

PHIL 745.001/LING 712.001: Advanced Studies in Philosophy of Language
[Topic: Context-Sensitivity]
UNC Chapel Hill, Spring 2024

Instructor: Alex Worsnip (aworsnip@unc.edu)

Class meetings: Thursdays, 1-3:30, Caldwell 213

Office hours: Thursdays, 10-11am, Caldwell 202B; and by appointment

Course description. Context-sensitivity, in the sense we'll be focused on in this class, is the phenomenon whereby the “semantic value” or “semantic content” (or, speaking more colloquially but somewhat inaccurately, meaning) of an expression (word, phrase, sentence, etc.) depends upon the conversational context in which it is uttered. Terms that are very widely held to be context-sensitive include indexicals (like ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’) and gradable adjectives (such as ‘tall’). More controversially, over the last few decades, numerous philosophers have advanced contextualist accounts of terms at the heart of epistemological and ethical theorizing, such as ‘knows’ and ‘ought’, and have held that such accounts resolve or dissolve various substantive epistemological and (meta)ethical puzzles. Thus, context-sensitivity is an extremely important topic for philosophers working in a wide variety of subfields. Unfortunately, however, it is poorly understood by many (though not all!) philosophers working outside of philosophy of language, with even some of the published literature on contextualism in epistemology and (meta)ethics being marked by elementary confusions and misunderstandings. This course aims, among other things, to help you avoid this fate.

The course is divided into four parts. The first two parts give you a grounding in some of the key theoretical work on context-sensitivity in philosophy of language and semantics. Part I examines classic theories of context-sensitivity from David Kaplan, David Lewis, Robert Stalnaker, and Angelika Kratzer. Part II considers some challenges to the (largely orthodox) view that linguistic context-sensitivity is widespread, such as semantic minimalism, (assessment-)relativism, expressivism, and ambiguity theory. The latter two parts of the course turn to ways in which contextualist theories have been deployed (and criticized) to address substantive puzzles in epistemology (Part III) and (meta)ethics (Part IV). The hope is that, armed with the theoretical understanding of context-sensitivity that you've developed in the first two parts of the course, you'll be in a much better position to understand and evaluate the substantive uses to which contextualism has been put.

Distribution requirement satisfaction. This course (when taken in normal, non-reduced writing format) satisfies the M&E distribution requirement for our graduate program.

Requirements/assessment.

- **Participation** (*10% of grade*). Including: attendance of all classes having done adequate preparation, and participation in discussions.
- **In-class presentation** (*10% of grade*). Beginning in the second week of class, students will take turns giving presentations. Here is the format that presentations should take:
 - Presentations should be around 15 minutes long (absolute maximum of 20 minutes). We will not interrupt.

- Presentations should not summarize/recap a whole paper (or anything close to it). Instead, your presentation should be aimed at spurring critical discussion of one or more of the assigned readings for that week, on the assumption that everyone has already read them.
 - Begin by recapping only (but, ideally, all) the aspects of the paper that are strictly necessary for setting up the points you want to raise.
 - Then, raise one to three points for discussion. These could be any of the following (not an exhaustive list):
 - An interpretative question about the author's view
 - A question about how two parts of the author's view relate to one another
 - A question or suggestion about how two different readings relate to one another
 - A (potential) criticism of the author's view
 - An identification of an assumption underlying the author's view, and a question about whether this assumption is plausible
 - A remark or question about the terms of debate in which the different readings for that week are engaged (e.g., an identification of a common presupposition they all make, and a question about whether it is plausible)
- **Please use a handout for your presentation.** Please email me the file by 12 noon on the day of class, and also bring copies of the handout with you.
- Because the class is heavily enrolled, a few weeks will contain two presentations.
- I'll send a link to a sign-up sheet following our first class meeting.
- **Reading responses** (*10% of grade per response*). You will take turns writing short reading responses (500-750 words each) on that day's reading. Each student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. The reading responses should highlight and explain an aspect of that day's reading that you found interesting, and critically respond to it. Soon after the start of the semester, I will distribute a schedule for the responses. Reading responses are due at 11:59pm on the day before class via email.
- **Term paper** (*50% of grade*). You will write a term paper for the class. This paper will be on a topic of your choice. Since this is an extended piece of writing, we'll follow a multi-step process:
 - Initial meeting to discuss ideas. *To be completed by **Wed, 3/27** at the latest.* I will meet with each of you one-on-one to discuss your ideas for a possible topic for your paper. Please come to the meeting having thought carefully about what you might like to write about. (Though this is the only required meeting, you're welcome to meet with me again at any point later on.)
 - NB: if you want to write on a topic that we're covering at the end of the semester but haven't reached yet by the date of our meeting, that is possible. If there's a forthcoming topic that catches your eye, have a look at the readings for it before our meeting.
 - One paragraph paper proposal. *Due **Sun, 3/31, 11:59pm.*** You will write up a proposal for the topic of your paper, explaining the issue(s) you plan to discuss and (if you know) what you (tentatively) plan to argue. The proposal should be clear, should propose a well-defined,

manageable and tractable topic, and should be clearly related to the themes of the class. I will write back to you either approving the proposal as it is or asking you to make modifications.

- **Full draft.** *Due Fri, 4/12, 11:59pm.* You will write a *full, complete* draft of the paper. I will send you detailed comments on your draft by Sun, 4/21 (this is the main set of comments you will receive from me on your paper).
- **Final submission.** *Due Tues 4/30, 11:59pm.* Finally, you will have an opportunity to revise the paper in light of my comments, before submitting the final version. I will send you your grade with some briefer comments by the end of that week.

