

# Subjective Language without Evaluation

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## 1. Introduction

Some linguistic domains give rise to relativist effects. The most famous, or infamous, relativist effect is faultless disagreement: cases where two speakers seem to disagree, and yet are both right. I will also discuss faultless retraction: cases where a speaker has to take back an earlier claim, that nonetheless was made without mistake. I call these effects “relativist,” since they’ve been taken to motivate relativist semantic analyses. However, I don’t take the label to commit me to semantic relativism. Rather, I will use the term “relativist effects” simply for those effects which have motivated relativism, leaving open whether other types of analysis can account for them just as well, or even better.

A main domain that gives rise to relativist effects, and hence has come in for a relativist analysis, is discourse about matters of personal taste, expressed using predicates of personal taste, like ‘tasty’ or ‘fun’. This paper jumps off from the question: *What is the source of relativist effects with predicates of personal taste?*

The question can be posed as one about compositionality. As MacFarlane (2014) points out, ‘tasty’ — the canonical predicate of personal taste — is synonymous with ‘tastes good’. To the extent that the former gives rise to relativist effects, so does the latter. Are these effects, then, due to ‘tastes’, to ‘good’, or to something about their combination (or, to add an option MacFarlane doesn’t mention, perhaps both individually)? To put the question more generally, observe that predicates of taste implicate both the *subjective experience* of an agent, as well as some *evaluation* on their part. Are the relativist effects traceable to one of these rather than the other, or are both involved?

MacFarlane notes that to answer this question, we have to make general investigations of both verbs of sensory appearance (‘taste’, ‘look’, etc.) and evaluative adjectives (‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘beautiful’, etc.). In this paper, I pursue the former investigation, examining predicates involving verbs of sensory appearance, like ‘looks blue’ or ‘tastes vegan’.

The paper has three main sections. In §2, I show that appearance language (even in the absence of anything evaluative) gives rise to the same relativist effects as predicates of personal taste do. While this doesn’t prove that evaluation is irrelevant to the relativist effects, it does show that there is no need to trace their source back to it. It also shows that to the extent that relativism is motivated for predicates of taste, it’s also motivated for appearance predicates. In §3, I discuss how our linguistic analysis of appearance predicates might capture the relativist effects. Finally, in §4, I consider how the framework I’m developing can account for the variety of uses of appearance language, and in particular for the difference, proposed in the philosophy of perception, between phenomenal and epistemic appearance claims. In the rest of this abstract, I will summarize each of these sections.

## 2. Relativist Effects with Appearances

This section has two goals. The primary goal is to show that appearance language gives rise to the same relativist effects — faultless disagreement and faultless retraction — that predicates of personal taste do. But to do this, I must first pursue the subsidiary goal of

clarifying what these relativist effects are. Recall that my overall aim is not to argue for semantic relativism, but rather to investigate the source of the effects which have motivated it. Because of this, I take it to be methodologically important to identify the relativist effects in theory-neutral terms, but still precisely enough to get a handle on them as distinct from other nearby phenomena. So I begin the section with a characterization of faultless disagreement and retraction as applied to predicates of personal taste, jumping off from existing literature.

Then I turn to a comparison with appearance language, and show that faultless disagreement and faultless retraction arise with it as well, even in the absence of any evaluative language. I'm interested, for example, in the comparison between disagreements like the following:

- |     |                                |     |                                    |
|-----|--------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------|
| (1) | A: That cake <i>is tasty</i> . | (2) | A: That cake <i>tastes vegan</i> . |
|     | B: No, it's not!               |     | B: No, it doesn't!                 |

I hold that just as in a dialog like (1), the speakers disagree, and yet in some sense can both be right (in the sense clarified earlier in the section), so too can the speakers in (2). I also compare cases of faultless retraction, but for reasons of space I won't include one in this summary.

