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On Retraction: A way for the truth-relativist to respond to the truth-contextualist

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## 1. Introduction

Language is a bridge between minds that allows passage *via* communication. When used correctly, it provides access to external sources (external to each individual mind), that enrich the understanding of both our internal and external world. In this way, it is important to understand how language behaves, because it is one of the main ways to gain and impart understanding about the world. The structural aspects of language are intricate and require deeper studying, which is what linguists and truth-theoreticians are doing.

I will start with an example of two kinds of disagreement that illustrates what this thesis is about.

- 1) Two people disagree about facts.

(referring to the same yardstick)

S1: "That yardstick is 3 feet long."

S2: "No, it is not."

The length of a yardstick does not depend on anyone's opinion or taste, so it is obvious that either S1 or S2 has to be mistaken. Either the yardstick is or is not 3 feet long. The disagreement is strictly factual.

- 2) Two people disagree about tastes.

(referring to the same drink, having both tasted it)

S1: "That cocktail is tasty."

S2: "No, it is not."

This disagreement *looks to be* (in form) the same kind of disagreement, as in the first example, but it differs from it in the sense that while the length of the yardstick does not depend on personal tastes, the judged tastiness of a cocktail does. This difference is of interest to people trying to study linguistic meaning, because although there seems to be a disagreement about whether the cocktail is tasty or not, it does carry the same implications as the factual disagreement. A cocktail can be tasty to one, and not tasty to another. It seems that in this disagreement, neither S1 nor S2 is mistaken.

There is a debate between two truth-theoretical views, which has developed over time (referred to as *the debate*). The two truth-theoretical views are the Truth-Relativist view and the Truth-Contextualist view. The focus of the debate used to be faultless disagreements. Faultless disagreements occur when interlocutors (participants in a conversation) disagree on something, but each of them is right to hold their personal positions. Now the debate has shifted its focus to the speech act of *retraction* to try to explain the way language behaves in certain situations. The language units presented relative to the debate are predicates of personal taste (*abbreviated as PPTs*). Predicates of personal taste are the parts of sentences that express someone's personal preferences in taste (e.g. *is beautiful; is tasty*).

The thesis will focus on the linguistics relevant to the debate. To properly advance the thesis, I will present an overview of the relevant truth-theoretical views, the relevant specifics of both truth-theories and the advancement of the debate itself. The situational examples used to illustrate different parts of the debate are fictional examples composed by the author and are meant to emulate natural conversations, which illustrate the main points of the debate.

I will first present the concept of faultless disagreement to show how and why the debate advanced. Next, two kinds of contexts will be introduced, that are integral to the present debate: context of utterance and context of assessment. Included in the chapter of faultless disagreements, I will detail the distinction between factual and opinional disagreements (which were briefly showcased at the beginning of the introduction), to present the aspects that are different between these two kinds of disagreements. In this paper, opinional disagreements will involve statements made by using predicates of personal taste. Before I present the Contextualist and the Relativist views, I will introduce the Truth-Conditional content of non-taste predicates, to present truth-conditions of sentences that do not include predicates of personal taste. To make it easier to understand the truth-conditional content of sentences using predicates of personal taste, I will give an explanation of truth-conditional meanings of sentences and the difference between content and meaning. Then I will present the truth-contextualist and the truth-relativist theories. Next, I will show how the debate shifted its focus from faultless disagreement to retractions (on which the debate is focused on now). After that, the notion of retraction will be properly introduced to help understand the debate and the two articles that are presented to explain the debate more completely. I will present the conduction and the results of the study presented in Markus Kneer's article *Predicates of personal taste: empirical data*, which shows the intuitions of ordinary language speakers, regarding retraction. The author will address the article *Retraction in public settings* by Manuel Almagro et al. to

explain whether and why it provides the relativists a way to respond to the results presented in Markus Kneer's article *Predicates of personal taste: empirical data*. The results from Markus Kneer's article provide support to the contextualist theory, while Manuel Almagro's et al. article provides support to the relativist theory. I will conclude that the article *Retraction in public settings* does provide the relativist a way to respond to the results of Markus Kneer's article. Kneer's article shows that ordinary language speakers do not support retraction of taste-statements, while Almagro's et al. article shows that ordinary language speakers support retraction of taste-statements, if the statements are made in a public setting.

## 2. Faultless Disagreement

In order to understand, why the debate stopped focusing on faultless disagreements and turned to retraction instead, the notion of faultless disagreement must be explained. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of faultless disagreements, accompanied by examples, and an explanation regarding why faultless disagreement was left aside from the focus of the debate.

Faultless disagreement is a disagreement where neither party seems to be *at fault*. Max Kölbel has defined faultless disagreement in an understandable way:

“A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (content of judgement) p, such that:

(a) A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that not-p

(b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault).” (Kölbel, 2004b, 53-54)

“Not making a mistake” (and thus being faultless) is described as having sufficient evidence and having given enough thought to the matter, to be convinced that a person's position is the one that the person prefers. “It is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true.” (Kölbel, 2004b: 56) *Evidence* signifies information, that helps to form a person's position and gives the person a reason to believe their position. An extra condition may be that there may be no information that would make them change their mind.

Faultless disagreements (or rather disagreements that have the same structure) are quite common in everyday situations but without the proper knowledge about faultlessness, they can be difficult to distinguish from other types of disagreements, as they are similar in structure to other types of disagreements. To make the distinction evident, I will present factual disagreements and then compare them to opinionial disagreements.

