

SAYING ‘YES’ AND ‘NO’ IN MATTERS OF PERSONAL TASTE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the communicative function of public pronouncements about what is tasty, agreeable or attractive, followed by an equally public endorsement or rejection. The *typical* and *expected* reaction to contributions like ‘This is tasty’ or ‘The roller coaster is fun’ in a conversational setting is *not* ‘how come?’ or ‘How do you know that?’, but a reply that reveals one’s own attitude towards an object or state of affairs, thus revealing conflict or alignment over the issue at hand. Judgements of taste (their content and the speech acts performed) are explored in the context of a cooperative view of communication developed by Michael Tomasello, which classifies communicative actions in terms of what we want from others when we communicate to them. We also use game theory. The game-theoretical connotation for a public dispute over what to like or to prefer is a co-ordination game like *Battle of the Sexes*. Speech act theory traditionally allows that speakers can perform different speech acts simultaneously. Combining both views, we argue that the public pronouncements that give rise to seemingly faultless disagreement have informative, requestive *and* alignment-seeking dimensions, which make different propositional contents salient. In a dispute over whether something is tasty (fun, ...) a speaker and her intended audience usually play two games – the game of letting others *know* something (about oneself), and the *alignment of attitudes* game, *i.e.* the game of making moves in the direction of seeking alignment over what to prefer, or what would be preferable, in a given situation. Both games make different propositions salient. I conclude with a brief evaluation of current disputes over what’s tasty (comical, ...) between contextualists and assessment relativists in matters of personal taste.

Keywords: Expressivism, contextualism, assessment-relativism, coordination, cooperation; Max Kölbel, Michael Tomasello, John MacFarlane

1. Designing the *Centre Pompidou*

In the early 1970ties, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers were given the task to design a new cultural center in the heart of Paris, the urban landmark we now immediately recognize as the *Centre Pompidou*. Some like it, others detest it, but what matters for our purposes is that it illustrates that shared projects required shared preferences in matters of taste. Both architects had to align their architectural tastes and preferences in order to bring the project to its startling result. For visitors too it is difficult to resist making

public a judgement of taste, which often has the intended effect that one immediately finds out how one's companion/interlocutor judges it and to what extent her judgement aligns with yours – often only to discover that it doesn't, thus creating friction which can, and sometimes must be resolved one way or another.

This runs counter the idea that disagreements in matters of taste are sometimes held to be *faultless*: if X asserts that *p* and Y asserts that not-*p*, then both are 'right' because one can't be mistaken about one's own taste-experiences or judgements (Kölbel 2004, p. 846). And yet both speakers are taken to be disagreeing over the truth of *p*. Many have suggested that such disagreements are utterly pointless (*de gustibus et coloribus non est disputandum!*), but they are almost never *inconsequential* and we all know that when they emerge, our are brought into the open, they can be downplayed, offer occasion for negotiation or reveal a deeper pattern of attitudinal conflicts over a wider range of issues. This should not be overlooked, because not only joint projects, but also shared bonds one has with others (which constitute the 'in-group'), the feeling of 'us' and the sympathy one has for those who share your outlook depend on bringing it into the open – hence communicating – one's attitudes towards objects and state of affairs (Haidt 2001, 2008). Empirical studies about attitude alignment show that friends and partners that have close relationships exhibit greater than chance similarity with respect to attitudes. People who come to appreciate each other tend to bring their attitudes into closer alignment, and attitudinal dissimilarities produce discomfort, but only insofar as those dissimilarities become salient to partners (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Most social psychologists reserve the term *attitude* to refer to our *relatively enduring evaluation of something* – the *attitude object* – and we will stick to that use (Wood, 2000).

