Talking about Taste: Disagreement, Implicit Arguments and Relative Truth

Isidora Stojanovic

▶ To cite this version:

Isidora Stojanovic. Talking about Taste: Disagreement, Implicit Arguments and Relative Truth. 2007. <ijn_00089096v4>

Talking about Taste:
Disagreement, Implicit Arguments, and Relative Truth

Isidora Stojanovic

Institut Jean Nicod, CNRS, 29 rue d'Ulm, ENS-Pavillon Jardin, 75005 Paris, France

Isidora.Stojanovic A T ens.fr

Abstract

In this paper, I take issue with the claim, found in relativist proposals such as Kölbel (2002) and Lasersohn (2005), that the correct semantics for taste predicates *must* use contents that are functions of a *judge* parameter (in addition to the possible world parameter), and that this parameter *cannot* be seen as an implicit argument lexically associated with the expression. I will argue that the two approaches are, from the viewpoint of semantics, notational variants of one another: given any sentence containing a taste predicate, and given any context, the two accounts predict the same truth value, and are, in that sense, semantically equivalent. I will also look at possible reasons for preferring one account over the other. The phenomenon of "faultless disagreement" is often believed to be one such reason, but I will argue, against Kölbel and Lasersohn, that disagreement is never faultless: either the two parties genuinely disagree, hence if the one is right the other is wrong, or the two parties are both right, but their apparent disagreement boils down to a misunderstanding. I will furthermore argue that even if there were faultless disagreement, relativism would fail to account for it. The upshot of my paper, then, is to show that there is not much disagreement between *contextualist* accounts that model the judge parameter as an implicit argument to the taste predicate, and the relativist accounts that model it as a parameter of the circumstance of evaluation. The choice between the two accounts, at least when talking about taste, thus appears to be, to a large extent, a matter of taste.

Section 1.   Setting the Stage

Predicates of personal taste give rise to a puzzle. Consider this dialogue between Tarek and Inma, who have just tasted some soybean ice-cream:

1. Tarek: This is delicious.
2. Inma: That's not true. This isn't delicious at all.

On the one hand, we are inclined to say that Tarek and Inma disagree. But on the other hand, we are also inclined to say that Tarek and Inma may both be right, and that their seemingly contradictory utterances may be true together. So here comes a puzzle:

a: For any two utterances u_1 and u_2, the utterer of u_1 disagrees with the utterer of u_2 only if: if u_1 is true, then u_2 is false, and if u_1 is false, then u_2 is true.

b: The utterer of 1 (Tarek) disagrees with the utterer of 2 (Inma).

c: On the assumption that Tarek finds the soybean ice-cream delicious, and that Inma does not, 1 is a true utterance, and so is 2.

The problem is that a, b and c, while plausible on their own, lead to contradiction.

   For relativists like Max Kölbel, Peter Lasersohn, or John MacFarlane, the way out of the puzzle lies in rejecting a.[1] My own way out of the puzzle is to reject either b or c, on a case to case basis. I will argue that the puzzle arises from some equivocation upon the notion of disagreement. In the weak sense, disagreement means that the two parties take each other to be saying false things. But note that this may happen simply because one party misinterprets what the other party is saying. Disagreement is genuine only when one party's being right entails that the other party is wrong. My goal in Section 2 will thus be to show that any *prima facie* case of faultless disagreement distills, upon analysis, either into a case of

---

1   Cf. e.g. Lasersohn: "If you say that roller coasters are fun, and I say they are not, I am negating the same content which you assert, and directly contradicting you. Nonetheless, both our utterances can be true (relative to their separate contexts)" (2005: 645).

genuine disagreement, with only one party being right, or into a case of spurious disagreement, based upon a misunderstanding. In Section 3, I will argue that even if we were to accept, for the sake of the argument, that there can be faultless disagreement on matters of taste, the mere idea of truth relative to a *judge*, and the related idea of content whose truth value varies along the judge-parameter, would not yet account for the phenomenon. In other words, relativism, when understood as a proposal regarding the notion of (semantic) content, could not account for faultless disagreement any better than its contextualist rival could. But this should come as little surprise since, as I show in Section 4, relativist frameworks of the sort of Lasersohn (2005)'s are, pretty much, a notational variant of contextualist frameworks that handle the context-dependence of taste predicates by means of implicit arguments. The technical results from Section 4 thus discredit Lasersohn's claim that the correct semantics for taste predicates *must* use contents that are functions of a judge and *cannot* handle judge-dependency at the level of implicit arguments. In Section 5, I discuss some non-semantic considerations that, at a first glance, seem to tell in favor of the relativist account, and against the contextualist account, and that turn upon the question of *what we say* when we talk about taste. I will conclude, though, that those considerations are far from being conclusive.

Section 2.   Disagreement vs. Misunderstanding

In this section, I will argue that there is no such phenomenon as faultless disagreement: either the disagreement is genuine, but only one party gets it right, or else, it is spurious and boils down to a misunderstanding.