Faultless disagreements are of interest to linguists because the positions of the interlocutors involved in a faultless disagreement seem to represent the world (and the tastes of the interlocutors) accurately, yet the positions are still incompatible with each other. It seems to be a disagreement, where each interlocutor is right in their position, although usually, a disagreement, that involves contradictory positions of the parties, is an indicator of one of the participants being wrong in their position. First, I will present factual disagreements, in which at least one of the interlocutors must be wrong in their position. After that I will present faultless disagreements.

## 2.1 Factual disagreements:

### Example 1

#### Specification

P1: "The University of Tartu is in Tartu."

P2: "The University of Tartu is not in Tartu."

The University of Tartu (not the colleges associated with it), is located in Tartu, so P2 is mistaken in this disagreement. General form of this disagreement: P1:  $p$ ; P2:  $\text{not-}p$ .

### Example 2

#### Identification

P1: "The bird sitting on that branch is a parakeet."

P2: "No, it is not a parakeet."

Assuming that P1 and P2 are talking about the same bird, one or both of them must be mistaken. The bird can either be a parakeet or not. There is no possible situation in which P1 and P2 are both correct in their statements. General form of this disagreement: P1: *p*; P2: *not-p*.

### Example 3

#### Recollection

P1: "A tree fell on our house last year."

P2: "No tree fell on our house last year."

In this situation, assuming that the speakers are talking about the same house, either there was a tree that fell on their house the previous year or there was no tree that fell on their house the previous year. One of the participants in this disagreement must be mistaken. General form of this disagreement: P1: *p*; P2: *not-p*.

In these examples, it would not be possible for both interlocutors to be correct in their statement – one or both of them must have made a mistake in forming their statement. An "interlocutor" is someone who takes part in a conversation. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) I will use this term as a substitute for "participant of a disagreement". In example 2, the bird that is sitting on the branch is the deciding factor of the disagreement – if it is a parakeet, then P2 is mistaken. If it is not a parakeet, P1 is mistaken.

The factual disagreements were presented as a comparison point for what I will discuss next. In the next examples, I will present disagreements that could be considered as faultless.

## 2.2 Faultless Disagreements

Faultless disagreements could arise (for example) in discussions regarding personal taste. That is, when the interlocutors hold opposing positions towards something, when expressing their personal taste. The following examples are used to illustrate faultless disagreements:

### Example 1

P1: "Dragon fruit is tasty."

P2: "Dragon fruit is not tasty."

At first glance, the form of this disagreement seems to be the same as in a factual disagreement. P1 states that  $p$  and P2 states that  $not-p$ . However, when it comes to tastes, there is a significant difference from factual disagreements - disagreements regarding taste rely on personal preferences, which can be different from each other without the interlocutors having made a mistake. One person's tastes and preferences may not extend to others, which makes it possible that neither of the participants is mistaken in their position, if their positions are not compatible with each other. This disagreement could be considered as faultless, if the interlocutors have formed their statement in a way, where they have *not made a mistake*. Here, a mistake could be considered as a person forming a taste-statement before actually experiencing the taste that the statement is about. The mistake in forming a taste in this way is that they do not have enough evidence to form a taste, if they have not experienced the taste.

### Example 2

P1: "Bats are cute."

P2: "Bats are not cute."

This is the same kind of interaction as in example 1 but with a different predicate. *Is cute* as a predicate seems to be more complicated than *is tasty*, and this predicate's relation to bats is also complicated, since what is considered as *cute* about bats by P1 and P2 may vary – bat's appearances may be considered as cute, or their behaviour may be considered as cute. What is important, is that both P1 and P2 can be right in their positions, although they appear to be in a disagreement about the cuteness of bats.

There is a clear sense in which faultless disagreements differ from factual disagreements, however faultless disagreements are not always clear in their occurrence. A disagreement involving tastes might not always be faultless and what seems to be a disagreement might not always *be* a disagreement. Whether something is a disagreement or not depends on what one considers a disagreement to be – does it simply require two people holding opposing positions about something or do they have to interact with each other, for them to have a disagreement?

This creates a question about what can be characterised as a disagreement. Furthermore, the sense of faultlessness is not always clear either. It is possible to be at fault in one's position even if the position is purely taste-related. For example, when one forms a taste without sufficient evidence (making a taste-statement without the relevant experience involving the taste in question), e.g. P1 says she finds apples to be tasty, even though she has never tasted an apple. The interlocutor in this position is not considered as faultless, because she formed her position without sufficient evidence. These kinds of uncertainties made faultless disagreement to be too unstable to be the focus of the debate. So, over time, the debate started to focus on the retraction of statements that involve predicates of personal taste. To explain the notion of retraction, I will first introduce two kinds of contexts. These contexts are used to either support or disregard retraction as a necessary speech act, when discussing statements that use predicates of personal taste.

### 3. Two kinds of contexts

Before I can properly present the truth-contextualist and truth-relativist views, two kinds of contexts need to be explained. Both, relativists and contextualists make use of these two contexts, when explaining linguistics – the context of utterance and the context of assessment.

The first context I will address is the *context of utterance*. An utterance is “something that someone says.” (Cambridge Dictionary) Context can be understood as the circumstance, in which something exists. A context of utterance, then, is a circumstance in which an utterance is made. This context is always fixed (will not change) and linked to the utterance, because an utterance is something that, once performed, will stay the way it was uttered. For example, when I say “digital art is beautiful” on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May in 2024, then the context of *that specific* utterance is 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2024 and the specific place and other possible factors that are present during that utterance (including the weather, the time of the day etc.). So, a context of utterance is like a snapshot in time, that records the circumstances related to that specific utterance.

