the intuition concerning the difference in truth-value that a given utterance can have in different situations. And this, it seems to me, as well as undermining our intuitions, also turns out to be empirically unconvincing insofar as every competent speaker would undeniably claim that in the drinking situation, unlike the cleaning one, in uttering “There is some beer in the fridge” Jane said something false.<sup>10</sup> These intuitions, I repeat, do not concern the proposition expressed: they merely concern the truth-value of Jane’s utterance. Actually, if we adopt the ICD minimalist test the report of what Jane said would not, and could not, discriminate between the cleaning situation and the drinking one. For, in both cases the report would be:

(17) Jane said that there is some beer in the fridge

This report would not, and could not, capture our intuition. It is silent on whether Jane said something true or false, for it does not capture the situation in which Jane uttered the reported sentence. To undermine the power of the ICD test we can further consider the following case involving Igor, who is 20. Jim, the manager of the under-17 football team, asks Igor to play for them next game. Jane, without knowing that the relevant team is the under-17, hears Igor replying “I am too old”. Tim, the manager of the under-21 football team, asks Jane whether Igor could play in his team. Jane, who happens to be a minimalist and a fan of Cappelen & Lepore’s ICD test, replies: “Igor said that he is too old”. Jane’s reply wrongly suggests that Igor is not allowed to play for the under-21 team. This example stresses that when a report is sensitive to the report’s situation and not the situation where the original utterance occurred, the ICD test does not work. We thus have situations where reports which pass the ICD test are inappropriate and, therefore, the ICD test cannot be applied. The general moral is thus that ICD may not be, *pace* Cappelen & Lepore, such a reliable test.<sup>11</sup> Be that as it may

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<sup>10</sup> I ran the experiment with some of my first year students and all, without exception, claimed that in the cleaning situation Jane said something true while in the drinking situation she said something false.

<sup>11</sup> To be honest, Cappelen & Lepore (2005: 93-4) recognize cases in which the narrator is ignorant or mistaken of the original context of the reported utterance. Yet they argue that the report is correct regardless of the ignorance and/or mistake of the context of the reported utterance. This, though, is not a bullet many are willing to bite. As the example I mentioned makes clear, when the report is sensitive to the context of the report the ICD tests may not be satisfactory. This should further undermine Cappelen & Lepore’s (2005: 114 ff) view that contextualists should be committed to what they call *Contextual Salience Absorption*, i.e. the view that the relevant context automatically triggered is the context of the reported utterance (what they characterize as the target context) and not the context of the report (what they characterize as the story telling context). The Contextual Salience Absorption which should ultimately campaign in favor of ICD and, therefore, minimalism is not, *pace* Cappelen & Lepore, a reliable and empirically sound principle.

be, I now turn to discuss an alternative view. The latter should accommodate the contextualist intuitions without crumbling under the minimalist charge.

## 4. Situationalism

As we saw, the main question we face concerns the way context enters the picture in determining the truth-value of a given utterance. To begin with, we can adopt the classical Tarskian framework where a sentence's truth-conditions can be represented, adopting Tarski's T-sentences ('S' is true *iff* S), as follows:

- (18) "Jane is not tall enough" is true *iff* Jane is not tall enough
- (19) "Jane is late" is true *iff* Jane is late
- (20) "Jon is too old" is true *iff* Jon is too old

The T-schema can easily be adapted to accommodate utterances<sup>12</sup>:

- (21) If  $u$  is an utterance of "Jane is not tall enough", then [ $u$  is true *iff* Jane is not tall enough]
- (22) If  $u$  is an utterance of "Jane is late", then [ $u$  is true *iff* Jane is late]
- (23) If  $u$  is an utterance of "Jon is too old", then [ $u$  is true *iff* Jon is too old]

If an utterance contains context-sensitive expressions, say indexicals, it should be evaluated following a T-schema of the form:

- (24) If  $u$  is an utterance of "I am too old" and  $x$  is the agent of  $u$ , then [ $u$  is true *iff*  $x$  is too old]
- (25) If  $u$  is an utterance of "He is too old", and the agent of  $u$  refers to  $x$  with 'he', then [ $u$  is true *iff*  $x$  is too old]

This representation allows us to capture the context-sensitivity of an utterance. The T-schema appears in the consequent (it is represented within the square brackets). The T-schema, though, is contextualized inasmuch as it is conditional on the various contextual parameters appearing in the antecedent of the conditional.

