

PREDICATES OF PERSONAL TASTE: EMPIRICAL DATA

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Abstract

According to contextualism, the extension of claims of personal taste is dependent on the context of utterance. According to truth relativism, their extension depends on the context of assessment. On this view, when the tastes of a speaker change, so does the truth value of a previously uttered taste claim, and if it is false, the speaker is required to retract it. Both views make strong empirical assumptions, which are here put to the test for the first time. It turns out that the linguistic behaviour of ordinary English speakers is consistent with contextualist predictions and inconsistent with relativist predictions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Indexical Contextualism

Indexical contextualism is a semantic theory according to which claims involving predicates of personal taste such as 'delicious', 'tasty' or 'fun' are context-dependent.¹ The relevant standard of taste of, say, 'Spinach is delicious' is determined by the context of utterance, and it manifests itself, albeit tacitly, at the level of the content expressed by the utterance. Claims of this sort are thus somewhat analogous to utterances invoking strict indexicals such as 'I' or 'now'. What a sentence like 'I am hungry' expresses can vary across contexts, since different contexts of utterance may supply different values for the first person pronoun, that is, different speakers. The default value of perspectival claims is also the perspective of the speaker, though sometimes it is the perspective of another individual, or some

¹ The semantics of predicates of personal taste has received a lot of attention over the last decade. An incomplete list of important contributions includes Kölbel (2002, 2004, 2004, 2009), Lasersohn (2005, 2008, 2009, 2011), Stojanovic (2007), Stephenson (2007), Recanati (2007), Glanzberg (2007), MacFarlane (2007, 2014), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) as well as the *Analysis* book symposium (2011) about the latter, Sæbø (2009), Moltmann (2010), Egan (2010), Sundell (2011), Huvenes (2012), Collins (2013), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014).

contextually salient group. Standardly, however, indexical contextualists take (1) to mean (2):

(1) Spinach is tasty.

(2) Spinach is tasty for me.

This intuitively plausible picture has recently come under attack, principally on the basis of two arguments: The argument from faultless disagreement, and the argument from required retraction. The former has been employed to motivate a position called nonindexical contextualism, the latter to motivate truth relativism. Here we focus on the latter.

1.2 Truth Relativism

Truth relativism² differs from indexical contextualism in three regards: *Firstly*, perspectival elements such as the relevant standard of taste are not part of the Kaplanian *content* of the proposition expressed by an utterance, but a parameter in the circumstance of evaluation like worlds or times. The content itself is perspective-neutral, just as it is time-neutral on a temporalist view of propositions such as Kaplan's (1989) own. *Secondly*, which standard of taste is relevant does not depend on *the* context of *utterance*, but on *some* context of *assessment*. Since there are countless contexts of assessment – in contrast to a single context of utterance per utterance – the truth-value of the proposition expressed is non-constant: It can vary across contexts of assessment, depending on the assessor's standard of taste. *Thirdly*, if the taste of a speaker evolves, her previous claim might no longer be accurate or true with respect to her current context of assessment. In such a case, the speaker – if challenged by an interlocutor – is required to retract or take back her previous claim. Here is an instructive passage by MacFarlane:

When our own tastes change, so that a food we used to find pleasant to the taste now tastes bad, we may say that we were mistaken in saying that the food was "tasty." When I was a kid, I once told my mother, "Fish sticks are tasty." Now that I have exposed my palate to a broader range of tastes, I think I was wrong about that; I've changed

² Defenders of the position, not necessarily limited to predicates of personal taste, are *inter alia* MacFarlane (2007, 2014), Egan (2007) and, on some interpretations, Lasersohn (2005, ms).

my mind about the tastiness of fish sticks. So, if someone said, "But you said years ago that fish sticks were tasty," I would retract the earlier assertion. I wouldn't say, "They were tasty then, but they aren't tasty any more," since that would imply that their taste changed. Nor would I say, "When I said that, I only meant that they were tasty to me then." I *didn't* mean that. At the time I took myself to be disagreeing with adults who claimed that fish sticks weren't tasty. (2014: 13,14)

What the example brings out is that the *truth* of claims of personal taste is assessment-sensitive (i.e. it depends on features of the context of assessment), and that this is *demonstrated* by the retraction of such claims at contexts of assessment at which they are no longer true. This can be fleshed out a bit. MacFarlane proposes a norm-driven picture of assertion, that is, a view according to which the practice of assertion is governed by certain constitutive rules. According to one such rule, a speaker should only assert what is true:

Reflexive Truth Rule: An agent is permitted to assert that p at context c_1 only if p is true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 . (2014: 103)

The reflexive truth rule might seem puzzling, in so far as the context of utterance (or use) and the context of assessment *coincide*. This means – as MacFarlane acknowledges – that it 'will not help us make sense of relative truth, for it leaves contexts of assessment without any *essential* role to play' (2014, p. 104). However, the truth rule does not exhaust the normative constraints that govern assertion. As illustrated by the fish sticks example, there seems to be another constitutive rule in play, a rule in which contexts of assessment play a central role:

Retraction Rule: An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of p made at c_1 if p is not true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 . (2014: 108)

Hence: Young MacFarlane was *permitted* to utter 'Fish sticks are tasty', since the claim was true as used and assessed from the context of utterance. Once his tastes have evolved, however, he has to admit (if challenged) that his claim was *false* since it is inaccurate from his present context of assessment.