The second context is the *context of assessment* (sometimes referred to as *context of evaluation*). Overall, context of assessment is the context in which something is assessed. In this debate, context of assessment is the context in which the truth or falsity of an utterance is assessed. This context is not fixed (it can change) but is always linked to the specific utterance that is assessed. There can be multiple contexts of assessment for any given utterance. The

utterance “digital art is beautiful” can be assessed (for example) on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2024, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2026 and even on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2102.

In the following overviews of the Contextualist and Relativist theories, it will be important to understand these contexts, as they are used to explain some of the important parts of the theories. Next I will discuss the truth conditions of the content of statements, which do not include taste predicates.

#### 4. Truth-Conditional Content of Non-Taste Predicates

Truth-conditional content is content that is true under certain conditions. Truth-conditionality indicates that a sentence is true, if its content’s conditions are met. The following examples will include predicates, that do not indicate personal tastes.

##### *Example*

*The Statement:* “That rock is heavy!” (referred to as *the statement*)

The sentence indicates that the speaker, that makes such a statement, is referring to a certain rock, which is heavy *for them* to carry. The truth-condition of such a statement is that the rock *is* heavy for the speaker. I will demonstrate that in the following example.

Speaker A (a 10-year-old referring to a rock, which weighs 20 kilograms): “That rock is heavy!” – *The statement’s* truth conditions are met for the 10-year-old. So, as uttered by the 10-year-old, *the statement* is true.

Speaker B (a 35-year-old referring to the same rock): “That rock is not heavy!” – *The statement’s* truth conditions are not met for the 35-year-old, as the rock is not heavy for them. So, as uttered by the 35-year-old, *the statement* is false.

The example describes a natural situation, but the truth-conditionality of statements becomes even more apparent, when we think about a 35-year-old (speaker C), that may not be able to lift the rock at all. The inability may come from a disease or from the lack of proper physical form needed to lift the rock (or some other reason). There can also be a well-trained 10-year-old, who can lift the rock with ease.

Speaker A (a 35-year-old (lacking the proper physical form) referring to a rock, which weighs 20 kilograms): “That rock is heavy!” – *The statement`’s* truth conditions are met, so it is true for the 35-year-old (speaker A).

Speaker B (a 35-year-old (having the proper physical form) referring to the same rock): “That rock is not heavy!” – *The statement`’s* truth conditions are not met, so it is false for the 35-year-old (speaker B).

From these examples it can be seen that a statement can be true or false for the speaker on different conditions. This overview is an explanation of truth-conditional content of statements. Truth-conditional content is important to consider, when discussing sentences involving predicates of personal taste because it helps to understand how a statement can be true for one person while being false for another. There are more truth-theories than two, but I will focus on the theories of *relativists* and *contextualists*. Next, I will introduce the topic of Truth-Conditional meanings of sentences to explain how an utterance involving predicates of personal taste is assessed as true or false.

## 5. Truth-Conditional meanings of sentences

Truth-Conditional meanings of sentences provide a connection between a statement and the way the world is. Truth-conditional content is an indicator that there can be truth-conditional meaning. Truth-conditional meaning is a property of truth-conditional content. The following definition will help to understand that connection:

“The truth condition of a statement is the condition the world must meet if the statement is to be true. To know this condition is equivalent to knowing the meaning of the statement.” (Oxford Reference) To rephrase, the meaning of a truth-conditional sentence is its truth-condition. For example, the statement “The Sun is a star,” is true if and only if (abbreviated as *iff*) the Sun *really is* a star. The meaning of this statement is “The Sun is a star.” In the same way, “Pineapple is tasty to me” is true if and only if pineapple *really is* tasty to me. Although it might seem a simple concept, it ties the *use of language and meaning to the way the world*

*is*. It makes it so, that if a statement is true, it can be considered as a representation of the world it is describing. I will explain it with the example(s) used in chapter 1.

P1: "The bird sitting on that branch is a parakeet."

According to the truth-conditional meaning, the statement of P1 is true *iff* the bird (whom the speaker is referring to) sitting on the branch (which the speaker is referring to) *is* a parakeet. The meaning of a sentence is its truth-condition. The truth-condition is the condition in which the world has to be in order for the sentence to be true. Even if the condition is not fulfilled, the meaning of the sentence is still its truth-condition.

Truth-conditional meaning is important when discussing retraction, since retraction considers the content of a statement in two contexts (in the context of utterance and in the context of assessment). Truth-conditional meaning helps to judge whether a statement is true or false in either of these contexts. In chapter 7, I will consider the truth-conditionality of statements including predicates of personal taste, but before that, in chapter 6, I will discuss the truth-conditional content of predicates of personal taste to explain the possibility of different tastes and why faultless disagreement is not the proper concept to use, when discussing differences in taste. To make the distinction between truth-conditional meaning and truth-conditional content clear: truth-conditional meaning of a sentence is its truth-condition; truth-conditional content is the content of a statement, which is dependent on the fulfilment of its truth-conditions (the relevance of its meaning).

Example:

Truth-conditional meaning

P1: "Apples are tasty."

The meaning of such a statement is that the taste of apples in general can be described as pleasant (*is tasty*). The truth-conditional meaning of such a statement is that apples are indeed tasty for the speaker – the world meets the truth-condition of the sentence.