Note: provided that you complete the first three steps of the paper-writing process in full and by the due dates specified above, your grade for your paper will be determined solely by the fourth step, i.e., the final submission. Thus, the other stages of the process represent a risk-free way to try out your ideas and to get feedback on them before making the final submission.

Reduced writing option. Those taking the class in reduced writing format (as distinct from *auditing*, which is different) will still be required to do a presentation and reading responses, but no final paper. To pass the class, you also need to attend regularly just like any other student, and to show evidence that you have been doing and thinking about the reading (e.g. via participation in class discussions). If you're taking the class reduced writing, you must notify me by the end of the second week of classes.

Honor code. As should go without saying in a class at this level, UNC's honor code, available at honor.unc.edu, applies to all course assignments. Per department policy, any use of generative AI on a course assignment is prohibited, and counts as a violation of the Honor Code. Also, remember that you are not permitted to submit a final paper that substantially overlaps in content with a paper submitted for another class. Consult with me if in any doubt about how this requirement applies.

Accessibility, Equity & Resources.

- I am committed to making class fully accessible, and to providing accommodations for those who need them. If I can do anything to help make class more accessible to you, please let me know, or have [UNC Accessibility Resources & Service \(ARS\)](#) contact me on your behalf.
- I am also committed to making the class an inclusive and safe space for everyone irrespective of gender identity, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, or other individual or group identity. Please let me know if I can do anything to improve; I appreciate suggestions.
- As I know from personal experience, mental health challenges during graduate school (among many other contexts) are very common. If you experience such challenges, I strongly urge you to seek help through UNC's [Counseling and Psychological Services](#). Though I am of course not a professional, I am also more than happy to talk, offer support, and make necessary accommodations; please don't hesitate to reach out.
- I am a Safe Zone Ally, trained and certified by the university LGBTQ center. I am available to meet during office hours or by appointment to offer support.

Readings (TENTATIVE – subject to change)

All readings will be made available on Canvas. Alongside journal articles, we are also reading significant portions of several books over the course of the semester, including Angelika Kratzer's *Modals & Conditionals*, Herman Cappelen & Ernie Lepore's *Insensitive Semantics*, John MacFarlane's *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*, and Keith DeRose's *The Case for Contextualism*. If you like having physical copies of books (as I do), these are worth considering for purchase.

Note: within individual weeks, I have listed readings in the order in which I recommend reading them such that they make the most sense. The Canvas folders for each week list them in alphabetical order instead. I don't recommend reading them in alphabetical order.

Part One: Classic Frameworks

Week 1 (January 11th): Introduction + Kaplan

- David Kaplan, "Demonstratives", sections I-XIV

Week 2 (January 18th): Lewis

- David Lewis, "Index, Context, and Content"
- David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game"

Week 3 (January 25th): Stalnaker

- Robert Stalnaker, "On the Representation of Context"
- Robert Stalnaker, "Common Ground"

Week 4 (February 1st): Kratzer

- Angelika Kratzer, *Modals and Conditionals*, chs. 2 & 4

Part Two: Recent Challenges to (the Ubiquity of) Context-Sensitivity

Week 5 (February 8th, on Zoom): Semantic Minimalism

- Herman Cappelen & Ernie Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*, selections from chs. 1-9 (feel free to only skim chs. 1-2, which provide background)

Week 6 (February 15th): Relativism: Foundations

- John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, chs. 1-6 (focus on chs. 1 & 3; feel free to only skim the other chapters depending on interest & time)

Week 7 (February 22nd, on Zoom): Relativism vs. Contextualism about Epistemic Modals

- John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, ch. 10
- Janice Dowell, "A Flexible Contextualist Account of Epistemic Modals"

Week 8 (February 29th): Expressivism; Ambiguity Theory

- Seth Yalcin, "Epistemic Modals"
- Emanuel Viebahn & Barbara Vetter, "How Many Meanings for 'May'? The Case for Modal Polysemy"

Part Three: Applications in Epistemology

Week 9 (March 7th): Knowledge Ascriptions

- Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism*, selections from chs. 1-3 & 6-7 (focus on chs. 1-2, feel free to only skim the others depending on interest & time)

[No class March 14th – Spring break]

Week 10 (March 21st): Skepticism

- David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”
- Keith DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”

[No class March 28th – Wellness Day]

Week 11 (April 4th): Fallibilism

- Dylan Dodd, “Against Fallibilism”
- Charity Anderson, “Fallibilism and the Flexibility of Epistemic Modals”
- Alex Worsnip, “Possibly False Knowledge”

Part Four: Applications in (Meta)ethics

Week 12 (April 11th): Information-Sensitivity

- Niko Kolodny & John MacFarlane, “Ought: Between Objective and Subjective”
- Gunnar Bjornsson & Stephen Finlay, “Metaethical Contextualism Defended”
- *Optional*: Janice Dowell, “Flexible Contextualism about Deontic Modals: A Puzzle about Information-Sensitivity”
- *Optional*: John Pittard & Alex Worsnip, “Metanormative Contextualism & Normative Uncertainty”

Week 13 (April 18th): Standards/End-Sensitivity

- James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism”
- Stephen Finlay, “Oughts and Ends”
- *Optional*: Alex Worsnip, “‘Ought’-Contextualism Beyond the Parochial”

Week 14 (April 25th): Reasons

- Justin Snedegar, *Contrastive Reasons*, chs. 1-2