If this is the right picture, i.e., if representations like (24-25) represent the truth-conditions of utterances like "I am too old" and "He is too old", then the reason why the agent of  $u$  in (24) and the referent of 'he' in (25) are too old does not enter the T-schema. As such, they do not seem to affect the truth-conditions of underdetermined utterances. For utterances like "I am too old" or "He is too old" do not state what the

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<sup>12</sup> This formulation is borrowed from Higginbotham (1988). For a detailed discussion of it see Carston (2002: 50ff).

specified individual is too old for. As I understand it, we face the following three possibilities:

1. *Minimalism*: We endorse the view that (24) represents the truth-conditions of an underdetermined utterance like “I am too old” and that “I am too old” [said by Igor] expresses the (minimal) proposition *that Igor is too old*.
2. *Contextualism*: We reject the view that (24) can represent the truth-conditions of an underdetermined utterance like “I am too old” and endorse the view that “I am too old” [said by Igor] expresses the enriched proposition *that Igor is too old for such and such* [where ‘such and such’ stands for some pragmatic information enriching the minimal proposition].
3. *Situationalism*: Like contextualism we reject the view that (24) can represent the truth-conditions of an underdetermined utterance like “I am too old”. Like minimalism we accept the view that “I am too old” [said by Igor] expresses the (minimal) proposition *that Igor is too old*. Yet, unlike minimalism and contextualism we commit ourselves to the view that truth-value of an utterance is itself context-sensitive.

These three possibilities correspond to the various stances one can take *vis-à-vis* the contextual intrusion into semantics. Actually, if one chooses the first possibility, one ends up defending minimalism where we have no contextual intrusion. If one endorses the second possibility, one is likely to hold the view that the utterance (or the proposition it expresses) undergoes a process of completion or enrichment and that it is only once such a process is fulfilled that the utterance’s truth-conditions can be established. Context affects the proposition expressed. This is the contextualist stance. These two strategies are unsatisfactory.

As I already anticipated, the minimalist position fails to capture ordinary speakers’ intuitions concerning the truth-value of an utterance. For, *pace* Cappelen & Lepore’s ICD test, speakers’ intuitions do not concern what is said or the proposition expressed. As the boxer weight and the drops of beer in the fridge examples made it clear, speakers’ intuitions concern the truth-value of what is said. Every competent speaker ends up saying that in one situation the utterer said something true while in the other she said something false. When questioned, a competent speaker does not reply that the utterer said different things in different situations. She merely says that what is said changes truth-value with the change of situation.

If one chooses the second possibility (contextualism), one would find oneself in the difficult position of having to determine how much extra information should enter the truth-evaluable proposition, i.e. how much should enter what is said. Furthermore, like the minimalist, our contextualist would be incapable of capturing the real intuitions of a competent speaker, for our contextualist is forced to claim that a speaker’s intuitions concern what is said rather the truth-value of what is said.

As far as I understand them, the main positions on the current market seem to endorse either the minimalist position or the contextualist one (or, to be precise, versions of them). It should not come as a surprise that I endorse the third possibility, i.e. situationalism. Following this possibility, the proposition expressed (what is said) is either true or false. But its truth or falsity must be determined in the context of the discourse or in the discourse situation. To further highlight this fact we can focus on a classical example (see Barwise & Etchemendy 1987: 121-2). Looking at a poker game, Jon says: “Claire has the three of clubs”. Jon’s utterance expresses the proposition *that Claire has the three of clubs*. This utterance concerns the situation of the game of poker being watched by Jon. For Jon’s utterance to be true, it is not sufficient that the proposition or fact it expresses obtains. This proposition must obtain in the relevant situation, i.e. the poker game being watched by Jon. If Jon is mistaken in identifying Claire, and Claire is not among the players of the poker game, Jon’s utterance cannot be true. Furthermore, his utterance would not be true even if Claire were playing poker in another part of town and happened to have the three of clubs. Jon’s utterance is true only if Claire has the three of clubs in *that poker game*, i.e. the game being watched by Jon. The notion of a situation captures the intuitive idea that our discourses and linguistic interchanges, not to mention our cognitive activity, concern given situations. If one says “Henry scored a wonderful goal” whilst watching the Manchester-Arsenal match, what one says is true if and only if Henry scored a wonderful goal *during that match*. The wonderful goal Henry scored the previous Wednesday when playing for France does not make the relevant utterance true. In short, our utterance concerns the Manchester-Arsenal game the utterer is watching; it does not concern another game. One’s utterances, and one’s thoughts, are situated.<sup>13</sup> Following this suggestion, the proposition expressed is *situated* as well. In other words, a given proposition gets its truth-value in a context-sensitive way. This should be the gift of situationalism. In other words, like contextualism and unlike minimalism, situationalism assumes that the relevant game enters the truth-conditions, but unlike contextualism it enters the truth-conditions *via* the situation against which the proposition is evaluated. It does not enter the truth-conditions in affecting (enriching) the proposition expressed. The enrichment, if any, affects the truth-conditions. It does not affect the proposition expressed, i.e. what is said. In the drops of beer in the fridge example mentioned earlier, the proposition *that there is some beer in the fridge* may be false in situations in which Jon asks for a drink and true in situations in which Jon has just finished cleaning the fridge. But the truth or falsity of the proposition does *not* rest on it undergoing some changes. It is the very same proposition—i.e. the (minimal) proposition *that there is some beer in the fridge*—which gets evaluated in different situations. In short, following situationalism we can