Truth-conditionality of the content of such a statement means that the statement can be true or false, depending on whether the meaning of the statement is in accordance with the speaker's tastes or not.

In chapter 6, I will provide a more detailed explanation of truth-conditional contents of sentences.

## 6. Truth-Conditional Content of Predicates of Personal Taste

When two people are in a disagreement, regarding (including but not limited to) tastes, contextualists think that the participants in the disagreement are using the same words with different truth-conditional contents. Truth-conditional content is the content of a statement, that is true under certain conditions. Truth-conditionality indicates that a sentence is true, if its content's conditions are met. It can be best illustrated with an example.

Aurora: "Cinnamon rolls are tasty."

Mia: "Cinnamon rolls are not tasty."

Aurora and Mia, although using the same words, are using the word "tasty" with different truth-conditional contents. Aurora expresses that the taste of cinnamon rolls *can* be characterized with the predicate *is tasty*, while Mia expresses, that the taste of cinnamon rolls *cannot* be characterized using the predicate *is tasty*. Expressed in a reversed state: Aurora's sense of *is tasty* includes the taste of cinnamon rolls, while Mia's sense of *is tasty* does not include the taste of cinnamon rolls.

If the concept of truth-conditional contents is accepted, there will be consequences when considering the possibility of faultless disagreements. The consequences will show why the debate now focuses on retraction instead of faultless disagreements.

## 7. The consequences of including Truth-Conditional Content

In accepting that there may be different truth-conditional contents of predicates of personal taste, the understanding of these predicates will change. Since the participants of a disagreement can justify their position by saying, that they are using the same words with different truth-conditional contents, the outcome is, that their disagreement is no longer only about what is tasty and what is not, but it *seems* to become a disagreement about what is meant by the predicate *is tasty* as well - more specifically, which tastes are included under that predicate, and which are not.

Aurora: "Cinnamon rolls are tasty."

Mia: "Cinnamon rolls are not tasty."

Mia's statement about her taste is true, if the truth-conditions of her statement are fulfilled. In this case, if Mia *does not* find cinnamon rolls tasty, the truth-conditions are fulfilled, making her statement true. Aurora's statement about her taste is true, if the truth-conditions of her statement are fulfilled. In this case, if Aurora *does* find cinnamon rolls tasty, the truth-conditions of her statement are fulfilled, making her statement true as well. What makes it possible for these otherwise contradictory statements to be true at the same time, is that different tastes can be characterized with different predicates by different people. *Is tasty* may include *e.g.* apples and oranges for one person, while *is tasty* may not include apples and oranges for another. This distribution of tastes is individual for each person. In this case, *is tasty* signifies two things: 1) Something is to a person's liking; 2) The "something" that is to a person's liking, now belongs to their category of "is tasty", which means that when they are asked "what is tasty to you", they may refer to that "something", that they have found to be tasty. So, the positions of the participants in the disagreement change from "Cinnamon rolls are tasty" to "To me, cinnamon rolls are tasty" or "Cinnamon rolls are tasty to me." "To me" indicates a person's personal taste experience, which may differ from another person's experience.

Since now the participants of the former disagreement are only saying something about themselves (that something is tasty *to them*), contextualists state, that there is no disagreement here, but the interlocutors are merely *talking past each other*. They are just stating their preferences, without contending to express anything, that would have to be true for others as well. In this way, there is no disagreement about what is included under *is tasty* either – for one of the interlocutors, *is tasty to me* includes certain tastes, and for the other interlocutor, it includes different tastes. What makes it obvious that there is no disagreement, is when the interlocutors take "is tasty" to mean "is tasty to me". The following example will illustrate that:

Aurora: "Pineapple is tasty to me."

Mia: "Pineapple is not tasty to me."

Both interlocutors are now stating something about the relation of their own preferences to pineapple. Since they are stating something about different things (each interlocutor expresses something about *their own* taste), there is no disagreement. This situation is now seen as the

interlocutors *talking past each other* instead of a disagreement. This is what the contextualists have accepted about predicates of personal tastes – although not always said aloud, *is tasty* (some other PPTs follow the same pattern) is taken to mean *is tasty to me*. The disagreement will still look like before, but now the predicate *is tasty* is used in different senses by the interlocutors:

Aurora: “Pineapple is tasty [to me].”

Mia: “Pineapple is not tasty [to me].”

The main reason, why faultless disagreement is not the focus anymore, is that the disagreement can be viewed in different ways, that give rise to different positions. If the disagreement is viewed as the interlocutors saying something about their own taste, then there is no apparent disagreement. If, however, they are saying something about the tastiness of (in this case) pineapple, then there is an apparent disagreement.

With the information and explanations provided so far, it is possible to understand the truth-relativist and truth-contextualist theories. The next two chapters will explain both theories (truth-contextualist theory in chapter 8 and truth-relativist theory in chapter 9) in detail, to then move to the focus of the debate (retraction).

## 8. The Truth-Contextualist Theory

The truth-contextualist theory, regarding linguistics, states that “the extension of claims of personal taste is dependent on the context of utterance.” (Kneer, 2021) “The extension” here means *truth-value*. The truth-value “[...] of claims of personal taste is dependent on the context of utterance. (Kneer, 2021)” Truth-value indicates whether something (in this case, a claim of personal taste) is true or false.

