

Relative Truth, Speaker Commitment, and Control of Implicit Arguments

Peter Lasersohn, University of Illinois

A fundamental problem in the theory of truth conditions is how to deal with sentences which intuitively are not about matters of fact, but seem to involve some ineliminable element of subjective judgment or opinion, such as (1)a. and b.:

- (1) a. Licorice is tasty.
- b. Roller coasters are fun.

To capture the subjectivity of such examples, we might analyze them as true or false only *relative* to particular individuals; they might be true relative to you, but false relative to me.

The most obvious way to develop such analysis would be to treat these sentences as containing some sort of hidden indexical, so that “true relative to you” means “true when the value of the hidden indexical is set to you”, and “false relative to me” means “false when the value of the hidden indexical is set to me”. If we say this, then sentences like these have different truth values relative to different individuals because they express different contents relative to different individuals.

In Lasersohn (2005), I argued that such examples should *not* be analyzed as expressing different contents relative to different individuals, on the grounds that such an analysis could not explain why, if one person says *Roller coasters are fun*, and another says *Roller coasters are not fun*, we intuitively regard them as disagreeing with — or even contradicting — one another. If *Roller coasters are fun* expresses different contents relative to the two speakers, there would seem to be no conflict between the two assertions.

To maintain an analysis in which the truth values of such sentences are relativized to individuals, therefore, we must allow a relativization of truth value *without* variation in content — something not allowed in conventional semantic theories. Similar arguments have been given for examples involving future contingents, epistemic modals, vagueness, and moral, aesthetic and probability statements (Kölbel 2002; MacFarlane 2003; Richard 2004; Egan, et al. 2005).

Because the central arguments in all these cases have revolved around the phenomenon of “faultless disagreement,” the impression may be strong in some quarters that the analysis of disagreement provides the only motivation for an analysis which relativizes truth values without relativizing content; and that therefore, if some other, less radical explanation could be given for our intuitions of disagreement in such cases, the motivation for a relativist truth assignment would be removed, and we could retain a more conventional style of semantic theory.

In this paper, I will provide some arguments for a relativization of truth values without relativization of content which do *not* depend in any direct or obvious way on the analysis of disagreement. A defense of a more conventional, non-relativist semantic theory must therefore provide more than an alternative explanation for our intuitions of disagreement.

The arguments will be based on sentences in which clauses expressing personal taste are embedded under factive predicates. (A parallel argument may also be given, using “truth

evaluative adverbs” such as *correctly* or *incorrectly*.)

The use of a factive predicate presupposes the truth of the factive predicate’s complement clause, and therefore commits the speaker to the claim that this clause is true. For example (2) commits its speaker to the claim that John’s theory has flaws. Many factive verbs, including *recognize*, also carry entailments that the referent of their subject noun phrase is committed to the truth of this same clause. Hence (2) also entails that John is committed to the claim that his theory has flaws.

(2) John recognizes that his theory has flaws.

Now consider an example in which a statement of personal taste appears in the complement clause:

(3) John recognizes that licorice is tasty.

The most natural reading for this sentence is one which implies that the speaker likes licorice, and that John likes it too.

However, in a theory in which *tasty* contains a hidden indexical argument, the value of this argument should be fixed — by the pragmatic context, or by principles of anaphora or control. The value to which it is fixed determines the content of the subordinate clause: If it is fixed to John, the content of the subordinate clause is that licorice is tasty for John; if it is fixed to the speaker, the content is that licorice is tasty for the speaker. Since the use of a factive verb like *recognize* commits both the speaker and the subject to the content of the subordinate clause, (3) should mean that John and the speaker are both committed to the claim that licorice is tasty for John, or mean that they are both committed to the claim that licorice is tasty for the speaker (or mean that they are committed to a similar claim for some third person). However, there seems to be no way to obtain the most natural reading for this sentence, in which *Licorice is tasty* is an expression both of John’s taste and of the speaker’s.

In contrast, a theory which maintains that *Licorice is tasty* does not vary in content from individual to individual, but which does allow variation in truth value according to the personal tastes of the individual involved, predicts this reading automatically: John and the speaker must both be committed to the (invariant) content of *Licorice is tasty*; to say that this content is true relative to John is to say that licorice appeals to John’s tastes, and to say that it is true relative to the speaker is to say that it appeals to the speaker’s tastes. Such examples thus provide motivation for a relativist semantic theory, independent of the analysis of disagreement.

References

- Egan, Andy, John Hawthorne and Brian Weatherson (2005) ‘Epistemic Modals in Context’, in *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning and Truth*, ed. by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, Oxford University Press.
- Kölbel, Max (2002) *Truth Without Objectivity*, Routledge.
- Laserson, Peter (2005) ‘Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste’, *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28.6.643-686.
- MacFarlane, John (2003) ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53.321–36.
- Richard, Mark (2004) ‘Contextualism and Relativism’, *Philosophical Studies* 119: 215–242.