The upshot of this broadly empirical section is that the motivations for relativism from faultless disagreement and retraction are present as much with appearance language as with predicates of personal taste. Thus there's no need to locate the source of relativist effects in the evaluative component of predicates of taste. Experiential language alone is enough.

### 3. Semantics for Appearance Language

The relativist effects discussed above have been taken to motivate semantic relativism applied to predicates of personal taste. I begin this section by sketching a relativist analysis of taste predicates and explaining how it captures faultless disagreement and retraction (broadly following MacFarlane (2014)). I then show how this analysis can be extended to appearance language.

The approach involves two claims. First, the semantic values of the target expressions are relativized to a parameter tied to experience. Some theorists identify this parameter with an experiencer, but I use the more neutral "experiential standard" ("s" in the clauses below). The idea is that given different experiential standards, different things can be 'tasty' or 'fun', and different things can 'taste vegan' or 'look blue'.

- (3)  $[[\text{tasty}]]^s = \lambda x \in D_e. x \text{ is tasty according to } s$
- (4)  $[[\text{tastes}]]^s = \lambda P \in D_{et}. \lambda x \in D_e. x \text{ tastes to } s \text{ as if } P(x)$

Second, which experiential standard is relevant to the truth of an unmodified claim about personal taste or appearance is determined not by the context in which the claim was made, but rather by the context in which it is being assessed. So if you like the cake and I don't, then from my point of view, your utterance of 'The cake is tasty' is false. And likewise, if the cake tastes vegan to you but not to me, then from my point of view, your utterance of 'The cake tastes vegan' is false.

While this relativist analysis can capture the relativist effects, I wish to emphasize that it isn't mandatory. More generally, relativist effects with personal taste and appearance predicates motivate an analysis that takes their interpretation to depend in some way on experience, where whose experience is relevant to the acceptability of a claim is not simply the speaker's. In the paper, I go over how some non-relativist analyses can also fit this mold.

#### 4. Varieties of Appearances

I've suggested that subjective experience plays a key role in the interpretation of appearance language, so that given different experiential standards, we can get different verdicts about whether something 'tastes vegan' or 'looks blue'. In this section, I show that once we appreciate the variety of ways we talk about appearances, we should recognize (at least) two quite different roles for experience to play.

Begin from the observation that the semantic clause given above in (4) works well for certain appearance predicates, but less well for others:

- (5) That cake *tastes vegan*.  
✓ true iff the cake tastes as if it's vegan
  
- (6) That cake *tastes good*.  
?? true iff the cake tastes as if it's good

(Note that I've avoided appearance predicates like 'tastes good' so far, since they aren't helpful for factoring out the contribution of evaluative language. But in the end, our semantics for the appearance verb 'tastes' should apply to it too.)

Some appearance predicates, like 'tastes vegan', are appropriately paraphrased in a way that takes the adjective to apply directly to the subject of the sentence, while others, like 'tastes good', aren't. Following terminology from the philosophy of perception, I call the first kind of appearance predicate *epistemic*, and the second *phenomenal*. The distinction has been drawn in a variety of ways, but I suggest that it comes out in the framework I'm developing as a difference in the role played by experience in the respective kinds of claims. With an epistemic appearance claim, like (5), the experience provides *information* in support of an appearance-independent state of affairs — in this case, of the cake being vegan. By contrast, with a phenomenal appearance claim, like (6), the experience gives rise to an *evaluation* of the object in question. And the latter is also true of claims with traditional predicates of personal taste, like 'tasty' and 'fun'.

Relativist effects arise with language whose interpretation depends on subjective experience. This class encompasses predicates of personal taste, appearance predicates, and probably more. An investigation of appearance language — of which this paper is just the beginning — gives us a way into appreciating the variety of roles that experience plays in discourse: for instance, as a source of both information and evaluation. I would like to close, then, with the suggestion that this investigation could also shed light on evaluative language (e.g. moral and aesthetic language) and information-sensitive language (e.g. epistemic modals) more generally.

## Selected References

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