An example illustrating this position could be as follows:

John claimed two weeks ago that he finds/found apples tasty. Today Mia and Aurora are discussing whether John thinks that apples are tasty. Aurora claims that two weeks ago, she heard John say that apples are tasty. If John’s claim about his own tastes was true two weeks ago, then in the context of *John two weeks ago*, John had found apples tasty. So, Aurora can safely assume that at least two weeks ago, John had found apples tasty. Even if John does not

find apples tasty anymore, when assessing the truth-value of John's two-week-old claim, it is still true in the context of *John two weeks ago* (in the context of utterance).

This was an example about just stating something, but truth-values of statements are more complicated to assign, when people are in a disagreement. In a disagreement, multiple contexts are involved, like the context of each interlocutor's position *or* the context of world state (how the world really is). Depending on the focus of a disagreement, different contexts have to be accounted for.

Before I explain the shift in the debate, which resulted in retraction becoming the focus, I will explain the truth-relativist theory.

## 9. The Truth-Relativist Theory

The truth-relativist theory, regarding linguistics, states that “their extension depends on the context of assessment.” (Kneer, 2021) “Their” here means *statements of personal taste*, so it is to be read as “the extension of statements of personal taste depends on the context of assessment.” As introduced in chapter 2, context of assessment is the context in which the truth or falsity of an utterance is assessed. Extension, as introduced in chapter 4, is truth-value.

Example: John said two weeks ago that he found apples tasty. Truth-relativists do not assess *the truth-value of John's two-week-old claim* in the context of *two weeks ago*, but in the context of *today*. So, if John does not find apples tasty anymore, then the two-week-old claim is assessed as false, because in the context of today the claim does not represent John's (current) tastes correctly.

If a previously true claim is now assessed as false, and assuming that endorsing a false proposition is not permissible (for the sake of coherence), one must retract the previous claim. Next, I will be discussing retraction and its implications.

## 10. A shift in the debate - from faultless disagreement to retraction

Regarding the debate, relativists argued, that the Contextualist theory cannot account for faultless disagreements. Since contextualists take *is tasty* to mean *is tasty to me*, then in the case of faultless disagreements, it makes it so that there is no disagreement at all. Interlocutors are stating their positions as “x is tasty to me” and “x is not tasty to me.” “Me” refers to different people. People can state their own preferences without being in a disagreement. Although the interlocutors are faultless in their positions, they are not in a disagreement. That is why relativists stated, that contextualists cannot account for these kinds of disagreements.

Contextualists responded to that, saying that there is indeed no disagreement. Even if there would be a disagreement, then the disagreement could be either about the tastes of the interlocutors *or* the tastes of the *things* that are characterized with the predicates of taste (e.g. the taste of an apple). It is uncertain which is to be considered in a taste-related disagreement. For example, if the same apple tastes sour to one person, but not for another, then is the apple sour or not? The disagreement could be either about the sourness of the apple *or* it could be about the meaning of *sour*. Sourness can only be evaluated using one’s own tastebuds, so if the results of this taste test differ for people (one person concludes that the apple is sour and the other concludes that it is not), then there is no consensus on whether the apple is sour or not.

Ultimately, faultless disagreement was seen as unstable datapoint for the debate, because of the confusion about what is considered a disagreement and what is faultlessness (and how exactly can it be applied). The debate moved on to the phenomenon of retraction. This is where this paper’s discussion will move to as well.

## 11. Retraction of claims including predicates of personal taste

Retraction is a speech act, specified as “the act of taking back an offer or statement, or admitting that a previous statement was false.” (Cambridge Dictionary) Advocates of retraction say that retraction is necessary, when a statement made in the context of utterance is assessed as *false* in the context of assessment.

An example might be:

- 1) Tom on Monday morning: ”Croissants are tasty!”
- 2) Tom on Wednesday morning: "I was wrong – croissants are not tasty.”

Since Tom`s tastes on croissants have changed, then *according to relativism*, if he has not already retracted his previous claim, he is now endorsing two opposing propositions. That is an incohesive position, which needs to be corrected by retracting the previous claim. So, Tom is required to retract the statement he had made on Monday. The position is incohesive because Tom can either hold true that croissants are tasty, or that croissants are not tasty but not both at the same time.

*According to contextualism*, Tom is not endorsing two opposing propositions. In the context of Monday morning, he was endorsing one proposition. Then his tastes changed. So, in the context of Wednesday morning, he is endorsing another proposition. He does not have to (and should not) retract his previous statement, because it is still true in the context of Monday morning.

Although retraction is important to the relativist-contextualist debate, it also has important implications to everyday life situations. I will illustrate this with the following example, that I have come up with:

- 1) I sell an object to someone, let us say it is a cup, at a price of five euros on Wednesday. The cup has a symbol on it, that I have not noticed. I do not regard the appearance of the cup as anything special. The client says: "It is beautiful!" and I respond: "Eh, it is nothing special," and sell the cup to the client.
- 2) On Thursday, I discover a photo of the same cup that I sold on the internet and notice a symbol on it that I had never noticed before. It is the symbol of infinity. I have always liked the symbol of infinity, so I decide to contact the buyer on Friday.
- 3) On Friday, I contact the buyer and tell her that *I take back* what I said on Wednesday, the cup *is* beautiful. I want more money for it (or I want it back)!

Of course, the buyer will probably never contact me again or she may even have some harsh words for me, but my retraction changed the way I would have acted. If I would not try to retract my statement, I would not contact the buyer again, since I would know that on Wednesday my statement about my tastes was different. I would just accept that I did not regard the cup as special then, even though I now find it to be beautiful.