II. Taste judgements and our socially embedded lives

We live social lives in which public value judgements and judgements of taste are natural expressions of our socially embedded conative lives – there is almost nothing we don't have a positive or negative *attitude* towards and common knowledge of attitudes we hold plays a distinctive role in organizing our affective and emotional bonds and alliances. *Projects* often require interaction in the form of coordination, and our tastes and preferences, together with beliefs, explain strategic choices we make and are expected to make (A choice is *strategic* when the utility (or payoff) of what one chooses depends on how the other party chooses, which depends on *their* preferences.) The conversation is the natural niche of speech acts and the breeding ground of publicly acknowledged agreements and conflicts. *How* we seek alignment and to what extent subjective or assessment-specific parameters are semantically articulated (cf. *infra*), depends on subtle

considerations grounded in what we want from the other when a potentially divisive dispute over what to prefer emerges. Too much attention to propositional content hides from view the fact that the choice of words and the level of commitment expressed is as important as revealing the proper propositional object of one's attitudes. 'I find this delicious' and 'This is delicious' have different impact on the intended audience. It matters how one seeks alignment (Buekens, 2011, Pinker *e.a.*, 2008). The way we present our attitudes to others is as important as the contents we have attitudes towards.

Recent research on disagreement in matters of taste has focused on the semantics and pragmatics of predicates of taste, but the conceptual and empirical issues relevant for understanding the communicative dimension of such disputes – why we have them, and how we deal with them – extend into areas that touch on the evolutionary psychology of expressing attitudes (Green, 2009), the role of social emotions and argumentation in morality (Haidt, 2001) and the function of cohesion and trust in small and large groups (Davis, 2001). Systematic fault lines in matters of taste typically reveal where and how individuals were socialized and where the in-group/outgroup consensus lies. The capacity to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' often focuses on attitudes that play a key role in organizing our social preferences. In socialization and integration the adoption of pre-existing interests, values and preferences (often required for the creation and maintenance of joint, or shared projects) plays a key role.

By 'disagreement' I mean a public disagreement as it comes to light in debate or dialogue.¹ The typical and expected reply to 'This is tasty' is *not* 'how come?' or 'How do you know that?', but an equally public reaction that reveals one's own position on the subject matter of the evaluation. There can be active disagreement over what course to follow, over how to proceed on a particular issue ('they disagreed about the best route to the summit'), over how to value an object or state of affairs, as expressivists have insisted when they reflected on *disagreement in attitude* (Stevenson, 1963) or *disagreement in plan* (Gibbard, 2003).² The kind of disagreement is thus a disagreement in pro-attitudes, *i.e.* attitudes that fall under the broad but appropriate concept of 'psychological dispositions of being for or against something', as Stevenson (1963, p. 1-2) put it.

Disagreements in matters of taste have two easily recognizable dimensions that do not easily fit together. On the one hand, there is a sense of faultlessness – each party seems to be *prima facie* right about her judgement because it reflects how she herself is affected by a state of affairs or where her preferences lie (the judgements are *de se*, as Egan stresses (Egan, 2014).

¹ See Egan (2014) for other types of disagreement.

² The idea of non-co-satisfiability of attitudes (valuings, preferences) was highlighted by taken up by (Marques, 2014) and goes back to David Lewis.

On the other hand, occasions that prompt such judgements often reveal that it matters, in the context of the conversation, to the participants that it becomes *common knowledge* that she is so affected (Chwe, 2013). In many small-scale cases of acting together, coordination is important and attitudinal disputes must be resolved (Bratman, 2007). If you and I are going to decorate a room, together, we'd better agree on which color we prefer for the walls. When a disagreement becomes public, it becomes *common knowledge* among the participants that there is a disagreement between them (Thomas, et al. 2014). If I prefer cannelloni and you don't, but there is no Italian restaurant within walking distance (there is one downtown, but it's hard to find and it might be closed), one of us has to give in. Shopping can be extremely tedious when incompatible preferences are constantly ventilated. *De gustibus non est disputandum* is a cynical recommendation to a quarreling couple in an IKEA warehouse looking for curtains that fit the color of the newly bought sofa. A shared project comes under pressure, and bonds, affective relationships and feelings of fellowship can, at least temporarily, come under pressure. Philosophers tend to present disputes over taste as disputes on which little or nothing depends (in a 'faultless disagreement' no one should be blamed, for no one is at fault), but this doesn't explain why people so often engage in such disputes. One reason is that we seek alignment or convergence of non-doxastic attitudes, as psychological research on the functional and social role of attitude alignment of preferences and values testifies (Wood 2000). Seeking convergence of attitudes and avoiding attitudes that cannot be jointly satisfied is the basis for the formation of joint goals, projects and the creation and maintenance of delicate social bonds. The feeling of 'us' requires common knowledge that specific values, preferences and pro-attitudes are shared.