But if the previously made claim is now considered as *having been false*, MacFarlane suggests, it needs to be retracted so as to ‘undo the normative commitments’ undertaken by the speaker when it was uttered. In sum, relativism proposes a view that defines truth-evaluation as dependent on contexts of assessment, and suggests that the retraction of taste claims arises *in virtue* of their assessment-sensitivity.

1.3 Two kinds of Data

Truth Relativism about predicates of personal taste is an *empirical position*, which makes certain claims about our practices of truth-ascription and the retraction of assertions. These descriptive claims are taken to ground certain constitutive norms of assertion – the truth rule and the rule of retraction. Note that the norms in question are *behaviour-dependent*: They rely on the empirical adequacy of the relevant descriptions of our practice of assertion. If the descriptive claims are false, the norms are fictitious, and the resulting account of assertion is distorted. Legal norms and moral norms (at least on certain assumptions about moral values) differ from linguistic norms in this respect: If nobody acts in accordance with a particular law or moral norm, it does not follow that such legal or moral rules do not exist. Whereas rules of this sort are behaviour-independent, linguistic norms are not.³ As such they are suited to empirical investigation.

Relativists allege they have provided ‘data’ regarding the assessment-sensitivity of predicates of personal taste. This is somewhat euphemistic. They have provided example cases coupled with conjectures to the effect that ordinary language speakers react in line with relativist predictions. Since these conjectures are rather contentious, however, it is perhaps time to turn from ‘data’ to data proper.⁴

³ For a related point, cf. Horwich (2014).

⁴ This is not intended to sound polemical. Example dialogues which test whether certain utterances sound felicitous make for a perfectly valid preliminary method of assessing their linguistic properties. However, given how contentious even these preliminary assessments are, and given that the debate has raged for over a decade, a more refined method of inquiry is required.

2. Experimental Design

2.1 Scenario

The retraction of claims of personal taste, relativists content, is driven by the assessment-sensitivity of the truth-value of such claims. If a certain taste claim uttered at context c_1 and true as assessed from c_1 at some later context of assessment c_2 is false, the speaker is required to retract *because* it is false at c_2 . We must thus address two core questions: (i) Whether the taste claim, true at a context c_1 , is indeed assessed as *false* from c_2 if, at c_2 the speaker's tastes have changed, and (ii) whether ordinary language speakers share the relativist's intuition that the speaker is required to take back their original utterance in such a situation.

MacFarlane's passage can be worked into the following scenario, which comes in two versions (A and B) so as to address the two questions regarding falsity and retraction separately:

FISH STICKS

John is five years old and loves fish sticks. One day he says to his sister Sally: 'Fish sticks are delicious.' Twenty years later his taste regarding fish sticks has changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes fish sticks and John says he doesn't anymore.

[A] Sally says: 'So what you said back when you were five was false.'

[B] Sally says: 'So you are required to take back what you said about fish sticks when you were five.'

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Sally's claim?

Participants were randomly assigned either version [A] or [B], and had to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' (1) to 'completely agree' (7). Mean agreement with Sally's assessment of John's original claim, and her suggestion that he must retract provides evidence for or against relativism in *absolute* terms. Since agreement is measured on a scale, and since it is hard to say which precise range of levels would confirm or disconfirm the relativist's or the contextualist's predictions, it is useful to have benchmark levels. In devising the benchmark scenarios, the vignette should be modified as little as possible, so as not to trigger framing effects.

2.2 Benchmarks

According to the relativist picture, a change in tastes gives rise to a change in truth-assessment, since taste claims are evaluated at the context of assessment. The results for the target scenario, in which John used to like fish sticks yet no longer does (call this condition 'Yes/No'), should pattern with those from a scenario in which John didn't like fish sticks as a child and still doesn't ('No/No'). In either case the claim 'Fish sticks are tasty', uttered 20 years earlier, is false as assessed from the present context of assessment and thus requires retraction. The only difference is that in the relativist benchmark case it was, in fact, never true. Hence, relativists and contextualists alike would agree that the claim must be evaluated as having been false. What is more, in such a case it is *prima facie* not implausible to hold that the claim stands in need of retraction on grounds neutral with regards to the debate between contextualists and relativists.

