

Assessor-Relativizable Predicates

Phil Crone* & Deniz Rudin†

*Department of Linguistics, Stanford University

†Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Cruz

Introduction We provide a novel account of predicates that accept modification by “to/for x ”, where x is some assessor. This class includes Predicates of Personal Taste (PPTs) as a proper subset, but includes other predicates not typically discussed in the PPT literature, such as *clear*, *obvious*, *acceptable*, etc. We refer to the full class of predicates that accept “to/for x ”-modification as Assessor-Relativizable Predicates (ARPs). We take ARPs with overt “to/for x ”-modification (PERSONAL ARPs) to express the judgment of x , whereas ARPs without overt “to/for x ”-modification (BARE ARPs) express the judgment of a hypothetical, qualified assessor. Our paper makes substantive contributions to the literature by widening the frame of inquiry beyond PPTs to all ARPs and by discussing empirical phenomena that we term the NON-SUPERVENIENCE PROPERTY and NORMATIVE FORCE of bare ARPs. We show how these empirical phenomena pose problems for several previous accounts of ARPs, but are accounted for by the present proposal. Pearson (2013)’s analysis ARPs is an exception in that it may account for both the normative force and non-supervenience property of bare ARPs. However, we argue that Pearson’s quantificational semantics gives rise to several problems not faced by the present proposal.

Proposal The semantics of ARPs include a variable q whose default interpretation is that of a hypothetical, qualified assessor. This assessor is an element of the domain of entities D_e , but is hypothetical in that it is not any “flesh and blood” individual in the world. The assessor’s judgments embody a folk theory of values, e.g. of what constitutes good taste. Modification with “to/for x ” binds this variable and saturates it with x . Non-ARPs do not have a q variable in their semantics, making “to/for x ”-modification semantically vacuous.¹ Formally, all ARPs are at least two-place functions of the form $\lambda x.P(x, q)$, where $P(x, q)$ is true iff x is P to q . We assume that all assignment functions assign to the free variable q the value of the hypothetical, qualified assessor. Optional “to/for x ” phrases are interpreted as follows: $\llbracket to/for\ x \rrbracket = \lambda Q.(\lambda q.Q)(x)$.

Some ARPs, such as *clear*, allow for an explicit evidence argument introduced by a PP headed by *from*. Such ARPs are a three-place function of the form $\lambda x.P(x, q, e)$, where $P(x, q, e)$ is true iff e plays a causally sufficient role in making x P to q . When e is left implicit, it is interpreted existentially, in line with other predicates whose implicit arguments receive an existential interpretation (Condoravdi and Gawron 1996). Optional “from y ” phrases are interpreted as follows: $\llbracket from\ y \rrbracket = \lambda Q.(\lambda e.Q)(y)$. Interpretation of q is as described above.

Non-Supervenience We observe that bare ARPs may be true despite the corresponding personal ARPs being false for all actual relevant assessors. Compare (1a) and (1b):

- (1) a. Van Gogh’s paintings were beautiful when they were painted, but nobody appreciated them until much later.
- b. # Van Gogh’s paintings were beautiful to everyone/art critics/his friends when they were painted, but nobody appreciated them until much later.

¹Non-ARPs can be coerced into receiving “to/for x ”-modification, e.g. *That’s green to me*. These coerced uses of “to/for x ” require x to be prosodically focused; ARPs allow prosodically deaccented “to/for x ”-modification.

Examples (1a) and (1b) show that a bare ARP claim can be true even if the corresponding personal ARP claim is infelicitous for any overt assessor. In addition, (1a) suggests that the judgments of actual speakers at the time were defective, a consequence of the normative force of bare ARPs discussed below. Consider also the following situation:

(2) *Context: Mary discovers documents that lead her to believe that Shakespeare's plays were actually written by Marlowe. She is the only individual in possession of these documents.*