Retractions may have different impacts, depending on what is retracted. Retraction is now the focus of the debate because, it allows a different viewpoint of statements including predicates

of personal taste. Instead of discussing how two statements representing different tastes of different people interact with each other, the discussion now focuses on seemingly contradictory taste-statements of the same person. In addition to understanding how language behaves, retraction can also have important implications when it comes to everyday situations. The topic of retraction is central to the two articles that I will analyse next. I will start with *Predicates of personal taste: empirical data* by Markus Kneer.

### 12. *Predicates of personal taste: empirical data* by Markus Kneer

Markus Kneer has published an article, in which he addresses the topic of retraction by presenting the results of empirical studies carried out on ordinary English speakers, to gather their intuitions about retraction. In his article, Kneer concludes “that the linguistic behaviour of ordinary English speakers is consistent with contextualist predictions and inconsistent with the predictions of the most widely discussed form of truth relativism [...]” (Kneer, 2021) The results of the studies are important, because they reflect the intuitions of the people that speak the language on a daily basis (ordinary English speakers). The information from the article will be analysed and accompanied with an explanation, why the information is important in the debate.

The predictions of relativism are 1) the need for retraction of previous statements in case the tastes of a person have changed; and 2) regarding a statement in the context of utterance as “false”, when assessed in the context of assessment, in case the tastes of a person have changed. The predictions of contextualism are: 1) no need for retraction of previous statements in case the tastes of a person have changed; and 2) a statement in the context of utterance is to be assessed relative to the context of utterance.

The empirical studies involved questions regarding retraction. The participants were presented with a fictional situation and the asked to answer to which degree they agree with a statement about this fictional situation. For example, one of the questions was this:

#### 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)” (Kneer, 2021)

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (two scenarios: Fish Sticks, Sandcastle × 2 conditions: truth evaluation, retraction).” (Kneer, 2021)

Participants only saw either claim [A] or claim [B], and then were asked to answer question Q.

The results are clear and decisive (Fig. 1): In the fish sticks scenario, people manifest strong disagreement with Sally’s statements that John’s taste claim was false ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) and that it should be retracted ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ). In line with contextualist predictions, and in contrast to relativist predictions, mean agreement was significantly below the midpoint of the scale. The same holds for the sandcastle scenario. Here, too, people disagree with the assessment that what John said at the context of utterance was false ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ), and they also disagree with the claim that it stands in need of retraction  $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ). Both means were significantly below the midpoint, signalling pronounced disagreement with the predictions of truth relativism. (Kneer, 2021)

The situation preceding the question is accurately representing what the debate is about. The wording of both of the claims is clear and the question is comprehensible as well. Since other scenarios and questions were of similar structures, it can be said that the questions used in this study have been presented in a neutral way, so that they would not sway the participants’ answers in any way.

Another question was asked from the participants, but this time the time passed between the claim and the point of retraction was considerably reduced to only a few weeks. Still, the results were similar to the previous questions: ordinary English speakers disagreed that the past statements were false, when considered at a later time (in a context of assessment). They also disagreed with the requirement of retraction in these cases. The scenario was presented as follows:

#### 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) (Kneer, 2021)

The results from ordinary language speakers in this question support the contextualist view. The speakers do not regard a past taste-statement as false, neither do they agree that it should be retracted.

“Again, people strongly disagreed with the claim that Ben’s original utterance was false [...] or that it must be retracted [...]” (Kneer, 2021)

Kneer concludes the article by comparing the results of the study to both the Relativist and Contextualist theories about retraction:

” The findings presented in this paper are quite clear: In three experiments modelled on a scenario which truth relativists present as data in favour of their semantics, empirical data proper suggests otherwise. The predictions of MacFarlane-style relativism regarding truth-assessment and retraction stand refuted both in terms of absolute results [...]. The predictions of contextualism, on the other hand, are confirmed in both respects.” (Kneer, 2021)

The results of this study show that ordinary English speakers’ intuitions align with the theory of the contextualists. Ordinary speakers do not regard previous statements as false, even if their tastes have changed, and neither do they feel the need for retraction of previous statements, that do not represent their current tastes.

The examples used in the questions of this study were all examples of private context. The next study will make use of examples of predicates of personal taste used in public context, to state that ordinary language speakers support retraction, at least when it comes to using PPTs in public context. I will present the study and analyse the results to show, that when considering both Kneer’s article and the article by Almagro et al., if retraction finds support by ordinary language speakers in public context, then it gives the relativist a reason to justify their position

that statements including predicates of personal taste, that are no longer true, should be retracted. This justification can be done by using empirical data from ordinary language speakers.

13. *Retraction in Public Settings* by Manuel Almagro, David Bordonaba-Plou, Neftalí Villanueva

The article, *Retraction in Public Settings* by Almagro et al., is a kind of response to Kneer's *Predicates of Personal Tastes* and some other articles, that have sought to gain the insight of ordinary language speakers in the matter of retraction. In this article, Almagro et al. also aim to study the ordinary language speaker's intuitions about retraction, but they have built their study on examples that present public statements, to then ask the participant's intuitions about retraction in those examples. In addition to making a distinction between retractions in public and private settings, Almagro et al. distinguish between descriptive and evaluative statements. The article concludes "that context exerts a significant effect on speakers' attitudes toward retraction." (Almagro et al., 2023) I will present some examples from the article and discuss, whether and how the results of the study might influence the overall debate.