According to contextualism, by contrast, the perspectival feature of taste claims is provided by the context of utterance.⁵ Hence, the truth-value of John's claim must be evaluated relative to the context of utterance, and it rests constant over contexts of assessment. So a theory-neutral benchmark case for the contextualist's predictions is one in which John used to like fish sticks, and still does ('Yes/Yes'): Both relativists and contextualists agree that in such a case John's claim should *not* be assessed as false and that he is *not* required to retract it. Hence, with the two control cases in place we can also assess the *relative* fit of the target scenario results with the particular levels of mean agreement gathered in the benchmark experiments.

⁵ We will concentrate on the assumptions and predictions of indexical contextualism. So we will set aside nonindexical contextualism, according to which the truth assessment of *others'* claims pattern with relativist predictions and the truth assessment of *one's own previous* claims with predictions of indexical contextualism. The results below put pressure on the sort of nonindexical contextualism proposed as a better alternative to indexicalism via faultless disagreement arguments, such as the one defended e.g. by Kölbel (2004, 2004, 2009). The only nonindexical contextualist position consistent with the data here proposed is a very moderate sort, which is truth-conditionally equivalent with indexicalism. For discussion cf. Stojanovic (2007); Recanati (2007) seems to defend a view along these lines.

3. Experiment 1: 'Tasty'

3.1 Participants

124 (f=47) participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a paid Qualtrics online survey. The IP address location was restricted to the United States. After discarding non-native speakers, speed-clickers ($t < 15$ seconds)⁶, participants failing an attention test, or changing their response 10 or more times (suggesting automated response), 90 (f=29) datasets remained.

3.2 Materials & Procedure

The FISH STICKS scenario came in six versions: Three conditions (Target / Relativist Benchmark / Contextualist Benchmark) x two questions (Falsity / Retraction). Each participant was randomly assigned one of the six variations. After the first question, targeting truth evaluation or the requirement to retract, a follow-up question gathered data regarding a *second* relativist observation: In a scenario like FISH STICKS, relativists argue, it would sound 'odd or unnatural'⁷ if John challenged Sally's truth-assessment or resisted to retract. Depending on condition, participants faced one of the following two questions (the following are examples for the target scenario):

[A] How appropriate would you find the following response by John: 'What I said when I was five was true, because I did like fish sticks at the time.'

[B] How appropriate would you find the following response by John: 'At the time I did like fish sticks. So I am not required to take back the claim 'Fish sticks are delicious' I made when I was five.'

Responses were collected on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely inappropriate) to 7 (completely appropriate).

⁶ Three different subjects unfamiliar with the scenario and questions were asked to complete the task. They were carefully instructed to respond quickly, yet only once they had fully comprehended the target question. The minimum response time was around 15 seconds, which was thus used as a benchmark for full comprehension.

⁷ These are the terms MacFarlane uses in his discussion of resistance to retraction of epistemic modals, where the issue is largely the same (cf. MacFarlane 2014, p. 250).

3.3 Results & Discussion

3.3.1 Truth Assessment & Retraction

The results, represented graphically in figure 1, are decisive: As regards the target scenario (Yes/No) in which John used to like fish sticks, but no longer does, participants disagree strongly with the claim that his original assertion was false ($M=1.5$, $SD=0.9$). The level of agreement differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=5.6$, $SD=2.2$), i.e. the case in which John in fact never liked fish sticks and still doesn't (No/No). In line with contextualist predictions, the mean level of agreement of the target scenario does not differ significantly from a case in which John used to like fish sticks and still does, i.e. the Yes/Yes case ($M=1.5$, $SD=1.4$).⁸ ⁹ The truth of claims of personal taste is utterance-sensitive, not assessment-sensitive.

There is also strong disagreement with the statement that John is required to take back his claim ($M=2.1$, $SD=1.9$) in the target scenario. With respect to retraction, too, relativist predictions miss their mark not only in terms of absolute results, but also relative to the benchmarks: Mean agreement differs strongly from the relativist benchmark ($M=4.2$, $SD=2.0$) and does not differ from the contextualist benchmark ($M=1.2$, $SD=0.4$). Claims of personal taste are not governed by a retraction norm.¹⁰

⁸ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on truth assessment, $F(2, 40)=31.228$ $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=-4.17$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [-5.76;-2.59]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=-.046$; $p=.997$, 95% CI [-1.63;1.54]).

⁹ Some might deem planned contrasts more appropriate than Tukey's post-hoc test, and wonder whether the increased power produces distinct results. It does not (for this or any of the other experiments). Planned contrast test results for all three experiments are reported in Appendix 1.

¹⁰ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on retraction, $F(2, 44)=16.257$ $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=-2.16$, $p=.002$, 95% CI [-3.57;-.75]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=.84$; $p=.324$, 95% CI [-.57;2.25]).