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<sup>13</sup> “In *situation* theory, we take note of the fact that an agent’s world divides up into a collection, a succession, of situations; situations encountered, situations referred to, situations about which information is received, and so on. That is to say, our theory reflects the fact that agents discriminate (by their behavior) situations ... the behavior of people varies systematically according to the kind of situation they are faced with: threatening situations, spooky situations, pleasant situations, challenging situations, conversations, and what-have-you, all evoke quite different responses” (Devlin 1991: 30).

freeze the proposition and vary the situations. Following contextualism, on the other hand, a change in the situation is likely to trigger a change in the proposition expressed.<sup>14</sup> Finally, following minimalism, we would have the very same proposition (and the very same truth-conditions) regardless of the change of situations.

According to contextualism, as I represented it, a proposition's (and derivatively an utterance's) truth-value is absolute. This is possible inasmuch as one allows contextual features to participate in the determination of a complete, enriched, proposition. We would thus have different propositions expressed with a switch of the situation. The question which springs to mind is how we can define these propositions. To state it slightly differently, the position I have in mind distinguishes between the proposition expressed and the truth maker, the latter being the situation which makes true the former. In other words, unlike minimalism (and contextualism) I divorce the proposition expressed (what is said) by an utterance *u* from the truth-conditions of *u*. This distinction or divorce captures, *pace* minimalism, the relevant intuitions concerning the truth-value of various utterances. Yet, unlike contextualism, we do not have to commit ourselves to a specific (enriched) proposition the speaker and/or audience would express/grasp. The speaker expresses a minimal proposition. The audience grasps this very proposition, and speaker and audience understand each other insofar as they locate this proposition in the right situation. Situationalism incorporates the gifts of both contextualism and minimalism insofar as the proposition expressed is minimal yet its truth-value is context sensitive.

According to situationalism, (21-23) should incorporate the fact that truth is relative to a situation. The correct truth-condition representations would thus correspond to:

- (26) If *u* is an utterance of "Jane is not tall enough" and *s* is the situation in which *u* occurs, then [*u* is true *iff* Jane is not tall enough relative to *s*]
- (27) If *u* is an utterance of "Jane is late" and *s* is the situation in which *u* occurs, then [*u* is true *iff* Jane is late relative to *s*]
- (28) If *u* is an utterance of "Jon is too old" and *s* is the situation in which *u* occurs, then [*u* is true *iff* Jon is too old relative to *s*]

One can object that the position I propose faces a difficulty similar to the contextualist position. While the latter is faced with the problem of determining how much extra information should enter the proposition, situationalism is faced with the problem of determining which components of the situation in which an utterance occurs are relevant.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, how does a hearer wanting to understand what is being communicated discern what the relevant situation is? All I can say is that this information is pragmatically furnished and constitutes the background or setting upon

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<sup>14</sup> This is the proposition defended by Barwise and Etchemendy (1987). They argue that the situations enter what they characterize as Austinian propositions. For a defense of this view see Recanati (2002: ch. 8).