In their article, Almagro et al. state that "we have no principled reason to suppose that public and private contexts behave alike with respect to our intuitions on retraction, or that we feel the same pressure to retract our descriptive and our evaluative statements." (Almagro et al, 2023, 3) If the intuitions of ordinary language speakers show that retraction *is* favoured in public settings, then relativists would have the empirical data to contrast the results of Kneer's article, *Predicates of personal taste: empirical data*, which concluded that retraction (of statements involving personal tastes) is not favoured by ordinary language speakers. Then it would be the case, that ordinary language speakers do not deem retraction necessary in private context (according to the results of Kneer's study), but they do in public context (according to the study of Almagro et al.).

Since this article uses the notions of private and public context, the authors have specified, what the contexts exactly are:

- “1. Public context (“that the speaker has said so publicly”),
2. Private context (“that the speaker has said so privately”).“ (Almagro et al., 2023, 13)

The authors explain why they have included the differentiation between public and private contexts. They think that including these contexts may have a significant impact on whether ordinary language speakers favour retraction or not.

“In public contexts, retraction is frequently demanded from certain people, for specific statements. Retraction plays a central role in these conversations. Moreover, the effects that follow from retraction are significant, sometimes even constituting “reparations” for the damage produced by those from whom a retraction is demanded [...]. However, the examples used in the literature are examples of private conversations, where retraction is not particularly important.” (Almagro et al., 2023)

The authors are showing that by not including public settings in the discussion of retraction, some important consequences of retracting or not retracting a statement are left unexplored. By discussing these possible consequences, the authors aim to show that there are contexts, where retraction is not only favoured but demanded.

In addition to considering retraction in public settings, the study revealed that ordinary language speakers' intuitions (regarding retraction) change depending on whether the speaker retracts a taste-statement from liking to disliking or *vice versa*.

“Dinges and Zakkou (2020) also questions whether the data support the contextualist thesis. They defend the existence of a direction effect on taste predicates –speakers will have contextualist or relativist intuitions about retraction concerning propositions involving taste predicates depending on the direction in which their tastes change. For example, if someone starts by liking fish sticks, but later dislikes them, they will favor contextualist intuitions, and will not be prone to retract their earlier assertion. However, if someone starts disliking beer but later on likes it, they will favor relativist intuitions, and will be more inclined to retract their earlier assertion.” (Almagro et al., 2023)

This is an interesting result, because it indicates that although speakers are asked the same question, with only the direction of the retraction changing (from liking to disliking something *versus* from disliking to liking something), their intuitions about retraction change. The answers may depend on the experience of the speakers *and* what the statement is about (beer or fish sticks). *The experience* includes their preferences at the time of the conduction of this study. It is possible, that the participants' personal preferences affect their intuitions about retraction (if someone dislikes beer, they may be, even unconsciously, more ready to retract a statement about beer). This, however, cannot be proven nor disproven using this article's

results, since the participants have answered only on a numerical scale, which does not allow direct insight into their personal preferences. What it *does* show, is that the intuitions of the participants are unstable and not fully developed, because whether retraction is done from a positive statement, or its negation should not influence the justification of retraction – at least not in the matter of personal tastes. Either retraction of a statement involving personal tastes has to be retracted or it does not have to be retracted. Whether the statement changes from positive to negative or from negative to positive is not relevant. It is evident, that there is a confusion (that they themselves might not be aware of) among the participants about what retraction entails.

The authors state that with the results of their studies, they do not intend to support either side of the debate. They merely wish to see all possible aspects of this debate to be explored.

“[...] our aim is to single out new effects that can influence people’s intuitions on retraction in order to enrich the discussion between contextualists and relativists.” (Almagro et al., 2023) “The public nature of retraction is something that both contextualists and relativists should account for, and a factor that should be included in the design of the vignettes of empirical studies.” (Almagro et al., 2023) “In particular, we believe that retraction is, above all, a public phenomenon, and therefore retraction might not be mandatory in a private conversation but might be seen as obligatory in a public setting.” (Almagro et al., 2023)

The authors then state that their distinction between evaluative and descriptive statements influences the ordinary language speaker’s intuitions regarding retraction.

“Participants reported that a statement being evaluative, rather than merely descriptive, is the most relevant criterion in order to consider retraction mandatory, together with context being a public one [...]” (Almagro et al., 2023)

The results of this study show that ordinary language speakers judge the possibility, as well as necessity of retraction differently, depending on whether the context is public or private: “Consistent with our first hypothesis, we found that context affects retraction, both its possibility and its obligatory character. In particular, we found that claims that turn out to be

false are more likely to be asked to be retracted. Also retraction is more likely to be seen as mandatory when the context is public rather than private.” (Almagro et al., 2023)

Previous empirical research so far has suggested that people’s intuitions are inconsistent with the predictions made by MacFarlane’s assessor relativism concerning retraction. In particular, according to these studies, people don’t consider retraction to be obligatory, which makes relativism less plausible than some of its competitors, such as contextualism. However, we have identified a common feature of these empirical studies that might be affecting their results: they only consider scenarios of private conversations between two subjects, or at least don’t take into consideration the crucial difference between public and private contexts. At the most general level, our findings show that people take retraction to be mandatory when speakers consider that a statement they made in the past is false now. But, more importantly, both assessing abstract and concrete situations, participants considered retraction to be more often mandatory in public than they do in private contexts. Again, to be clear, we don’t think that our results support MacFarlane’s relativism. (Almagro et al., 2023)

Although the authors seem to think otherwise (as can be seen in the next quote), the article *Retraction in Public Settings* does offer support to the Relativist theory. Relativists take retraction to be an important aspect of language and the topic of predicates of personal taste. The results of this article show that, when it comes to public settings, ordinary language speakers support retraction, and also think it is necessary. The data clearly supports the relativists. This data from ordinary language speakers could be used as support to the favourable position regarding retraction in the same way, that Kneer’s data from ordinary language speakers can be used to justify the non-favourable position regarding retraction.