Reconsider the dialogue in (1)-(2). I will try to show that considerations about the context in which such a dialogue arises and about the ways in which it may evolve make it possible to decide whether we have a case of genuine disagreement, or only disagreement due to a misunderstanding.

Let us first note that by acknowledging that one has been talking about one's own taste strongly suggests that there was no genuine disagreement in the first place. Thus one way in which Inma and Tarek may resolve their dispute would be to recognize that what may be lovely for the one need not be lovely for the other:

3. Tarek: OK. To my taste, this ice-cream is delicious, that's all I'm saying.
4. Inma: OK, and to my taste, it isn't delicious at all; that's all I'm saying.

In (3) and (4), Tarek and Inma make it explicit that in claiming that the ice-cream was delicious, they meant to be talking of themselves and of their own taste, and, therefore, were not contradicting each other – as they acknowledge themselves, having moved from "Oh yes/Oh no" dialogue to "OK/OK" dialogue.

Now, even though, in matters of taste, people sometimes reach some kind of agreement by realizing that they like different things and that their respective tastes partly determine the truth of their statements, at other times they persist disagreeing, as if there were a matter of fact as to whether a given thing had a given property (such as deliciousness) or not. Tarek and Inma may well never resolve their disagreement, even after they have come to realize that the truth of their utterances *may* vary with taste:

5. Tarek: This is delicious! And it's not just that *I* find it delicious; it's delicious *tout court*.
6. Inma: No, that's not true. It isn't delicious – though I can see that people may find it delicious.

What do speakers who disagree whether something is delicious *tout court* actually disagree about, if the truth of what they say depends on a particular judge and his or her taste? For, if speakers are aware that what they say cannot be evaluated for truth unless a judge, or a point of view, has been supplied, and if they supply different judges, they must realize that their seemingly contradictory utterances may be true simultaneously,

just because of being evaluated at different judges. But, as we saw with (3)-(4), there would be no disagreement in this case.

A plausible answer is that in the case of *genuine* disagreement, the two parties agree on the value supplied to the judge parameter, but disagree as to whether, with respect to that value, a given thing is delicious or not. Of course, it is unlikely that the judge agreed upon will be either of the two parties. Rather, when Tarek says that the ice-cream is delicious *tout court*, and when Inma denies this, what is likely to be at stake is that they disagree as to whether the ice-cream is delicious on some *universally*, or at least *generally* accepted standards. They cannot be both right, so in this respect, their disagreement is on a par with ordinary disagreement about facts. To resolve it, Inma and Tarek would need to determine whether their ice-cream is delicious according to such general standards.

To be sure, there remains the issue of what determines whether a given thing is delicious for people *in general*. Perhaps this can be determined by a survey.[2] But, more importantly, whatever makes it possible to determine whether something is delicious with respect to some particular judge will also make it possible to determine whether it is delicious in general, since all we need is to determine whether for most judges, the thing is delicious with respect to them. Note that neither the relativist nor the contextualist are required to address this issue, since the issue does not pertain to semantics.

Now, disagreement, in the weak sense of simply taking the other party to be saying something false, may also result from a misunderstanding. Reconsider a variant on (1)-(2), but suppose that when Tarek utters (7), he is holding in his fingers the waffle that comes with the ice-cream.

---

2   A survey will only work on the assumption of first person authority; that is, if we assume that every person knows best what is delicious for him or her. Expressing one's own taste is, in this respect, similar to reporting one's own beliefs: if Tarek sincerely says that he believes something, it seems that he cannot go wrong. However, whether taste predicates actually obey first person authority is an issue independent from the contextualism/relativism debate.

7. Tarek: This is delicious!
8. Inma: That's not true. This isn't delicious at all.

Tarek means to be saying of the ice-cream that it is delicious, without realizing that Inma is taking him to be talking about the waffle. Inma, too, takes the ice-cream to be delicious; what she means to be denying in (8) is that the waffle is delicious, which she takes Tarek to be referring to.

It often happens that people engage in a dispute, while there are virtually no facts that they disagree about. Tarek thought that with 'this' he could unambiguously refer to the ice-cream, while Inma took him to be referring to the waffle. They fail to realize that their "disagreement" is simply due to a lack of agreement on what they are talking about. Now, I submit that many cases of *prima facie* disagreement on matters of taste similarly result from a lack of agreement on how to understand each other. If Tarek says that something is delicious to express his own predilections, and if Inma says that it isn't to express her own dislike of it, then they should not persist disagreeing, unless they were confused as to what they take themselves to be expressing. In general, persistent disagreement arises either when the intended interpretation is a universal or generic one, or when there is some misunderstanding as to what the intended interpretation is.