<sup>15</sup> Robyn Carston expressed this worry (personal communication).

which the communicative interchange or thinking episode occurs. It need not be specified or even conceptualized.<sup>16</sup> As such, it does not enter the proposition expressed. Indeed, for one to understand the message conveyed, one must “grasp” the relevant situation. As I understand it, the difficulty I face can be summarized as follows. While the friend of contextualism faces the problem of explaining how someone grasps/selects an enriched proposition, the friend of situationalism faces the problem of explaining how one grasps/selects a given situation. Although I may not have a clear-cut answer to this question, I can suggest that the grasping of a situation is a less cognitive activity than the grasping of an enriched proposition. That is to say, recognizing a situation may not involve any conscious selection or discrimination, while the grasping of a full-fledged proposition seems to require some cognitive effort. In short, while the activity of grasping a proposition is a conceptual one, the activity of grasping a situation need not be conceptual. Take, for instance, the example I described at the beginning involving me calling my partner to ask whether there is some chardonnay in the fridge. The fact that our discussion concerns our own fridge and not our neighbours’ fridge never gets mentioned: it is taken for granted. The success of our interchange need not conceptualize this fact. I take it that it is part of our cognitive makeup that we can discriminate a given situation without conscious effort. This is, I reckon, the background for language use. One can act and react in an appropriate way insofar as one is properly situated, i.e., insofar as one’s behavior rests on a given situation. One’s behavior need not be triggered by one’s grasping of an enriched proposition. The simple fact that our cognitive activity and/or our communicative exchanges are situated suffices to explain our cognitive and/or communicative success. It is as simple as that.<sup>17</sup>

The contextualist view, on the other hand, seems to commit itself to the idea that one needs to entertain an enriched proposition. Indeed, our contextualist friend could tell a story on how one can entertain an enriched proposition without having to conceptualize it or even to grasp it. I have no idea, though, how this story could go. From a cognitive viewpoint, situationalism seems to be more parsimonious. For, it does not need to appeal to the idea of entertaining a situation, insofar as one can merely find oneself in a given situation while one cannot find oneself into a given proposition (unless one expresses it using ‘I’). It may be worth saying that although one may not find oneself into a given proposition one may find oneself into the truth-conditions. In saying “He is to the left/back/front/...” the speaker is likely to end up in the situation against which the proposition expressed gets evaluated. To borrow

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<sup>16</sup> As far as I can see, the relevant situation against which a (minimal) proposition gets evaluated can contain variegated informations. As such, the notion of situation I have in mind comes close to Stalnaker’s pragmatic presuppositions: “The distinction between presupposition and assertion should be drawn, not in terms of the content of the proposition expressed, but in terms of the situation in which the statement is made—the attitudes and intentions of the speaker and his audience. Presuppositions, on this account, are something like the background beliefs of the speaker—propositions whose truth he takes for granted, or seems to take for granted, in making his statement” (Stalnaker 1974: 48).

<sup>17</sup> More on this particular idea in the next section.

Perry's (1986) notion of unarticulated constituents we can thus say that according to situationalism one can be the unarticulated constituent of the truth-conditions without being the constituent of the proposition expressed.

But one does find himself in the truth-conditions (the proposition?) of "He is to the right", albeit in an unarticulated manner. You may answer that an unarticulated constituent is just that: an element of the relevant situation that is neither articulated nor a constituent of the proposition expressed by the utterance. Well, I think you might owe an explanation about the consequences of your view for unarticulated constituents, at least to John (joke).

To summarize: the basic idea underlying situationalism is that the truth-condition of an utterance must be determined by the syntactic elements active in the utterance; the proposition (semantically) expressed is a minimal one. The elements triggering the presence of propositional constituents must be present either at the surface level or in the underlying logical form. In terms of propositions, this amounts to saying that all the propositional constituents must be represented in the logical form of the utterance.

## 5. Situationalism and Cognition

I would like to conclude in underlining how linguistic underdeterminacy is a virtue of natural language and how human beings are cognitively endowed to benefit from it. This should further highlight the merits of situationalism.

To begin with, linguistic underdeterminacy is the *sine qua non* of our linguistic interaction and our thinking activity. It is because we are context-bound agents that we constantly use underdetermined utterances and exploit context both in our linguistic interchanges and cognitive episodes. We *cannot* do otherwise, for Mother Nature (or Divine design if you belong to some American neo-con camp) has programmed us to be context-bound. In other words, we cannot escape the boundaries of the context in which our thoughts and communicative exchanges occur; context seems to be an essential feature of our nature. If I am right, our thoughts are best understood as *situated* in a given context or discourse situation as well.<sup>18</sup>

From a methodological viewpoint I propose the following principle, which parallels the idea that both propositions and thoughts must be viewed as situated:

### *Economy of Saying Principle*

One need not state what can be conveyed implicitly.