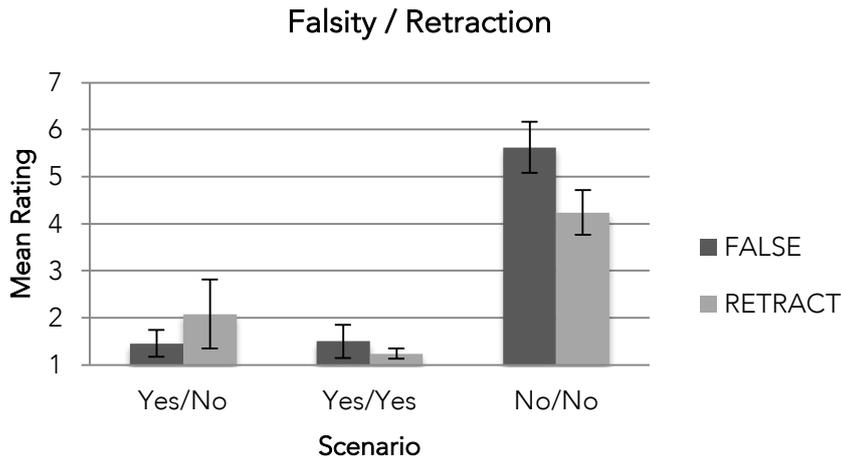


Figure 1: Mean agreement with the claim that John's original assertion 'Fish sticks are tasty' was false or requires retraction if John used to like them and no longer does (Yes/No), liked them and still does (Yes/Yes – contextualist benchmark), or never did and still doesn't (No/No – relativist benchmark). Error bars denote standard error of the mean.

3.3.2 Resistance to Re-evaluation and Retraction

The data regarding John's resistance to retract or to accept Sally's truth assessment is equally decisive. In the target scenario, participants consider it perfectly appropriate for John to insist that his assertion was in fact true at the context of utterance ($M=6.5$, $SD=1.5$), a result which differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=3.4$, $SD=2.1$) yet is near-identical with the contextualist benchmark ($M=6.6$, $SD=0.9$).¹¹

Resisting retraction is, *pace* MacFarlane, not deemed 'odd or unnatural'. Quite to the contrary, John's refusal to take back his claim is met with strong agreement ($M=6.8$, $SD=0.6$), the mean level of which differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=3.2$, $SD=2.0$) yet not from the contextualist one ($M=6.1$, $SD=1.3$).¹² Hence, for all four dependent variable (truth-assessment, retraction, resistance to re-evaluation, resistance to retraction)

¹¹ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on resistance to re-evaluation, $F(2,40)= 19.538$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=3.10$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [1.58;4.63]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=-.080$; $p=.991$, 95% CI [-1.45;1.60]).

¹² An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on resistance to retract, $F(2,44)= 25.871$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=3.59$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [2.26;4.31]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=.652$; $p=.978$, 95% CI [-.69;1.99]).

and both measures (absolute and benchmark comparisons) contextualist predictions prove correct and relativist predictions mistaken.

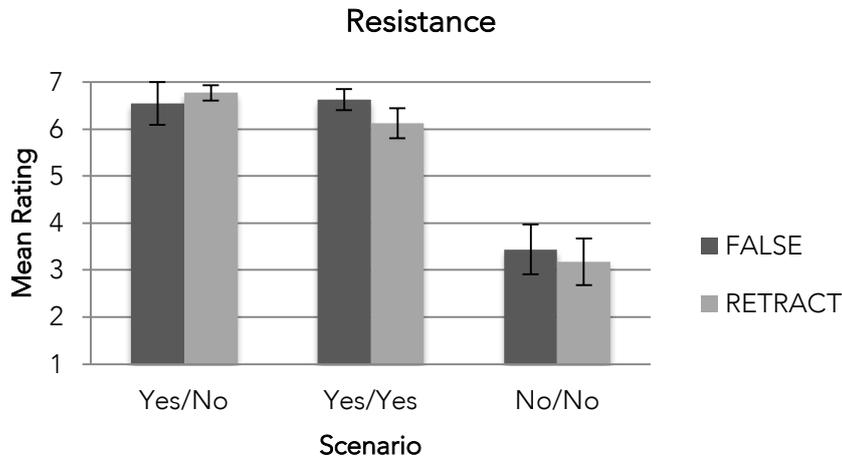


Figure 2: Degree to which it is considered appropriate (1=completely inappropriate; 7=completely appropriate) for John to resist an assessment of his taste claim as false, or to resist an alleged requirement to retract it in a case where John used to like fish sticks and no longer does (Yes/No), liked them and still does (Yes/Yes – contextualist benchmark), or never did and still doesn’t (No/No – relativist benchmark). Error bars denote standard error of the mean.

4. Experiment 2: ‘Fun’

The second predicate of personal taste besides ‘tasty’ that serves as a relativist intuition-pump is ‘fun’ (Laserson 2005, 2011; Stephenson 2007; MacFarlane 2014). We again need a scenario where the protagonist finds a particular activity – building sandcastles, say – fun at some stage, yet at some later context of assessment his preferences have changed. For the benchmark cases, just as in the experiment above, two extra conditions were devised which keep the preferences of the protagonist fixed over time. That way we can assess the relativist’s predictions not only in terms of absolute levels of mean agreement, but evaluate whether the target scenario levels pattern with the contextualist or the relativist benchmark results.