Let me end this with an example that Lasersohn thinks is particularly problematic for the contextualist. Imagine Mary and John riding on a roller-coaster and saying:

9. Mary: This isn't funny!
10. John: Oh, yes it is!

Lasersohn wants to claim that no contextualist proposal can account for the disagreement in this case. In particular, he thinks that neither the universal nor the generic reading would give us disagreement. As for the attempted universal reading, he points out that it would imply that John claims that the ride is also fun for Mary, which he takes to be implausible:

> "By contradicting her, John must be acting irrationally, or ignoring what Mary said, or claiming to know her own mind better than she does herself, or something similar. But in fact in this example John does not seem to be doing any of those things." (2005: 651)

The problem is that when Lasersohn talks of "this" example, he hasn't really told us what the example is. We are only given the sentences that Mary and John uttered, but to know what they are *doing* – whether they are really disagreeing, or just expressing different preferences, or talking past each other, we need more information on the context. In particular, we need to know in which way they could resolve their disagreement. For, it is certainly true that in *some* cases, John will be doing some of the things that "he does not seem to be doing", e.g. claiming to know better than Mary what is fun *for her*. And if he presented her with solid arguments, he could well convince her that the ride *was* fun for her, even though initially she wasn't prepared to accept it – just as a psychotherapist may convince a patient that she believed something she thought she didn't believe.

As for the suggestion that disagreement may be explained by endowing (9) with a weaker *generic* reading, Lasersohn writes:

> "It does not seem right that in order to analyze John and Mary as contradicting each other in examples like [(9)-(10)], we must treat their disagreement not as a matter of their own conflicting views about the roller coaster, but as a disagreement about what the majority view is within some group. If Mary has ridden on the roller coaster and knows that she does not like it, surely John will not be able to convince her that is is fun by showing her the results of a survey!" (2005: 652)

Here again, Lasersohn's reasoning turns upon equivocation. What John will not be able to convince Mary with the results of a survey is that the roller coaster is fun *for her*. But what he ought to be able to convince her (assuming that she is rational and accepts first person authority) is that the roller coaster is fun *for the majority*. The phrase 'to convince someone that something is fun' is in need of disambiguation.

Section 3. Can Relativism Account for Faultless Disagreement?

Lasersohn's argument for a relativist account of taste predicates proceeds by elimination. He starts with cases that trigger the intuition of faultless disagreement, then argues that none of the available accounts can explain them. My discussion in the previous section already serves as a rebuttal of Lasersohn's argument, since if genuine disagreement entails that one of the parties is wrong, there is no phenomenon of faultless disagreement to begin with. I shall now argue that even if there were faultless disagreement, relativist proposals of the sort put forward in Kölbel (2002) and in Lasersohn (2005) would not be able to account for it. My argument relies on an assumption endorsed equally well by relativists as by contextualists:

> Semantic Competence (SC):
> Speakers of English are semantically competent with predicates of taste: they master their meaning and truth conditions.

It is clear enough why anyone who believes in faultless disagreement should subscribe to SC. For, if it turned out that the disagreeing parties were ignorant about the way in which taste predicates behave and contribute to truth conditions, then the disagreement would be merely a by-product of semantic ignorance. For disagreement to be genuine (be it faultless or not), we must presuppose that the disagreeing parties master the meaning of the words with which they are expressing disagreement.

Leaving formal details aside, Lasersohn's proposal is that the content expressed by (an utterance of) a sentence "This is tasty" is a function from pairs consisting of a possible world and a judge, into truth values.[3] Thus when Tarek utters this sentence, talking about the soybean ice-cream, and when Inma denies it, they express contradictory contents, yet both utterances may be true, so long as they are evaluated at different judges (or, for that matter, at different worlds). Assume, for the sake of the

---

3   For the sake of simplicity, I ignore the time parameter throughout my paper. Also, the truth value of sentences containing taste predicates, just as with gradable adjectives in general, may be affected by shifting the comparison class. For simplicity, I will ignore dependence on the comparison class (but see Glanzberg (2007) for discussion).

argument, that the relativist proposal is correct. Then, given SC, Tarek knows that the content that he is asserting is true or false depending not only on what the world is like, but also on the judge. The same goes for Inma when she denies the content asserted by Tarek. But then, if Tarek intends the content that he is asserting to be evaluated for truth at himself, and if Inma intends her content to be evaluated for truth at herself, that will undermine the idea that their disagreement is genuine and rational. Both of them, given SC, know that one and the same content may take different truth values when evaluated at different judges. They also know that the one's assertion and the other's denial of the same content are inconsistent only when meant to be evaluated with respect to the same judge. Hence if each party intends the asserted content to be evaluated at himself or herself, and if this is mutually clear between them, then they will realize that there is no clash in truth value between their claims, hence that their "disagreement" is, at best, an expression of different preferences.[4]

Lasersohn was probably aware that something had to be added to his relativist semantics in order to achieve faultless disagreement. Recall the dialogue in (9)-(10), in which Mary and John appear to disagree whether the roller-coaster ride is fun. Lasersohn goes on to suggest that each party is "asserting his or her own *perspective* over and against that of the other" (2005: 652; my italics). Though it is not entirely clear what he might mean by 'asserting a perspective' (given that, in his view, what is asserted is a *content*, i.e. a function from world-judge pairs into truth values), he might

---

4   The analogy with the modal case may help illustrate the point. Given SC, speakers are aware that what they assert may be true at the actual world while being false at some counterfactual state of affairs. We often forget about this, because the world talked about is, by default, the actual world. But claims are sometimes meant to be evaluated for truth at some other world, as when we talk about fiction (cf. Predelli (2005a: 54)). Thus, if Tarek says that Holmes lived on Baker Street while talking about the fictional world of Conan Doyle's novels, and if Inma denies this, but is talking of the actual world, they are not really disagreeing. By analogy, we should not see them as disagreeing when Tarek says that the soybean ice-cream is delicious and Inma says that it isn't, when they are talking of themselves and their respective taste.

be hinting here at some deeper form of relativism than what he actually spells out in his paper.