Mary: It is clear to me from these documents that Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's plays. In the above situation, one may still doubt whether it is clear (simpliciter) from the documents that Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's plays, despite this being clear to the only relevant assessor in possession of the evidence, Mary. For example, if Mary is extremely credulous, a more qualified assessor may not agree with her judgment. We call this the NON-SUPERVENIENCE PROPERTY of bare ARPs, as the truth values of bare ARP claims do not supervene on truth values of any personal ARP claims. We account for this property by taking bare ARPs to be claims about the assessment of a *hypothetical*, qualified assessor. The non-supervenience property of bare ARPs is incompatible with analyses of PPTs (Lasersohn 2005; Stephenson 2007; Wolf 2014) and of *clear* (Barker and Taranto 2003; Barker 2009; Wolf and Cohen 2011) that take bare ARPs to be equivalent to personal ARPs relativized to either a non-hypothetical judge that is an element of the index of evaluation or a contextually relevant, non-hypothetical assessor.²

Normative Force In prolonged disagreements involving bare ARPs, each speaker implies the other has made a mistake or has defective judgment:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| (3) A: This roller coaster is fun! | (4) A: It's obvious that the butler did it. |
| B: No, it's not fun. It's terrifying. | B: No, that's not obvious at all! |
| A: You're crazy. | A: You're a fool. |

We call this the NORMATIVE FORCE of bare ARPs and take this property to show that a sufficient account of ARPs must include some normative component. Such a component is absent in most previous work, with Wolf and Cohen (2011) and Wolf (2014) being notable exceptions. We account for this property because the hypothetical, qualified assessor is an inherently normative notion.

Against Quantificational Analyses Pearson (2013) analyzes bare PPTs via universal quantification over relevant assessors with whom the speaker identifies in all accessible worlds, building on Moltmann's (2006, 2010) notion of first-person-oriented genericity. This proposal potentially accounts for non-supervenience if there are no relevant assessors in the actual world and for normative force if we take relevant assessors to be those who are normatively qualified.

We find much of Pearson's account attractive, but argue that a non-quantificational account of bare ARPs is to be preferred. First, we note that speakers may explicitly discount the views of others when making bare ARP claims. *Prima facie*, such dismissals are inconsistent with the spirit of a quantificational account. Nonetheless, such dismissals are technically consistent with a quantificational analysis if we take the dismissal to signal that the speaker only takes herself to be relevant, i.e. that she is universally quantifying over the singleton set containing herself.³ But then disagreements of the following kind should be impossible:

- (5) A: I don't care if everyone else in the world disagrees, this cake is delicious!
B: I don't care if everyone else in the world disagrees either, this cake is disgusting!
A: No, you're wrong! B: No, you are, you bozo!

²See Pearson (2013) for discussion of further shortcomings of these analyses.

³However, Pearson's (2013) claim that *Soapy dishwasher is tasty* is false even when asserted by a speaker who finds soapy dishwasher tasty suggests that she does not believe other agents' judgments may always be dismissed.

If their dismissals indicate that A and B are restricting the domain of quantification in their claims to only A and B, respectively, then there should be no disagreement. By instead treating ARPs as expressing idealized, normative judgment, our account captures the fact that disagreement over them is most trenchant when both speakers arrogantly consider their own taste sacrosanct.

A second problem for Pearson’s account arises in considering how a speaker responds to a disagreement with an interlocutor whom the speaker initially believed to be a relevant assessor with whom the speaker identified. Consider (6).

(6) A: This chili is tasty.

B: No, I don’t think it’s tasty at all.

Suppose that before the dialogue in (6), A had believed B to be a relevant assessor with whom A identified. Then, on Pearson’s account, B’s response requires an adjustment to A’s beliefs.⁴ One possibility is for A to stand by her claim that the chili is tasty, but conclude that B, contrary to A’s original supposition, is not a member of the set of relevant individuals with whom A identifies. Alternatively, A could maintain that her interlocutor is among the set of relevant individuals, but conclude that her initial claim was incorrect. That is, on Pearson’s proposal, A could rationally respond to (6) roughly as follows:

(7) A: # Since I take your view to be relevant, I was wrong to say that the chili is tasty.

However, we do not believe (7) is a sensible response to (6). So long as A still personally finds the chili tasty, A should not say that her original claim was wrong. Our account instead predicts that A’s response in (7) is incoherent, since the assessment of B should not affect A’s judgment about what a hypothetical, normatively qualified assessor would conclude.⁵

Speaker-Orientedness We close by discussing how we account for data discussed at length in previous work on ARPs. The assertion of a bare ARP usually licenses an inference to a personal ARP relativized to the speaker (8a). This follows from our account whenever speakers take themselves to be qualified. No similar inference is licensed for personal ARPs, since there is no reason that a speaker’s assessment should align with that of any arbitrary assessor (8b).