Joint actions, complex projects and the creation and maintenance of social and emotional bonds require that we are willing to act conditional on what the other does or prefers. Simply receiving a message is not enough to make the receiver participate in a joint project because coordination based participation requires not only that A is confident that B will participate, but also that B is confident that A will participate, and that A knows (or strongly believes) that B knows that... etc. A *public exchange* is one way to generate common knowledge (Thomas, et al. 2014). Attempts to coordinate actions for which it is important that participants have consistent attitudes towards p are less risky if and when both know of each other what they prefer to be the case. Without there being something at stake (and what is at stake make look trivial to the outsider!), the fact that such exchanges sometimes give rise to serious disputes would be inexplicable.³

³ Public ceremonies serve to create and maintain common knowledge of what to believe, but even more often what to value or to prefer, as they reduce uncertainty over what others will do (Chwe 2013).

Common knowledge among all those involved ('the players') about what is preferred or what is to be preferred is useful to select an equilibrium in a coordination game (but note that the selected equilibrium need not be symmetrical –, someone may have given in.) A *public announcement* of what one prefers or what is to be preferred – the public announcement reveals how one is going to act hence what is preferred or is to be preferred) reduces uncertainty about how the other party is going to act, and it invites the audience to also publicize her judgement, either directly or indirectly, thus reducing unpleasant surprises that might arise in the course of action. When Alice makes her preferences or preferred strategy, or choice public, she makes common knowledge with Bob what he can reasonably expect her to choose. But it is equally important that agents are open to the possibility that their personal values, desires or preferences – in particular those they would act on if they were to act alone or if they were not engaged in a joint project – will sometimes have to be adjusted, bracketed or perhaps even abandoned. If you prefer McDonalds while I prefer KFC, then apart from our distinctively unhealthy preferences, what is at stake is who is going to give in order to save the shared overarching project of having a snack together rather than having to lunch separately. In *Battle of the Sexes* two equilibria preserve the non-disputed shared preference to go out on Saturday night.⁴

Selecting a mutually beneficial equilibrium typically requires consistent preferences ('I'll do the cooking if you do the dishes'). 'Mutually beneficial' does not mean that the underlying preferences or desires must somehow be merged or be similar. Alice's *preference for x over y* can be reconciled with Bob's preference for *y over x* by agreeing to be *indifferent* between these preferences, or to let an external device (a toss, for example) select which equilibrium will be played, which is better than to push ahead and abandon a *shared* preference *u over z*. (In *Battle of the Sexes*, Bob and Alice can toss a coin to decide how the evening will be spent, or take what they did last Saturday as a suitable precedent.)

⁴ I avoid the concept 'expressive meaning' (as associated with slurs and interjections, for example) in the context of judgements of taste because it focuses too explicitly on the speaker and almost completely neglects what uptake of an evaluative judgement consists in. A typical example is Cruse (1986): 'Another characteristic distinguishing expressive meaning from propositional meaning is that it is valid only for the utterer, at the time and place of the utterance. This limitation it shares with, for instance, a smile, a frown, a gesture of impatience' (Cruse 1986, p. 272). This comparison with expressive language misses the subtle perlocutionary point of judgements of taste explored by Tomasello (cf. *infra*). See (Schroeder 2009) for a critical assessment of the alleged relation between expressivism and the semantics of expressives.

2. Why predicates of taste are not the best starting point

The characteristic combination of faultlessness and disagreement is not confined to sentences in which predicates of personal taste occur, and neither does it require the semantic articulation of two propositions formally contradicting each other (see Egan 2014 for similar observations). This illustrates the Frege-Geach insight that what we aim at using those sentences and not the semantic properties of the terms used that should be focus of attention in this area. Consider the following exchanges:

1. You can sleep on that sofa. / No, you can't (Moltmann 2000)
2. *This* is fun! / No, *that's* fun!
3. Let's go to McDonalds. / No, let's go to KFC.
4. I like Bach. / No, I prefer Stravinsky