Let me end this section by addressing an issue closely intertwined with the contextualism/relativism debate, namely, the issue of what, given (an utterance) of a sentence, determines the values of the parameters to which its truth is relative, and thereby, the truth value itself. If, following John MacFarlane, one distinguishes between contexts of *utterance* and contexts of *assessment*, one might frame the contextualism/relativism debate not as a debate on the semantics proper of taste predicates, as I have done and as I see Lasersohn doing, but rather, as a debate on metasemantics.[5] The idea is, then, that in the contextualist view, it is always the context of utterance that determines values of the parameters needed to determine the truth value, while in the relativist view, it is always the context of assessment. So, for instance, when Tarek says that the ice-cream is delicious, the contextualist would say that the judge (who may be Tarek himself, but need not), and, thereby, the truth value, is determined in the context of utterance while for the relativist, any context *from which* Tarek's utterance is being evaluated for truth would determine a possibly different judge, and, thereby, a possibly different truth value.

Though I do not deny some inuitive appeal to MacFarlane's distinction, I am not sure that it really illuminates the debate about taste predicates. First, I do not think that it is fair to represent the traditional contextualist views as committed to the idea of *the* context of utterance, let alone to the claim that it is this context that fix the values of the parameters that will determine the truth value. Consider the case of demonstrative pronouns, and recall the scenario in which Tarek has just tasted the ice-cream and, holding the waffle between his fingers, says "This is delicious." To talk of *the* context of utterance as determining the truth value of Tarek's utterance is already problematic because of the question of which thing is said to be

---

5   The term 'metasemantics' is used in this sense by Glanzberg (2007), who borrows it from Kaplan (1989). As to whether we should read into Lasersohn (2005) more than I have done, I leave that question open.

delicious: the ice-cream or the waffle? The mere setting in which the utterance takes place will not adjudicate between the two. Assessed by Tarek, who means to be talking of the ice-cream, his utterance is true; assessed by Inma, who justifiably takes Tarek to be referring to the waffle, it is false (assuming that, for Inma, the waffle isn't tasty while the ice-cream is). Indeed, Kaplan himself clearly stressed that his notion of context was a theoretical artefact, not to be confused with the intuitive notion of context *of utterance*. The question of which *Kaplanian* context, i.e. which sequence of values (agent, time, a sequence of demonstrata, etc.), is to be associated with a given sentence in order to obtain a truth value for an utterance of that sentence, is a question that (semantic) contextualism leaves to pragmatics.[6]

Secondly, even if we grant the relativist that the context of assessment, rather than the context of utterance, determines the judge who, in turn, determines the truth value, it is unclear that this could help the relativist to account for faultless disagreement. Dependence of taste predicates upon the context of assessment will now be built into their semantics, and the assumption of semantic competence will give us that a speaker who makes a claim on a matter of taste must be aware that his claim can only be evaluated for truth *from* some context of assessment. If Tarek intends his claim to be evaluated from his own context of assessment, while Inma intends her denial of Tarek's claim to be evaluated from her own context of assessment, and if this is mutually known between them, then we have hardly advanced towards an explanation of their presumed disagreement. Perhaps they would disagree if they were not aware that their claims are meant to be evaluated from different contexts, or if they were simply ignorant about assessment-dependence. But if we allow for either possibility, then the disagreement becomes a consequence of either semantic or metasemantic ignorance (as the case may be), and fails to qualify as genuine and rational.[7]

---

6   For further discussion, see Predelli (2005a), (2005b).
7   MacFarlane appears to acknowledge that disagreement on taste (when faultless) isn't

Section 4. Implicit Arguments vs. Relative Truth: What Difference Does It Make?

In this section, I will show that contextualist semantics (CS), in which the judge parameter is treated as an implicit argument to the taste predicate, and relativist semantics (RS), in which it is treated as a parameter in the circumstance of evaluation, do not differ interestingly, since they yield the same truth predictions. Now, Lasersohn was very keen to reject the option on which we "analyze sentences containing fun, tasty, etc. as making indexical reference to some relevant individual or group, not necessarily the speaker" (2005: 650). But this is pretty much what we do in CS, the contextualist framework that I will show to be equivalent to RS, and hence to Lasersohn's own framework. His attempt, then, to come up with *semantic* evidence in support of relativism and against contextualism is doomed to failure.