(8) a. This chili is tasty. \rightsquigarrow This chili is tasty to me. b. This chili is tasty to you. $\not\rightsquigarrow$ This chili is tasty to me.

However, speakers do not take themselves to be qualified to judge in all circumstances:

(9) a. This cat food is tasty. $\not\rightsquigarrow$ This cat food is tasty to me. (cf. Stephenson 2007)
 b. In Nebraska, that idea is shocking. $\not\rightsquigarrow$ That idea is shocking to me.
 c. A: I’m thinking of watching *Mulan* with my three-year-old, is it too scary?
 B: *Mulan* is very scary, my kids had nightmares after watching it.
 $\not\rightsquigarrow$ *Mulan* is very scary to B.

The inference in (9a) fails because the speaker doesn’t assume her judgments track those of a qualified assessor of the tastiness of cat food; if spoken by a member of the coastal elites, the

⁴Pearson argues that speakers delay making such an adjustment by maintaining a pretense that the speaker and listener have similar tastes, using López de Sa (2008)’s notion of a “Presupposition of Commonality”. However, in truly intractable disagreements, a commonality assumption must eventually be abandoned. If the disagreement in (6) reaches such a point, A must make some adjustment to her beliefs.

⁵There is one case in which our proposal correctly predicts (7) to be felicitous. If B is an expert chili taster such that A will take B’s assessment to be a good proxy for that of a hypothetical, qualified assessor, then B’s utterance informs A about what a hypothetical, qualified assessor would think about the chili. Note that in this case, A would also be committed to a belief that her own taste regarding the chili is defective in some way.

inference in (9b) fails because the speaker doesn't assume her judgments track those of qualified Nebraskan assessors; in (9c) the reactions of children are under discussion, and B does not assume that her own judgments track the judgment of a qualified child assessor.⁶ In each case, the inference fails because the context is one in which the speaker does not assume her own reactions to be in accordance with a qualified assessor of what is under discussion. In the full paper, we offer a modification of the formal proposal shown here to ensure the context dependence of the hypothetical, qualified assessor.

⁶See also Pearson (2013)'s discussion of defective or abnormal assessors' uses of bare ARPs.

References

- Barker, C. (2009). Clarity and the grammar of skepticism. *Mind & Language*, 24(3):253–273.
- Barker, C. and Taranto, G. (2003). The paradox of asserting clarity. In Koskinen, P., editor, *Proceedings of the Western Conference on Linguistics (WECOL) 2002*, volume 14, pages 10–21, Fresno, CA. Department of Linguistics, California State University.
- Condoravdi, C. and Gawron, J. M. (1996). The context dependency of implicit arguments. In Kanazawa, M., Pinon, C., and de Swart, H., editors, *Quantifiers, Deduction, and Context*, pages 1–32. CSLI Publications.
- Lasersohn, P. (2005). Context dependence, disagreement, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 28(6):643–686.
- López de Sa, D. (2008). Presuppositions of commonality: An indexical relativist account of disagreement. In García-Carpintero, M. and Kölbel, M., editors, *Relative Truth*, pages 297–310. Oxford University Press.
- Moltmann, F. (2006). Generic *one*, arbitrary PRO, and the first person. *Natural Language Semantics*, 14:257–281.
- Moltmann, F. (2010). Generalizing detached self-reference and the semantics of generic *one*. *Mind & Language*, 25:440–473.
- Pearson, H. (2013). A judge-free semantics for predicates of personal taste. *Journal of Semantics*, 30(1):103–154.
- Stephenson, T. (2007). Judge dependence, epistemic modals, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 30:487–525.
- Wolf, L. (2014). *Degrees of Assertion*. PhD thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba.
- Wolf, L. and Cohen, A. (2011). Clarity as objectivized belief. In Égré, P. and Klinedinst, N., editors, *Vagueness and Language Use*, Palgrave Studies in Pragmatics, Language and Cognition Series, pages 165–190. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.