4.1 Participants

123 (f=50) participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a paid Qualtrics online survey. The IP address location was again restricted to the United States. After discarding non-native speakers, speed-clickers ($t < 15$ seconds), participants failing an attention test, or changing their

response 10 or more times (suggesting automated response), 105 (f=42) datasets remained.

4.2 Materials & Procedure

The two versions (A and B) of the target scenario read:

SANDCASTLE

John is five years old and loves building sandcastles. One day he says to his sister Sally: 'Building sandcastles is great fun.' Twenty years later his opinion regarding sandcastles has changed. Sally asks him whether he still thinks building sandcastles is fun, and John says he doesn't.

[A] Sally says: 'So what you said back when you were five was false.'

[B] Sally says: 'So you are required to take back what you said about building sandcastles when you were five.'

Q.: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Sally's claim? (1= completely disagree; 7= completely agree)

The contextualist benchmark stipulated that John used to enjoy building sandcastles and *still* does (the 'Yes/Yes' condition); the relativist one that he never did and still doesn't ('No/No'). Again, advocates of relativism and contextualism agree regarding the predictions of the theory-neutral benchmark cases. Each of the three conditions (Target / Contextualist Benchmark / Relativist Benchmark) came in two versions, one focusing on the truth assessment of John's claim (i.e. [A]), one on retraction (i.e. [B]). Participants were randomly assigned one of the six possible combinations, and asked to respond on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' (1) to 'completely agree' (7). As in the previous experiment, a follow-up question gathered data on whether John could reasonably challenge Sally's evaluation of his taste claim or resist her invitation to retract it. In the target scenario (adapted for the Yes/Yes and No/No scenarios), these questions read:

[A] How appropriate would you find the following response by John: 'What I said when I was five was true, because I did like building sandcastles at the time.'

[B] How appropriate would you find the following response by John: 'At the time I did like building sandcastles. So I am not required to take back the claim 'Building sandcastles is fun' I made when I was five.'

Responses were collected on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely inappropriate) to 7 (completely appropriate).

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Truth-Assessment & Retraction

Just as in the previous experiment, there is strong disagreement with the claim that the original utterance was false ($M=1.2$, $SD=0.4$), differing significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=6.1$, $SD=1.3$), but not the contextualist one ($M=1.3$, $SD=0.9$).¹³ There is also strong disagreement with the claim that John's utterance stands in need of retraction ($M=1.7$; $SD=1.3$), again differing significantly from the relativist benchmark level ($M=4.1$, $SD=1.9$), though not the contextualist one ($M=1.2$, $SD=0.6$)¹⁴, cf. figure 3.

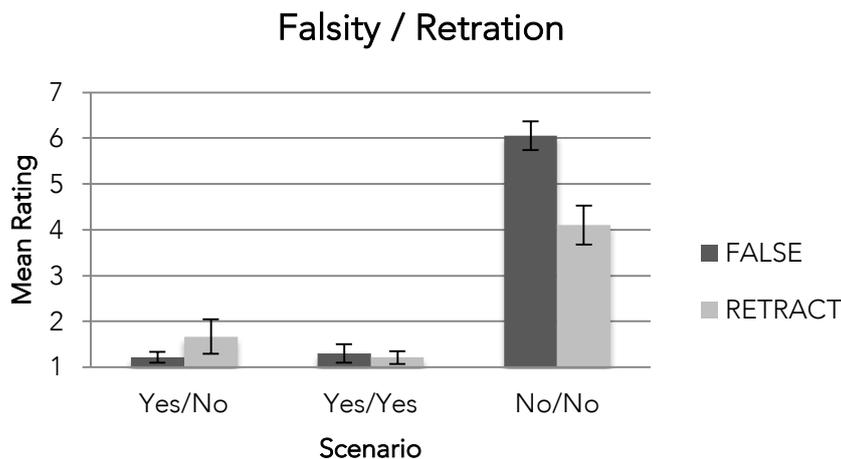


Figure 3: Average agreement with the claim that John's original assertion 'Building sandcastles is fun' was *false* or *requires retraction* if John used to like it and no longer does

¹³ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on truth assessment, $F(2, 48)=137.433$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=-4.84$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [-5.69;-4.00]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=-.086$; $p=.965$, 95% CI [-.91;.74]).

¹⁴ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on retraction, $F(2, 51)=24.061$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=-2.43$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [-3.58;-1.29]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=.46$; $p=.611$, 95% CI [-.70;1.61]).

(Yes/No), liked it and still does (Yes/Yes – contextualist benchmark) or never did and still doesn't (No/No – relativist benchmark). Error bars denote the standard error of the mean.