To prove the equivalence between CS and RS, I define a bi-directional translation procedure T between the two formal languages for which the following holds. Let S_c and S_r be respectively sentences in the languages of CS and of RS, let f_1, f_2 be assignments of values to free variables, and let w be a world of evaluation and u a judge. Then:

- S_r is true with respect to f_1, w and u <u>iff</u> $T(S_r)$ is true with respect to f_1^T and w, where assignment f_1^T is defined in terms of f_1 and u.
- S_c is true with respect to f_2 and w <u>iff</u> $T(S_c)$ is true with respect to f_2, w and u^T, where u^T is a judge value obtained directly from f_2;

The method that I am using is classic, and the result obtained, *qua* a formal result, is well known within model theory for modal logics.[8] But it is still worthwhile to lay down the equivalence, as it appears to be widely

---

really rational: "From lofty philosophical heights, the language games we play with words like 'funny' and 'likely' may seem irrational. But that is no reason to deny that we do play these games, or that they have a social purpose" (2007: 49).

8   In essence, the equivalence between the relativist and the contextualist semantics of taste predicates derives from the equivalence between modal logic S5 and monadic predicate logic.

ignored by both camps in the contextualism/relativism debate.

Let us start with contextualist semantics. Its formal language, L_{CS}, is the language of quantified modal logic, the only novelty being that we have a distinguished variable, x_T, used for the implicit judge argument associated with taste predicates. The syntax of L_{CS} consists of the standard rules for well-formedness, plus the constraint that for any atomic sentence, x_T occurs at most once, and only in the very last position.[9]

On the semantic side, a **structure** is a triple consisting of a universe, a set of possible worlds, and a valuation that maps n-place predicates to functions that map possible worlds to sets of n-tuples of individuals. For simplicity, I will ignore accessibility relations. Truth is recursively defined with respect to **models**, i.e. triples consisting of a structure, a world, and an assignment of values to the free variables. The truth definitions are entirely standard, e.g. $S, w, f \vDash \Box F$ iff$_{def}$ for every w', $S, w', f \vDash F$. It is thus unnecessary to spell them out.

To see how this semantics applies to taste predicates, take the sentence "This is delicious." Its default translation will be DELICIOUS $x_1\, x_T$. If used by Tarek in reference to the ice-cream to express his own taste, the relevant assignment of values will send x_1 to the ice-cream and x_T to Tarek. If used by Inma in reference to the waffle and to express her own taste, we will assign the waffle to x_1 and Inma to x_T. On the other hand, if the sentence is used to make a universal claim, in the sense of 'delicious *tout court*', then its translation is going to be $\forall x_T$ DELICIOUS $x_1\, x_T$.

Let me emphasize that by handling the judge argument by means of a variable, CS is not committed to the idea that I could say 'This is delicious' in reference to any old judge, expressing *their* taste. Just as there are restrictions on what, in any given context, can be referred to with 'this',

---

9 For example, $Px_T x_T$ and $Px_T y$ are not well-formed, while Pyy or Pyx_T are. We need the "at most once" constraint for the equivalence results. However, the language thus constrained seems fine for modeling natural language, because, at least in English, we do not have atomic expressions that simultaneously involve *two* judges. As for the constraint that x_T always occurs at the end, it is only there to make it easier to define the translation between the two formal languages, but nothing important hinges on it.

there are restrictions on the range of individuals plausibly assignable to x_T. These restrictions may be merely a pragmatic matter, or they may be lexicalized, but they are not built into the semantics. Here again, CS and RS are on a par, since, similarly, restrictions on the range of values at which an utterance of a sentence can be plausibly evaluated for truth are not built into the semantics either.

Let us now turn to the relativist "sibling" of contextualist semantics. The difference is, roughly, that what a contextualist translates by a 2-place predicate one of whose arguments is occupied by the variable x_T, a relativist translates by a 1-place predicate. But on the semantic side, the interpretation of this 1-place predicate is not just a mapping from possible worlds to sets of individuals, but rather, from *pairs* (world, individual) to sets of individuals. The framework that follows is as in Lasersohn (2005), except for some minor differences.[10]

The formal language of RS, L_{RS}, is the language of quantified modal logic, the only novelty now being that we have a new operator, ■. The syntax of L_{RS} consists of the standard rules for well-formedness, plus: if F is a formula, so is ■F. On the semantic side, a structure is, again, a triple consisting of a universe, a set of possible worlds, and a valuation that now maps any n-place predicate to a function that maps pairs consisting of a possible world and of an individual to sets of n-tuples of individuals. Truth is recursively defined at models, which are now quadruples of the form (S, w, u, f), where S is a structure, w a world, u an individual (who

---

10 One difference is that, unlike Lasersohn, I am introducing ■, a universal operator on the judge parameter. Another difference is that Lasersohn has a class of predicate modifiers 'for c' (where c is a constant), meant to translate complex expressions such as 'tasty for Tarek'. On the semantic side, 'for Tarek' works as a rigidifier: it makes the semantic value of 'tasty for Tarek' a constant function in the judge parameter, whose value, for any other individual, is the same as the value that 'tasty' alone takes at Tarek. The way a contextualist would translate the expression 'for c' is by making explicit the second argument of 'tasty', which, when *implicit*, is occupied by the variable x_T. Finally, Lasersohn's framework is cast within a Kaplanian framework, hence, besides the possible world parameter, it also uses a time parameter and a context parameter, both of which I am ignoring here.