Exchange (1) clearly reflects an attitudinal difference about the dormative comfort of the sofa, but it doesn't contain a predicate of taste. Exchange (2) reflects a dispute that focuses on two different options, but the propositions semantically expressed are not formally contradicting each other. The same holds for (3) and (4). It is clearly the relation between attitudes of the speakers – the fact that they take the expressed or conventionally implicated attitudes to be not aligned – that licenses acts of denial (Sundell 2011). Utterances like 'Cats find rotten fish tasty', or 'most children find this interesting' do not suggest that the speaker is seeking alignment for the simple reason that the speaker merely describes attitudes certain subjects have to objects or states of affairs. The speaker's own preferences are irrelevant to understand what she is aiming at – in this case, and uncontroversially, transmitting a bit of knowledge about cats or children. All this is consistent with the point that the use of a taste predicate ('fun', 'taste', but also 'thick' predicates like 'horrible', ...) is often a focal point, a trigger for inferring that the speaker seeks alignment over a specific issue, although it should immediately be added that exocentric use of taste predicates cancels the invitation to align (Lasersohn, 2005).

3. From coordination games to alignment games

I am going to explore the idea that, just as one can play the **informing** and **requesting** game simultaneously (explored by Searle and others under the heading of 'indirect speech acts'), so can speakers simultaneously play the **informing** and **alignment** game. But what kind of language game is it *to seek attitudinal alignment*? I first explore a typical coordination game and the problem of *equilibrium selection*. Then I look at a classification of speech acts in terms of what speakers want from their audience. It will turn

out that a typical judgement of taste has two different goals: one of seeking to inform the other party, and one of seeking alignment in attitude with the other. Audiences can focus on one of these goals, focus on both, or even rationally ignore that alignment was being sought.

Alice and Bob have a dispute that originates in incompatible preferences, i.e. preferences that cannot be satisfied simultaneously, in the same world. On Saturday morning, they plan how to spend the evening together. Alice prefers a Bach concert while Bob prefers a Stravinsky concert. Given that they prefer to spend the evening together rather than separately (which is common ground, and not under discussion), they must align their first order preferences. The typical incentivization matrix has the following structure:

	C	D
C	2,1	0,0
D	0,0	1,2

Figure 1. *Battle of the Sexes*

	C	D
C	2,2	0,0
D	0,0	1,1

Figure 2. *Pure Coordination*

Battle of the Sexes differs from a pure coordination game (figure 2) where both players have symmetric preferences and coordination failure is the result of strategic uncertainty (which can, but must not be solved by making the choices sequential, such that the first player's choice becomes the salient option for the second player). How to resolve the dispute? The first player's move can either *prime* the second player to adopt the speaker's attitude or the first player can *check for alignment* – check for which equilibrium they can agree on.

Seeking alignment is an important goal of human communicative interaction (Tomasello 2008). Contrary to speech act theories which focus on illocutionary acts individuated by verbs that label the speech acts we perform (as in Austin 1962 and Searle 1969), Tomasello views seek to locate speech acts in a taxonomy that also covers non-verbal types of cooperative interaction like pointing, and this from a functional perspective: what is it that speakers typically want from their intended audience when they issue a non-verbal or verbal communicative action? Tomasello recognizes three broad types of cooperative interaction and it is important to note that every token communicative interaction incorporates to a certain degree all three of them (Tomasello, 2007).

Requestive communication takes place when a speaker wants the recipient to do something that will help the speaker/sender. These actions reflect, to use Tomasello's apt social reformulation of a well-known formula of Searle's, a *You-to-Me* direction of fit: the aim is that you (the intended audience) conform to my desire: if you accept my request, you are willing to satisfy my desire. 'Ordering', 'requesting', 'asking' are the familiar labels for the illocutionary component of such acts, but requestive communication does not depend on the existence of labels for illocutionary actions and the classification is based on typical effects aimed at by the speaker and fully recognized by the intended audience as the effect aimed at.

Helping is communicating with the aim of conforming to your desires to those of others – speech acts with a *Me-to-You* direction of fit. Individuals often want to help without even being requested to. I typically inform you of things that I think you will find helpful or interesting, given my knowledge of your goals and interests. When I inform you, I let you know (or put you in a position to know) what you (at least, in my eyes) need to know to realize your projects. (Helping by letting the recipient know what she might find useful to know may be have further self-centered motives.) When I help you with information, I often indirectly request you to confirm that you publicly accept what I thought was important for you. You let me know that you now take yourself to know what I told you.