4.3.2 Resistance to Re-evaluation and Retraction

Participants strongly agree that John could insist on his original claim's truth ($M=6.6$, $SD=0.8$), a result which differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=3.4$, $SD=2.2$), though not the contextualist one ($M=6.6$, $SD=0.9$).¹⁵ Resisting retraction is deemed appropriate ($M=6.4$, $SD=1.3$), mean level of agreement differing significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=3.7$, $SD=2.1$) though not from the contextualist one ($M=6.1$, $SD=1.6$).¹⁶ Yet again, the contextualist hypotheses are confirmed and the relativist ones are vitiated in *every single respect*.

4.4 Discussion

Two experiments, both using vignettes closely modelled on what is perhaps the most cited example to motivate relativism with respect to predicates of personal taste prove the relativist predictions about truth-assessment and retraction wrong. The truth of taste claims is not assessment-sensitive, and if tastes evolve, previously made claims do not stand in need of retraction.

The empirical hypotheses of contextualists, according to whom the claims of personal taste are sensitive to the context of utterance, by contrast, have turned out correct. Moreover, as contextualists maintain and relativists deny, it is not deemed 'odd and unnatural' to defend one's claim as having been true with respect to the context of utterance at a later context of assessment if one's tastes have changed, neither is it inappropriate to refuse to take back such a claim. There is perfect uniformity as regards the implications of the results for all four dependent variables (truth-assessment, retraction, resistance to re-evaluation, resistance to retraction) and both types of

¹⁵ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on resistance to re-evaluation, $F(2,48)= 27.916$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=3.29$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [2.02;4.56]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=.09$; $p=.982$, 95% CI [-1.14;1.32]).

¹⁶ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on resistance to retraction, $F(2,51)= 14.438$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=2.75$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [1.34;4.16]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=-.295$; $p=.873$, 95% CI [-1.13;1.72]).

measure invoked (absolute results, relative results as compared to benchmarks).

Does the relativist stand refuted? Not quite yet. Though the vignettes employed have been modelled closely on the relativist's own examples, one might reasonably call into question the endurance of the pragmatic commitment to retract a taste claim true at context of utterance c_1 yet false at context of assessment c_2 , if the contexts are separated by two decades.¹⁷ Perhaps the requirement to retract wears off over time. Furthermore, it might well be the case that such a requirement does not arise for claims made during childhood, as children are held much less responsible for their actions and utterances than adults. What it takes is thus an experiment with yet another vignette in which (i) the protagonist is not specified to be a child at the context of utterance and in which (ii) the context of utterance and the context of assessment are not separated by a long time span.

5. Experiment 3: Time lag Concerns

Experiment 3, which focuses on a third predicate of personal taste, 'delicious', addresses the potential concern regarding childhood assertions and time lag. Naturally, tastes do not change from one moment to the next, so while the time lag must be reduced considerably, excess should be avoided. In the new scenario (see below), it has been reduced from twenty years to a few weeks.

¹⁷ Von Fintel and Gillies (2008: 84-86) discuss time lag with respect to epistemic modal claims, which are also deemed assessment-sensitive by relativists and for which a retraction requirement allegedly arises, too. Since knowledge accumulates over time, the larger the time span that separates context of utterance and context of assessment, the higher the chances that the original claim stands in need of retraction. However, Von Fintel and Gillies argue, 'the facts go the other way, as t_a [the time of assessment] gets much later than t_c [the time of utterance], it becomes increasingly silly to go in for the sort of rejection that [relativism] predicts.' (2008: 86). For instance, if Mary is to guess a randomly chosen card put into an envelope by John, and if the question is only resolved ten years later, it seems exceedingly odd for him to shout 'Wrong!/What you said is false!' (2008:86) and to require her to take back her claim. Note that this train of thought constitutes a *counterargument* to the very logic of relativism. By contrast, I am trying to explore how similar considerations could be used in *favour* of relativism, so as to give the position its best shot. More particularly the suggestion is that due to the time lag the anti-relativist evidence of experiment 1 and 2 must be disregarded.

5.1 Participants

139 (f=71) participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a paid Qualtrics online survey. The IP address location was again restricted to the United States. After discarding non-native speakers, speed-clickers ($t < 15$ seconds), participants failing an attention test, or changing their response 10 or more times (suggesting automated response), 102 (f=55) datasets remained.

5.2 Materials & Procedure

The two versions (A v. B) of the target scenario read:

SALMON

It's Ben's birthday. To celebrate the occasion, Mary takes him out to her favourite restaurant. Ben loves salmon, and says to Mary: 'Salmon is delicious.' A few weeks later, Ben's tastes regarding salmon have changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes salmon and Ben says he doesn't anymore.

[A] Mary says: 'So what you said in the restaurant a few weeks ago was false.'

[B] Mary says: 'So you are required to take back what you said about salmon a few weeks ago in the restaurant.'