serves as the value for the judge parameter), and f an assignment of values to the free variables. The definition of truth is, again, entirely standard. The only new truth clause (standard, too, in its kind) is: $S, w, u, f \vDash \blacksquare F$ iff$_{\text{def}}$ for every u', $S, w, u', f \vDash F$. In other words, $\blacksquare$ is what we might call the *universal judge operator*, used in accounting for the universal reading of claims about taste.[11]

To show the equivalence between L$_{\text{CS}}$ and L$_{\text{RS}}$, we need to define a suitable translation between the two languages. This is made easy by the fact that L$_{\text{CS}}$ has a distinguished variable x_T, and that the definition of $\blacksquare$ isn't mediated by accessibility relations.[12] Here is the proposed translation T that takes L$_{\text{RS}}$-formulas to L$_{\text{CS}}$-formulas:

$T(Pc_1,..,c_m, x_1,..., x_n) = P^T c_1,..., c_m, x_1,..., x_n, x_T$

$T(F \wedge G) = T(F) \wedge T(G)$; idem for other connectives

$T(\forall x_i F x_i) = \forall x_i T(F x_i)$

$T(\blacksquare F) = \forall x_T T(F)$.

Remember that L$_{\text{SR}}$ handles the judge-dependence of taste predicates by means of an additional parameter in the definition of truth. L$_{\text{CR}}$, on the other hand, deploys no such parameter, but it has an additional argument place in every taste predicate. That is what translation T reflects. In fact, T "opens" a new argument place in every predicate, be it a taste predicate or not. For the latter, though, this argument will be idle.[13] What the first

---

11 Note that is not clear whether Lasersohn would acknowledge universal readings. If he were to do so, my hunch is that, rather than having an operator like $\blacksquare$, he would use the construction 'for x' and bind the variable x with a regular universal quantifier. Surprisingly, Lasersohn (2005) gives a framework without quantifiers, and without any expression that requires recursion on the judge parameter.

12 Even if we used an accessibility relation among judges, that would only entail a minor complication. In what follows, I rely on some known results from modal logic. See e.g. van Benthem (1983: 40).

13 In this respect, there will be a difference between the "direct" translation of a taste-insensitive predicate from natural language into L$_{\text{CS}}$, which is represented by a one-place predicate letter P, and the translation that we would get if we first translated into L$_{\text{RS}}$ and then into L$_{\text{CS}}$ using the translation procedure T, since, then, it will be represented by a *two*-place predicate letter P^T. On the semantic side, this difference is

clause says is, roughly, that if P is an n-place predicate in the language L_{RS}, then take an (n+1)-place predicate P^T in the language L_{CS}, and use variable x_T in its last argument place. We also need to ensure that the structures of interpretation S of RS and S^T of CS provide the (relevantly) same valuations for the two predicates:

- if $(w, u, (u_1,..., u_n)) \epsilon V^S (P)$, then $(w, (u_1,..., u_n, u)) \epsilon V^{S_T}(P^T)$.

What translation T does, too, is translate the universal operator ∎ by a universal quantifier that binds the judge variable x_T.

In the other direction, translation T maps sentences of L_{CS} to sentences of L_{RS} as follows:

$T(Pc_1,..., c_m, x_1,...,x_n, x_T) = P^t c_1...,c_m, \ x_1,... x_n$

$T(Pc_1,..., c_m, x_1,..., x_n) = Pc_1,..., c_m,..., x_1,..., x_n$

$T(F \wedge G) = T(F) \wedge T(G)$; idem for other connectives

$T(\forall x_i Fx_i) = \forall x_i T(Fx_i)$, for any $x_i \neq x_T$

$T(\forall x_T Fx_T) = \blacksquare T(Fx_T)$

Again, we must ensure that the structures of interpretation S of CS and S^T of RS will interpret the atomic predicates alike:

- if $(w, (u_1,..., u_n, u)) \epsilon V^S (P)$, then $(w, u, (u_1,..., u_n)) \epsilon V^{S_T}(P^T)$;

- if $(w, (u_1,..., u_n)) \epsilon V^S(P)$, then $(w, v, (u_1,..., u_n)) \epsilon V^{S_T}(P)$, for all $v \epsilon U$.[14]

---

hardly noticeable – for, if $V(P)$ is a function constant in the parameter u, then $V(P^T)$ will be similarly "constant" in its last argument: if there is $u \epsilon U$ such that $(u_1,..., u_n, u) \epsilon V(P^T)$, then any $v \epsilon U$ must be such that $(u_1,..., u_n, v) \epsilon V(P^T)$.

14 Recall that in the language of CS, the judge argument is only associated with taste predicates. That is why we need the second clause in the translation procedure, as well as this constraint on interpretation structures: its task is to prevent the possibility of a judge-insensitive predicate from L_{CS} being interpreted, in RS, by a function that varies in the judge parameter.

