

## Some commonalities and differences between dimensional and aesthetic predicates

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This paper addresses some commonalities and differences between dimensional predicates such as German *groß* and English *tall*, and aesthetic predicates such as German *schön* and English *beautiful*. Aesthetic predicates are close to predicates of personal taste (German *lecker*, English *tasty*) with respect to faultless disagreement and to embedding under subjective attitude verbs (e.g. German *finden*, English *find*) which figure as the prominent characterizations of subjectivity (e.g., Lasersohn 2005, Saebo 2009). At the same time they have been shown to differ from taste predicates in a number of respects (for example in not entailing an experiencer, cf. McNally & Stojanovic 2017). This paper will focus on aesthetic predicates.

Dimensional and aesthetic predicates exhibit a number of parallels. They are, for example, gradable and relative. But whereas the truth of the proposition in (1a) hinges on a property inherent to the object it is predicated of (i.e. the size of the statue), the property in (1b) is merely ascribed to the object – there is no matter of fact of whether something counts as beautiful.

- (1) a. This statue is tall.  
b. This statue is beautiful.

However, when denied in discourse both (1a) and (b) may be subject to so-called faultless disagreement, that is, the intuition that, although they assert contradictory propositions, neither discourse participant can be blamed to be wrong. Moreover, in German the corresponding sentences may be embedded under the subjective attitude predicate *finden* – *Ich finde die Statue groß / schön*. (which is less clear in the case of English *find*, cmp. Kennedy 2016)

This raises the question of what it is in the lexical meaning of these predicates that makes them behave in the same way with respect to faultless disagreement and embedding under German *finden*. The proposal in this paper will be, in short, that dimensional predicates as well as aesthetic predicates (and, more general, evaluative predicates) share a crucial characteristic: Their primary meaning consists in a rule-like valuation component expressing that something is outstanding or noteworthy, be it approving or disapproving. Their denotational meaning is only secondary, determined by criteria of approval or disapproval agreed on by conversational participants.

The difference between dimensional and aesthetic predicates consists in the nature of the criteria: Aesthetic predicates are multi-dimensional with dimensions of all sorts (rational, ordinal, nominal) which vary considerably across contexts. Dimensional predicates, in contrast, are one-dimensional, the dimension relates to a rational scale and,

most importantly, it is stable across contexts. So while aesthetic predicates are open for multiple dimensions and all sorts of application criteria, dimensional predicates are less flexible in their meaning since their single dimension is fixed even if the application criterion defined on this dimension (i.e. the cut-off point) still varies across comparison classes. But as in the case of aesthetic predicates their primary meaning component is a rule-like valuation component expressing noteworthiness.

### **Hare (1952) on the meaning of *good***

The idea that aesthetic predicates have a rule-like valuation component as their primary meaning is adapted from Hare's analysis of the meaning of *good* (Hare 1952). He argues that there is no property shared by good things – a good motor car and a good picture and a good meal have nothing in common apart from being good. So there is no regular denotational meaning of *good*. But there is what Hare calls the commending function of *good*: calling a motor car or a picture or a meal good means commending it.

The commending function constitutes a rule-like valuation meaning component. In addition there is, following Hare, a descriptive meaning component. Although *good* has no regular denotation there are criteria relative to comparison class, speaker community, time etc. establishing a context-dependent standard for something to be called *good*. As far as they relate to factual properties these criteria create a quasi-denotational meaning of *good* relative to particular domains and criteria agreed on in the speaker community.

In this way, value statements may provide factual information. Suppose someone has been told that a particular car M is a *good motor car*. Suppose, moreover, this person knows nothing about M, but he knows what the accepted standard of goodness in motor cars is: "He will complain that I have misled him, if he subsequently discovers that M will not go over 30 m.p.h., or uses as much oil as petrol, or is covered with rust, or has large holes in the roof. His reason for complaining will be the same as it would have been if I had said that the car was red and he subsequently discovered that it was black. I should have led him to expect the motor-car to be of a certain description when in fact it was of a quite different description." (Hare 1952, p. 113).