Q.: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Mary's claim? (1= completely disagree; 7= completely agree)

In the contextualist benchmark case Ben likes salmon at the time of his birthday and still does when the subject is raised again by Mary a few weeks later ('Yes/Yes' condition). In the relativist benchmark Ben doesn't like salmon at either times ('No/No'). As in the previous experiments, all three conditions (Target/Contextualist Benchmark/Relativist Benchmark) came in two versions, one focusing on the truth assessment of Ben's claim (i.e. [A]), one on retraction (i.e. [B]). Participants were again randomly assigned one of the six possible combinations, and asked to respond on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' (1) to 'completely agree' (7). As in experiment 1 and 2, participants were also asked to what extent they agree that Ben could challenge Mary's truth assessment and resist retraction.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Truth-Assessment & Retraction

The results are essentially the same as for the two previous experiments. There is strong disagreement with the claim that Ben's utterance was false in the vignette where his tastes change (the 'Yes/No' case). The mean level of agreement ($M=2.4$, $SD=1.2$) differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=6.2$, $SD=2.0$), yet does not differ from the contextualist benchmark ($M=1.4$, $SD=1.1$).¹⁸ Participants also disagree with the claim that Ben must retract his claim in the 'Yes/No' scenario ($M=2.4$, $SD=1.6$), the mean level differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=4.4$, $SD=2.0$), but not from the contextualist one ($M=1.4$, $SD=1.1$)¹⁹, cf. figure 4.

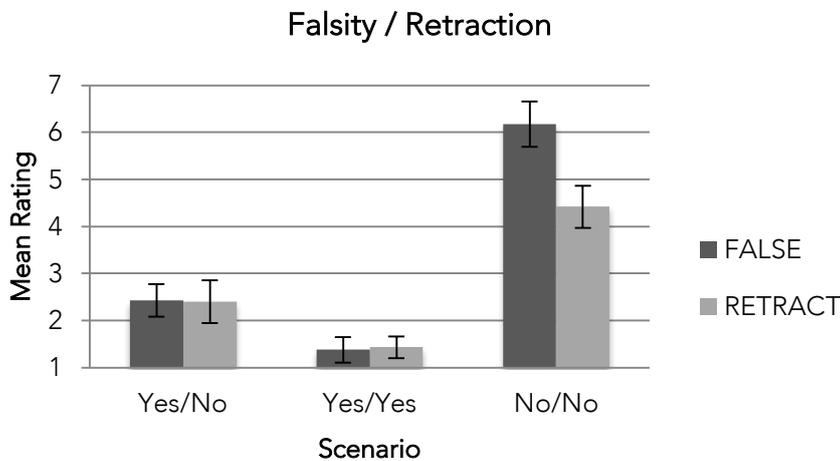


Figure 4: Average agreement with the claim that Ben's original assertion 'Salmon is delicious' was false or requires retraction if Ben used to like it and no longer does (Yes/No), liked it and still does (Yes/Yes – contextualist benchmark) or never did and still doesn't (No/No – relativist benchmark). Error bars denote the standard error of the mean.

5.3.2 Resistance to Re-evaluation/Retraction

There is strong agreement that Ben, having changed his mind regarding salmon, can indeed insist that his assertion was true at the context of

¹⁸ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on truth assessment, $F(2, 44)=45.416$ $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=-3.75$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [-5.08;-2.42]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=-1.05$; $p=.152$, 95% CI [-.30;2.40]).

¹⁹ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on retraction, $F(2, 52)=18.684$ $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=-2.02$, $p=.001$, 95% CI [-3.33;-.72]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=.97$; $p=.168$, 95% CI [-.31;2.24]).

utterance ($M=5.9$, $SD=1.3$). The mean level of agreement differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=1.5$, $SD=.7$), but not from the contextualist one ($M=5.7$, $SD=2.0$).²⁰ There is similarly strong agreement that Ben is in the right to resist retraction ($M=6.0$; $SD=1.6$), a result which again differs significantly from the relativist benchmark ($M=2.7$, $SD=1.4$), though not from the contextualist one ($M=6.1$, $SD=1.3$).²¹

5.4 Discussion

Experiment 3 addressed two potential sources of distortion of the first two experiments: (i) the fact that the protagonist in the first two vignettes was a child at the context of utterance, and (ii) the time lag of two decades between the context of utterance and assessment. As it turns out, the worry was unfounded: The results for experiment three are equivalent to those of the first two experiments in all respects. Again, the contextualist predictions proved corrected with regards to all four dependent variables and both measures, and the relativist predictions were shown as empirically mistaken across the bank. The truth of claims of personal taste are sensitive to the context of utterance only, and they are not subject to a rule of retraction.