The following equivalence results follow directly from the definitions of T (but may be checked, if necessary, by induction on the complexity of F.)

claim 1:   S, w, u, f $\vDash_{\mathbf{RS}}$ F i f f S^T, w, $f^T \vDash_{\mathbf{CS}} T$(F),
where $f^T(x_T)=u$ and f^T is otherwise like f

claim 2:   S, w, f $\vDash_{\mathbf{CS}}$ F i f f S^T, w, $f(x_T)$, f $\vDash_{\mathbf{RS}} T$(F)

This equivalence between CS and RS means that there will never be *semantic* evidence to cut in favor of the one account over the other. In other words, no occurrence of a sentence containing a taste predicate will come out true in the one account and false in the other (provided, of course, that the individual assigned to the implicit argument in CS is the same as the individual taken as the value for the judge parameter in RS). This implies, in turn, that the contextualism/relativism debate becomes meaningful only when conceived as a debate about something other than the meaning and the semantics of taste predicates.[15] Perhaps some of Lasersohn's remarks go beyond semantics, but what he actually gives us, taken at face value, is a defense of relativism *qua* semantic framework.[16] In this respect, the results from this section serve to discredit a large part of Lasersohn's proposal.

Section 5.   The Argument From *What Is Said*

I want to end the paper by raising and discussing some considerations related to the notion of *what is said* that, at a first glance, seem to tell against contextualist semantics of taste predicates. Consider:

---

15 The contextualism/relativism debate is, then, very different from, for example, the contextualism/ invariantism debate, since the latter *is* a debate about semantics and truth conditions.

16 This is also how e.g. Glanzberg (2007) and Stephenson (2007) interpret Lasersohn's proposal. Lasersohn himself stresses that he is presenting a *semantics* that he thinks gives different results than other semantic frameworks (cf. (2005: 645), (2005: 681)).

11. This is delicious. (uttered by Tarek in reference to the chocolate cake)

12. This is delicious. (uttered by Inma in reference to the same chocolate cake)

13. This is delicious. (uttered by Tarek in reference to the soybean ice-cream)

Let us suppose that in the three cases, it is clear that the speakers are expressing their own taste. Now arguably, there is a strong intuition that Tarek in (11) and Inma in (12) have said the same thing, namely, that the cake is delicious, and arguably, there is an equally strong intuition that what Tarek said in (11) is different than what he said in (13). Let us, for the sake of the argument, take those intuitions for granted. Then they might seem to pose a problem for the contextualist, for the following reason. The semantic representation of Tarek's utterance of (11) is not any more similar to the representation Inma's utterance than it is to the representation of his utterance of (13). Indeed, (11) and (12) will only differ on the value assigned to the variable x_T, while (11) and (13) similarly differ only on the value assigned to the variable x_1 (taking DELICIOUS x_1 x_T as a translation for "This is delicious"). By contrast, a relativist might claim that this is not at all a problem for his or her account, because what is said, on the relativist account, is a content whose truth value varies with the judge, hence a content of which the value for the judge parameter is not part, while the values assigned to the variables are. And such contents are the same for (11) and (12), namely DELICIOUS x_1 [$f(x_1)$= chocolate cake], while those of (11) and (13) are different, since different values get assigned to x_1.

We should not dismiss easily the question of how well a given semantic account, that is, an account of meaning and truth, extends into an account of *what is said*. Nevertheless, it is not clear that these considerations cut sharply in favor of the relativist account, or undermine the contextualist account. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed argument, so let me simply outline a solution to the problem of what is said.

The intuition that Tarek says different things (11) and (13) comes from the fact that he is talking about different things, namely, the cake and the

ice-cream, hence saying *about* different things that they are delicious.[17] But in the contextualist view, Tarek in (11) and Inma in (12) are also, in a sense, talking about different things, since each is talking about his or her own taste.[18] What the contextualist needs to explain is why we do not have the intuition that they are saying different things; instead, we naturally report them as having said the same thing, namely, that the cake is delicious.

The explanation that I propose relies on the idea that talking about one's own taste is a way of talking about oneself, and on the fact that, in general, two persons who says the same thing *about themselves* are easily perceived, and reported, as having said the same thing. Consider:

14. I hate soybean ice-cream. (uttered by Inma)

15. Mary said that, too. (Tarek's reply to Inma)

As it stands, Tarek's report of what Mary said is ambiguous between what we may call a *strict* reading, on which Mary said that Inma hates soybean ice-cream, and a *sloppy* reading, on which she said that *she herself* hates it. There is thus an asymmetry between the ways in which 'this' and 'I' pattern in reports of what is said. When 'this' is used in reference to different things, the speakers may not be truly reported as having said the same thing, unless we make it explicit what they said it about. For instance, "Inma said that the cake was delicious, and Tarek said the same thing about the ice-cream" becomes a fine report for (12)-(13). On the other hand, when 'I' is used by different speakers, we may report them as having said the same thing, without having to make it explicit that each was talking about himself or herself.[19]

---

17 For the idea that that we don't just say things, but that we say them *about* things, and the related notion of aboutness, see e.g. Donnellan (1966) and my (2006).