The third communicative motive is *sharing*:

'People often simply want to *share feelings and attitudes* about things with others – what I will call an expressive or sharing motive. For example, on a beautiful day it is quite common to say to your officemate upon arrival at the office, 'What a beautiful day!' – which derives not from any imperative or informative motive involving help, but rather from a purely social one. This kind of communicative act is simply a sharing of attitudes and feeling to expand our common ground with others. This sharing motive underlies much of the everyday talk of people as they gossip about all kinds of things, expressing opinions and attitudes which they hope the other will to some degree share.' (my italics) (Tomasello 2008, p. 89)

Philosophers of language have paid scant attention to sharing feelings and alignment of attitudes as a communicative goal in dyadic engagements, but one early exception was Immanuel Kant who famously held that in judgements of taste the speaker makes "a claim to the agreement" of others: 'Through the judgment of taste (on the beautiful) it imputes ('ansinnen') the delight in an object to everyone' (V, 213-4), and 'the pleasure (felt in the determination of an object as beautiful) is at the same time declared through the judgement of taste to be valid for everyone' (ibid., 221).⁵ The

⁵ Quoted in Ginsborg (1990/2016), p. 70.

insight was not lost to Richard Hare, who held that expressivism includes the view that a taste judgement has a 'commending function'. *Expressing* an attitude (rather than describing the attitude one has) is not like letting steam off, as the familiar but misleading paraphrase 'Hurray for pizza!' would suggest. Its aim has three dimensions: to *inform* the other about one's own attitude, and to seek *alignment* by indirectly *requesting* her to publicize her preferences or affections. We focus on the first and second dimension.

But it was J.L. Austin (1962) who clearly saw, by introducing the perlocutionary act, that what a speaker aims at, what she wants from the recipient of the speech act *as a result of understanding* a speech act – is key to understanding communication. Although my use of it will slightly deviate from Austin's, I will use his concept of *uptake* to cover the distinction between understanding an utterance (the words used and grasping the communicative intentions – the illocutionary dimension – of the speaker) and overt acceptance by the audience what the speaker wants from her. Tomasello's threefold distinction identifies communicative goals in terms of what acceptance amounts to (Tomasello et.al. 2007b).⁶ It should be noted that every communicative interaction has aspects of requesting, informing and sharing, some of which can be more prominently present while other may be more indirectly conveyed.⁷

Communicative interactions involving attitudes to objects or states of affairs are coloured by all three dimensions (thinking here in terms of speech acts labeled by illocutionary verbs is especially pernicious as it blinds us to what the speaker wants from the intended audience). When I utter 'The cheesecake is tasty', I *inform* you about what I find tasty (I want you to know that), and I seek alignment with you (you are supposed to coordinate your attitudes with me, with that proposition or state of affairs as a focal point). The asserted content (*that cheesecake is tasty according to my standards*) reflects the *de se* character of what the audience comes to know and is the content that comes into view when the informing game is (or is made) the salient game – as when you ask yourself what you come to know when someone utters 'cheesecake is tasty', or what you can learn from what the other tells you without necessarily having aligned or having to align with her. But I also request you to publicly react – to position yourself with respect to the proposition *that cheesecake is tasty*. I cannot sensibly propose to you to seek alignment with respect to the proposition you rightly take me to be the content of what I let you know, because it is trivial that I am

⁶ From the cooperative point of view of informing others, truth *as such* cannot be what speakers aim at, since too many truths are irrelevant or inaccurate given the purposes of the conversation, a point stressed by Grice.

⁷ See also (Green, 1997) for the opposite phenomenon – that the communicative dimension of a judgment is not transparent to the audience ('What do you want from me?')

faultless with respect to how things are *with me*. That explains why a ‘No’ seems inappropriate *as a reply in the informing game*. In disputes over taste-issues, audiences typically don’t deny that you (the speaker) have an attitude or claim that you are mistaken about your own attitudes. The knowledge norm for assertion is typically satisfied when you are informing others about how things are with you in matters of taste. (‘How do you know?’ gets a trivial answer). But this doesn’t make the informing dimension superfluous or trivial. Even when the preferences of the interlocutors turn out to be non-co-satisfiable,⁸ there remains a potentially useful exchange of information. In case where an active, public disagreement interferes with an asymmetric social relation – as when non-congruence comes with loss of face – speakers can, by hedging their contributions, attenuate the alignment dimension, and audiences can avoid open conflicts by implicitly rejecting a proposal for alignment, or feigning ignorance of what was requested (see again Pinker et.al. 2008b and Thomas, 2014) for a game-theoretical account of plausible deniability and rational ignorance).