One interesting feature of the results bears mentioning: Even for taste claims which are and have been blatantly false (the No/No cases), and which are clearly assessed as such, there is no decisive support for a retraction requirement. This is illustrated by figure 5, where the No/No cases for all three scenarios are plotted in a single graph:

²⁰ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on resistance to re-evaluation, $F(2,44)= 50.610$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=4.46$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [3.22;5.70]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=.24$; $p=.888$, 95% CI [-1.02;1.50]).

²¹ An analysis of variance showed a main effect of condition on resistance to retraction, $F(2,52)= 35.387$, $p<.001$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated a significant difference at the 0.05 level between the target results and the relativist benchmark ($MD=3.32$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [2.14;4.49]) yet no significant difference between the target results and the contextualist benchmark ($MD=-.10$; $p=.978$, 95% CI [-1.25;1.06]).

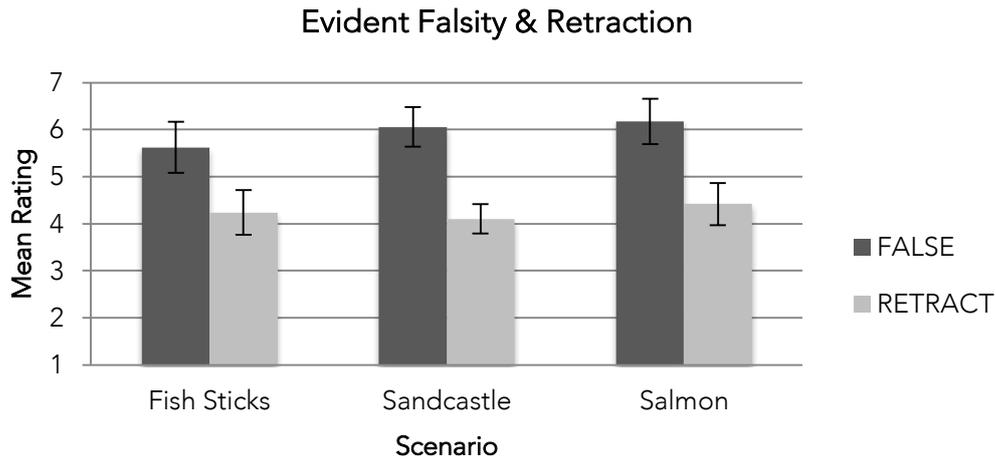


Figure 5: Mean agreement with the statement that the target claim was false/stands in need of retraction for the No/No conditions of the Fish Sticks, Sandcastle and Salmon scenarios. Error bars designate standard error of the mean.

Participants tend to neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the false taste claim must be retracted. This suggests that assertion simply is not governed by a constitutive norm of this sort, even in cases most favourable to its potential application. Beyond the empirical refutation of retraction predictions in the cases in which the relativist takes such a norm to *also* apply, doubts thus accrue whether *any* theory would be justified to invoke a retraction norm as an empirically confirmed phenomenon. Assertion is not subject to a retraction norm and the extensive pragmatic machinery the relativist builds atop the norm is devoid of any empirical foundation.

6. Conclusion

The results are loud and clear: In the case of three experiments modelled on a scenario which truth relativists present as ‘evidence’ in favour of their semantics, empirical evidence proper suggests otherwise. Relativist predictions regarding truth-assessment and retraction stand refuted both in terms of absolute results, as well as vis-à-vis the relativist benchmark levels. The predictions of speaker-centred indexical contextualism, on the other hand, are confirmed in both respects.²² What is more, it is highly doubtful

²² The results for the particular cases tested are not inconsistent with indexicalist approaches according to which the type of value of the tacit taste argument is somewhat flexible and allows, in certain contexts, for exocentric, generic or group readings. The particular cases at

whether assertions are ever subject to a constitutive norm of assertion. Even when the contentious claim was false with respect to the context of utterance, ordinary language speakers see no evident need for the speaker to retract their assertion.²³

Relativism with regards to truth in English, we said, is an empirical position. The view is easy to verify: All it takes is a demonstration that the extension of a single English expression is in fact used in assessment-dependent ways. The view is hard to falsify: According to relativists, there are many such expressions – predicates of personal taste, aesthetic predicates, moral expressions, epistemic modals, as well as the verb ‘to know’ and cognates, to name but a few. Given that the relativist predictions regarding truth-assessment have been empirically called into question for epistemic modals (Knobe & Yalcin, 2014; Kneer, 2015, ms.), and given that they turned out inadequate with respect to predicates of personal taste, too, one might see the burden of proof shift back to the relativist. What a defence of relativism with regards to truth in English requires is no more ‘data’, but empirical data about the linguistic behaviour of ordinary English speakers.

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hand just favour an autocentric (or speaker-dependent) reading which, though not necessary in general, is quite likely the default.

²³ The data for epistemic modals reported by Kneer (2015) suggests the same. Knobe & Yalcin’s (2014) data on modals might suggest otherwise. This is likely due to the framing of their retraction question, which diverges strongly from the diction employed in MacFarlane’s retraction rule.

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