18 Cf. MacFarlane: "The contextualist takes the subjectivity of a discourse to consist in the fact that it is covertly about the speaker (or perhaps a larger group picked out by the speaker's context and intentions). Thus, in saying that apples are "delicious", the speaker says, in effect, that apples taste good to her (or to those in her group)" (2006: 18).

19 For a more detailed discussion of the asymmetries between the first person and the

The fact, then, that (11) and (12) may be so easily reported as saying the same thing, even though Tarek is expressing his own taste and Inma her own, may be seen as an instance of more general facts about reporting what is said when one is talking about oneself.[20]

To be sure, there will be differences between the sense in which when Inma says that she hates soybean ice-cream, she is talking about herself, and the sense in which when she says that the chocolate cake is delicious, she is talking about herself (in virtue of talking about her taste). In the one case, she is the grammatical subject, in the other, the cake is the subject, and not her taste. In the one case, reference to Inma is explicit (by means of 'I'), in the other, reference to her taste is implicit. And there may be yet other differences. The point is that the contextualist need not claim that the implicit judge argument works exactly like the first person pronoun. All that needs to be said is that they pattern similarly in reports of what is said.

Section 6. Conclusion

One of the main goals of this paper has been to show that it makes little difference whether we go relativist or contextualist when deciding upon a semantic framework for taste predicates. Of course, it would be hasty to conclude that it makes no difference whatsoever whether we handle the context-dependence of taste predicates by means of an implicit argument, or directly through the circumstance of evaluation. Considerations about syntax and the syntax/semantics interface may well push us one way or the other.[21] The point, however, is that the semantic data are not enough to

---

rest, see my (2006) and (2007: 107-115).

20 One might object that this cannot be the end of the story, because, when Inma utters (2), and someone replies to her, "That's what Tarek said, too", the reply does not seem ambiguous: the reading on which Tarek is saying that the cake is delicious *to Inma* just seems unavailable. I believe the unavailability of this reading is a pragmatic matter: it is very unlikely that Tarek could have been making any claim about Inma's taste.

21 What is more, they may motivate having both an implicit argument and an additional parameter in the circumstances of evaluation, as is done e.g. in Stephenson (2007).

motivate the choice of relativist over contextualist semantics (or the other way round). That is what the formal equivalence results from Section 4 seek to establish.

I did not try to argue that there can be no motivation for relativism over contextualism. What I have argued, though, is that the two motivations most frequently appealed to by the relativists are not good enough. One has to do with the question of *what is said* by a claim on a taste matter. In Section 5, I have sketched how the idea that talking about one's own taste is a way of talking about oneself may be used in an account of reporting different speakers, each expressing his or her own taste, to have said the same thing. But the central part of the paper was devoted to the question whether faultless disagreement motivates relativist semantics. I argued that it does not. In Section 2, I tried to show that there is no such thing as faultless disagreement, and that each *prima facie* instance of it dispells, upon further analysis, either into a case of genuine disagreement, or into some form of misunderstanding. In Section 3, I argued that even if there were faultless disagreement, it could not be explained within a relativist framework (assuming that speakers are not "semantically blind"). So the take-home message, times and again, is that the choice between relativism and contextualism, at least when talking about taste, is pretty much a matter of taste.[*]

References

van Benthem, J. (1983), *Modal Logic and Classical Logic*, Bibliopolis
Condoravdi, C. and J-M. Gawron, (1996), "The Context-Dependency of Implicit

---

Arguments", in Kanazawa et al. (eds.), *Quantifiers, Deduction and Context*, CSLI Publications: 3-27

Donnellan, K. (1966), "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *Philosophical Review* 75: 281-303

Glanzberg, M. (2007), "Context, Content and Relativism", *Philosophical Studies* 132: 1-16

Kaplan, D. (1989), Demonstratives, in Almog et al. (eds) Themes from Kaplan, Oxford University Press: 581-563

Kölbel, M. (2002), *Truth Without Objectivity*, Routledge

Lasersohn, P. (2005), "Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste", *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28: 643-686

MacFarlane, J. (2003), "Future Contingents and Relative Truth", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 321-36

MacFarlane, J. (2007), "Relativism and Disagreement", *Philosophical Studies* 132: 17-32

Partee, B. (1989), "Binding Implicit Variables in Quantified Contexts", *Papers of Chicago Linguistic Society* 25: 342-365

Predelli, S. (2005a), *Contexts. Meaning, Truth, and the Use of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Predelli, S. (2005b), "Painted Leaves, Context, and Semantic Analysis", *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28: 351-74

Recanati, F. (2007), *Perspectival Thought: A Plea for (Moderate) Relativism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Stephenson, T. (ms.), "Judge Dependence, Epistemic Modals, and Predicates of Personal Taste."

Stojanovic, I. (2006), "What Is Said, Linguistic Meaning, and Directly Referential Expressions", *Philosophy Compass* 1, http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/philosophy/

Stojanovic, I. (2007), *What Is Said. An Inquiry into Reference, Meaning, and Content*, Dissertation, Stanford University, California