A recipient’s reply often reveals which dimension she thought was the most obvious to focus on, depending on what is common ground among speaker and recipient. When it is clear that an equilibrium must be found, as in scenarios for which *Battle of the Sexes* serves as a model, seeking, negotiating and finding alignment is the dominant function of the communicative act. When you signal that you accept to align with me, it becomes common knowledge among us that we are ‘in sync’ with respect to the salient propositional content. Replies like ‘Yes’ or ‘that’s true!’ or ‘okay’ are functional because they indicate alignment with a preference or the speaker’s take on an issue.⁹ Public disagreement is the result of a *rejection* of uptake: you refuse to align with a proposed preference, desire or value.

The relevance of a model involving sequential choices in coordination games (think again of *Battle of the Sexes*) should now be obvious: when two players have shared objectives, they better coordinate on which strategy to follow, and making public one’s personal preferences or value judgements helps predicting strategic choices. Hence, when speaking out on what to prefer, one seeks to align one’s choices (and thereby one’s preferences) with the other player, given the fact that in a coordination game more than one equilibrium is available. This explains one function of hedging – the verbal strategy which allows you to weaken commitment when you think the other won’t seek alignment. ‘I just wanted to let you know what I prefer’

⁸ A better concept than MacFarlane’s ‘co-tenable’ as it stresses the difference in terms of the consequences, not in terms of the having of different attitudes.

⁹ ‘To accept a claim is to do one’s part as a hearer in fulfilling the characteristic communicative function of that sort of claim. Accepting a pro-attitude just is to form a suitably related judgement that creates alignment.’

explicitly cancels the alignment dimension, and the audience can now publicly refuse to align without embarrassing the speaker. (Philosophers tend to neglect the strategic relevance of the way speakers put things here. When a speaker utters 'this is ugly' and not 'this is ugly according to my standards', this has less to do with a bottleneck phenomenon (as suggested by (Levinson, 2000), but more with consciously controlling the level of commitment behind her proposal to seek alignment (Pinker, 2007).¹⁰

Tomasello stresses the social function of successfully seeking alignment. When it becomes common knowledge that we feel/prefer the same about some common experience or issue, we are, or become, psychologically closer (Tomasello, 2008, p. 211), drawing on (Schachter, 1959). Proposals to align attitudes involve proposing the sharing of values which fosters bonds, but they can also create an inside/outside division. One way of expressing solidarity with others (which fosters collaboration in joint projects and social bonds) in a group is to behave like them, dress like them, talk like them, – in sum: to (sort of) become like them (Tomasello 2008, p. 208-209). The darker side of this phenomenon is that 'human groups discriminate against others that are not like them, and to go at great pains to devise ways for marking explicitly who is one of them and who is not. (...) humans also want to be liked by others, and one way of cultivating affiliation and liking is by sharing emotions and attitudes about the world in various kinds of gossip, narrative and expressive speech acts within the social group. (...) In both the case of 'wanting to "be like" others and to "be liked by" others, failures lead to negative emotions: shame or guilt.' (Tomasello, 2008, p. 210).¹¹

We will now use this material – coordination and coordination games, the social and practical function of alignment of attitudes and a pluralistic conception of what speakers aim at with their intended audience – to evaluate some aspects of the dispute between contextualism and assessment

¹⁰ Expressing an attitude is typically *costly* (you deliberately give up a bit of your autonomy and you gain credibility when you *express* what you feel). Presenting oneself to others has *having* a certain attitude, and implying that one has it, do not create the same level of commitment. *Implying* that one has it typically allows for *plausible deniability* (you retain your autonomy since you speak less committal, but you also appear less credible (Pinker 2010). The gain is avoidance of polarization and escalation. Informing/aligning games are played simultaneously, and speakers can cancel the alignment dimension, or weaken it, when alignment feared to be offensive, by stressing that they were just informing.