Our results cannot be used to support the validity of Reflexive Truth Rule, Retraction Rule, or relativism in general. Instead, our aim is to single out new effects that can influence people’s intuitions on retraction in order to enrich the discussion between contextualists and relativists. (Almagro et al., 2023)

In regard to both of these articles, and other studies, that rely on competent ordinary language speaker’s intuitions, it is important to note, that while the data about the intuitions of the people shows what ordinary language speakers *think* about how language should behave, it does not state anything about how language *should* behave. So, the empirical data should not be taken as *proof* for neither the relativist nor the contextualist

view. It can be used as supportive data, but it does not necessarily justify a position. This is important to consider, because if the data from ordinary language speakers is used in the debate, it should only be used as an example. Whether or not retraction is mandatory is not a matter of democracy (meaning that whichever side, supportive or unsupportive, finds the most approval from the ordinary language speaker is right), but a matter of understanding the behaviour of language. This is why the empirical data is not fully relevant to the justification of retraction.

#### 14. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results presented in the article *Public Retractions* offers the relativist a way to respond to the results presented in the article *Predicates of Personal Taste*. If the results in *Predicates of Personal taste* showed, that ordinary language speaker`s intuitions do not support retraction of statements that involve predicates of personal taste, then the results in *Public Retractions* show, that ordinary language speakers think that in public settings, it is necessary to retract statements that involve predicates of personal taste and are no longer true.

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## Resume

Tagasivõtmisest: kuidas tõerelativist saaks vastata kontekstualistile?

Tõeteoreetikud otsivad tingimusi, mille alusel saaks öelda, et miski on tõene või väär. Tõerelativism üritab välja selgitada, *mis on kelle jaoks tõene ja millistel tingimustel*. Kuigi tõde tundub olevat epistemoloogiline kontsept, võib väite tõeväärtuse määrata ka keelekasutus. Töös esitatakse debatt, kus osalevad tõerelativistid ja tõekontekstualistid. Debatt keskendub maitsepredikaate sisaldavate väidete tõetingimuste uurimisele. Selleks, et debatt lihtsamini mõistetav oleks, esitatakse mõlema tõeteooria tutvustus, debati kulg ning kaks artiklit, mis kumbki toetavad debatis vastanduvaid osapooli.

Kõnealune debatt on läbinud mitmeid faase, et leida tingimusi maitsepredikaate sisaldavate väidete tõesuse määramiseks. Algselt keskenduti lahkarvamustele, mis sisaldasid seisukohti, kus väljendati isiklikke maitse-eelistusi. Sellist lahkarvamust, kus osapooled ei nõustu millegi maitse osas, oma maitse-eelistustest tulenevalt, nimetatakse *veatuks lahkarvamuseks*. Veatu lahkarvamus üldiselt on lahkarvamus, kus osapooled on vastanduvatel seisukohtadel, kuid kumbki osapool ei ole oma arvamuse kujundamisel *eksinud*, st osapooled on oma arvamuses veatud. Täpsemalt tähendab *veatus* seda, et lahkarvamuses osaleja on oma ei ole eksinud oma positsiooni kujundamisel ning tal on alust hoida oma positsiooni. Veatuse lisatingimuseks võib olla fakt, et ei leidu ühtegi [asja], mis paneks inimest oma arvamust enda positsiooni suhtes muutma. Kui veatus lahkarvamuses osalevate osapoolte maitse-eelistused olid erinevad, siis jäi mulje, et nad on omavahel lahkarvamuses. Kontekstualistid ei olnud relativistidega nõus, et selline olukord võiks olla iseloomustatav lahkarvamusena. Kontekstualistid iseloomustasid sellist olukorda *möödarääkimisena*. Põhjuseks oli see, et lahkarvamuse osapooled ütlesid midagi enda maitse-eelistuste kohta, aga mitte midagi nende asjade kohta, mille maitse suhtes lahkarvamuses oldi. Sellele järgnes debatis segadus – mis on veatus ning mis on lahkarvamus? Kuna nendele küsimustele üheseid vastuseid ei leitud, liikus debati fookus veatult lahkarvamuselt *tagasivõtmisele*. Tagasi võtmine on kõneakt, mille käigus võetakse tagasi eelnevalt tehtud väide või pakkumine, või tunnistatakse, et eelnevalt tehtud väide oli/on väär. Tagasivõtmisest räägitakse maitsepredikaate sisaldavate väidete

kontekstis. Debati käigus üritatakse välja selgitada, kas ja millistel tingimustel on maitse-eelistusi sisaldava väite teinud inimene kohustatud oma väite tagasi võtma, kui tema maitse on muutunud.

Bakalaureusetöö hüpoteesiks on, et Almagro et al. Artikkel *Retraction in Public Settings*, annab tõerelativistidele võimaluse esitada empiirilisi andmeid, mis toetavad tõerelativismi seisukohta, et varasemalt tehtud, enam mittekehtivad väited, mis sisaldavad maitsepredikaate, peab *tagasi võtma* vähemalt siis, kui väited on tehtud avalikus sfääris. Hüpotees leiab leiab kinnitust.

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