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this view see Corazza (2004: ch 2 and ch. 6).

In particular, one should exploit context (broadly understood) as much as one can. In other words, what can be contextually transmitted should not be made explicit. For this very reason utterances turn out to be underdetermined. This methodological principle should be coupled with the following semantic principle, inspired by Grice:

*Semantics of Saying Principle*

What is not triggered by meaning does not affect what is said, i.e. the proposition expressed by an utterance.

The semantics of saying and the economy of saying principles are two sides of the same coin and are subsumed under the following principle:

*Context Exploitation Principle*

The proposition expressed by an utterance, i.e. what is strictly speaking said, is situated. One succeeds in transmitting a given message and one understands this very message insofar as one “grasps” the relevant situation.

As I have already stressed, one of the main difficulties consists in characterizing the notion of grasping the relevant situation in which the proposition gets evaluated. I do not believe that one can propose a specific account of this kind of knowledge. I take it to be a kind of *knowing how*, i.e. a general pragmatic or procedural knowledge one comes to master insofar as one belongs, to borrow Wittgenstein’s terminology, to a given form of life. It may also be that we are, at least partially, hard-wired in such a way as to make the most out of the situation in which an utterance occurs.

From a semantic viewpoint, the picture I am proposing can be understood as a minimalist one inasmuch as the proposition expressed by an utterance is a minimal proposition. Yet it is truth-conditionally evaluable. But, unlike the minimalist position proposed by Cappelen & Lepore, a proposition must be viewed as situated. It is because propositions are situated that they acquire a truth-value, and that information can be transmitted. Thus the picture I have in mind, i.e. situationalism, embraces a form of contextualism as well. To be sure, it embraces a full blooded form of contextualism. But the contextualism I favor is best characterized as situationalism insofar as I hold the view that both the proposition expressed and the thought entertained are situated.<sup>19</sup>

If I am right, the capacity to understand a given message need not rest on any inferential activity. It is often automatic and carried out at a subconscious level. The fact that we are context-bound agents constitutes one of the main ingredients guaranteeing both the success of communication and our interaction with the external world. In other words, situationalism should be considered as the result of the fact that we are essentially embodied in context, both in our thinking episodes and our

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<sup>19</sup> For an accurate discussion on the way our thinking activity must be viewed as situated, see Dokic (2002; 2005).

linguistic interchanges. From a cognitive viewpoint, situationalism, broadly understood, can be characterized as follows:

*Situationalism*

Our thinking and linguistic activity must be understood as context situated. This idea contrasts with the view that context must determine a thought which can then be evaluated in a context-insensitive way, i.e. the view that context participates in enriching what one thinks/says, with the enriched version being true/false across situations. In different situations, one may well end up entertaining the very same thought, yet that thought may be true in one situation and false another.

Furthermore, since I do not believe that what is communicated can be extracted fully from the context of the speech act, I commit myself to the following underdeterminacy and inscrutability view concerning communication.

*The Underdeterminacy and Inscrutability of Communication*

What is communicated transcends what is (strictly speaking) said, i.e. what is communicated is richer than the (minimal) proposition expressed. Yet (i) what is communicated is essentially underdetermined insofar as it can neither be encapsulated in an eternal sentence nor in a specific proposition and (ii) since what is communicated is intrinsically context-bound (situated) it cannot be characterized in a context-free way. For this very reason it is compelled to be inscrutable, for context potentially presents infinitely many facets.

This principle is the direct consequence of the view I proposed above, when I claimed that speakers must be conceived as context-bound agents, i.e., it is a consequence of what I characterized as situationalism. Communication is inscrutable inasmuch as trying to encapsulate communication within a context-free sentence is like trying to encapsulate an analogue image with a digital discourse. To be sure, one can describe a given picture and the description can be extremely accurate, yet something will be missed. It is logically impossible, I think, to go from analogue to digital content without losing information. A discursive description and an image, say a photographic picture of a landscape, may represent the same scene. But they are bound to be irreducible to one another. In claiming that communication is inscrutable, though, I do not mean that people do not succeed in understanding each other. I simply mean that people's understanding is context-bound and it is so necessarily. That is to say, understanding rests on agents being context embedded. And situationalism is, as far as I can see, the view capturing these cognitive platitudes.

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