Even though *good* has a quasi-denotation as described above, it lacks a regular denotation – there is no inherent property shared by good things. One consequence thereof, following Hare again, is that the predicate *good*, in contrast to *red*, cannot be taught by ostension – there is no common property to infer from examples as diverse as good motor cars, good pictures and good meals. Restricting the domain to motor cars someone may be taught by ostension to distinguish good motor cars from bad ones. Still, he will not have learned that calling something good means commending it. Another consequence of the lack of a regular denotation is the fact that the predicate *good*, in contrast to *red*, cannot be redefined in the sense of changing the denotation. Suppose motor cars change considerably in the future. Then it might be that what we now call a good motor car does not deserve this designation any longer. However, such a shift in meaning is not a redefinition but a change of standard and makes essential use of the fact that the evaluative meaning of *good*, that is, the commending function, stays constant. "[...] we are doing what would be called, if 'good' were a purely descriptive word, redefining it. But we cannot call it

that, for the evaluative meaning remains constant; we are rather altering the standard." (p.119).

Suppose, for example, that the addressee is familiar with Honda Civics, but he knows nothing about criteria of good motor cars. Then the sentence *A Honda Civic is a good motor car*. provides information about the standard of *good* in the context of motor cars (relative to speaker community, time, etc.) – this is what Barker (2002)/(2013) calls the meta-linguistic usage of a proposition. Now suppose that the addressee is not familiar with Honda Civics., but he agrees with the speaker on what criteria for good motor cars are. Then the same sentence provides information on Honda Civics, namely that they satisfy the agreed-on criteria for good motor cars – this is what Barker calls the descriptive usage of a proposition. So following Hare's analysis there is a descriptive usage of evaluative statements in addition to their meta-linguistic usage, and in this way evaluative statements may convey factual information, which is a strong argument against purely meta-linguistic analyses of evaluative predicates (e.g., Glanzberg 2007, Sundell 2011).

### **Adopting Hare's analysis**

Hare's analysis is made use of in an account of evaluativity/subjectivity separating the semantics of evaluative predicates from the pragmatics of subjective judgments (Umbach 2016). Faultless disagreement and the effect of subjective attitude verbs like German *finden* are accounted for on the level of judgements: What is their role in discourse? Do they require agreement/disagreement in order to enter the common ground or can they be used to convey mere individual discourse commitments? The implementation is based on Farkas & Bruce (2010) (see also Gunlogson & Carlson 2016).

On the level of semantics, the basic idea is that evaluative predicates rely on multi-dimensional criteria which have to be shared between discourse participants and may be negotiated via meta-linguistic interpretations. Multi-dimensionality is accounted for by 'generalized measure functions' extending the notion of measure function from the one-dimensional to the multi-dimensional case. The interplay of descriptive and meta-linguistic usage of evaluative propositions is implemented with the help of Krifka's (2012) simultaneous update of worlds and interpretations.

In the present paper the focus will be on Hare's valuation meaning component expressing that something is outstanding or noteworthy, be it approving or disapproving where the (quasi-)denotational meaning is only secondary, determined by dimensions and application criteria agreed on by conversational participants. While dimensions and criteria vary widely across speakers and domains, the valuation component stays constant, like a rule. One might also see it this way: The flexibility of dimensions and criteria is possible only because there is the constant valuation component.

In the case of dimensional predicates, the (single) dimension must not vary (setting aside figurative uses) – in the case of *tall* it is *height*. But the application criterion, that is, the cut-off for something to count as *tall* varies again. And as in the case of the aesthetic predicates it can be argued that the flexibility of dimensional predicates is possible only because there is a constant meaning component. This component is not related to

approval/disapproval but instead expresses noteworthiness or sufficient attraction of attention etc., see the discussion in Kennedy 2007. Apart from that it appears to be the same thing: a rule-like component providing denotational flexibility. From this point of view, dimensional predicates are just a special case of aesthetic (or in general: evaluative) predicates.

It remains to explore what the place of such a rule-like meaning component in a formal semantic system could be. One option would be a two-dimensional semantics in the sense of Potts (2005). A more conservative (and as I think more attractive) option is that of a character in the sense of Kaplan (1989). In the talk, both options will be considered.

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