¹¹ When expressing (or showing) doubt to one's interlocutor, as in 'This ticket might lose' (as a reaction to someone who is already making real estate plans after having bought a lottery ticket), the assertion has the content that it is possible that this ticket loses, while the alignment game sees an attempt to match doubts. Shared doubt is key to coordinating epistemic sentiments, our feelings about how sure we are over an issue that concerns both of us. Common knowledge about confidence can preclude *post factum* resentment ('I thought you were sure that the ticket would win, and now, we lost everything').

relativism in matters of personal taste. Our purpose here is not a detailed critique of contextualism and assessment relativism as approaches to the semantics of taste predicates (see Egan, 2014), but to show that these competing models are grounded in intuitions about two different communicative dimensions of judgements of taste: their informing dimension and their alignment function. (If this is right, our critique has important methodological implications for the semantics of taste judgements, but they must be left outside the scope of this paper.)

4. Contextualism and assessment-relativism in the realm of taste

A contextualist account of the semantics of ‘*x* is tasty’ – what it contributes to the proposition expressed by sentences in which it occurs – holds, broadly speaking, that an utterance of (say) ‘that is tasty’ requires that the audience identifies, in order to be in a position to know what is tasty, a suitable standard derived from the context in which the utterance was made and intended by the speaker to be the relevant standard. Her utterance is *accurate* or *correct* from the speaker’s perspective, and one prominent reading of ‘this is tasty’ holds that it is the speaker’s *own* standards of taste that are relevant.¹² But this makes it puzzling why the intended audience can *reject* what she is being told. An assessment relativist holds that the context of assessment is variable: the context of utterance (the context the speaker draws upon) is not the default context of evaluation, and when the intended audience produces a denial (by replying ‘No’, for example), she relies on her own standards of taste, and is, by that act of denial, putting the original speaker in a position to know that she draws on her own standards.

Already at this very general level, one question immediately rises: what if both speaker and addressee prefer to *articulate* the relevant standards in their utterances (perhaps because etiquette, or their culture, or the local habits, requires it)?¹³ In that case, no *p/not-p* contradiction – no real disagreement – seems to emerge. ‘Cheesecake is tasty according to my standards’ (said by A, directed at B) does not contradict ‘Hmm, well, Cheesecake is not tasty according to my standards’ (said by B, as a reply to A). This suggests that the source of friction that emerges between A and B is not to be located at the level over what is being asserted. The communicative relevance – its ultimate aim – of the speech act performed by saying ‘Yes’

¹² The speaker can also intend to make another person’s standards, or the standards of a group, relevant. Contextualism covers this possibility. See (Marques & García-Carpintero, 2014).

¹³ A contextual parameter (a place, time, or standard) can be left unarticulated in an utterance (Perry, 1986). Semantic minimalists have other resources to explain this phenomenon, but that discussion goes beyond the aim of this paper.

c.q. 'No' is not the public assignment of a truth value (true/falsity) to a proposition that what taken to be asserted. For 'yes' or 'That's true' to be relevantly informative in the context of these exchanges it must convey something different from the trivial confirmation, by the intended audience, that the original speaker spoke correctly according to *her* standards (or standards relevant in her context) or that the audience merely re-asserts what the speaker asserted.

A second problem for assessment relativism is that it violates the requirement that epistemic norms for the speech act of assertion are typically *speaker-directed*.¹⁴ A speaker is never going to assert that *p* when she knows its truth is going to be evaluated against unknown standards (Greenough, 2011).¹⁵ If the norm for correctness were *true relative to the hypothetical perspective of an indeterminate assessor*, correctly asserting that *p* would depend on what others think, but correctness or rightness (and speaking correctly) is clearly an achievement of the speaker. Living up to a norm for assertion cannot depend on whether one's audience thinks the assertion is correct or true. The real insight behind assessment-relativism is that an assessor, whose preferences (and standards) are relevant for uptake, can *accept* a contribution in view of what *she* prefers (or comes to prefer, by considering what the speaker proposes) and thereby making it public that she aligns with the speaker with respect to the salient, articulated proposition *that cheesecake is tasty*.¹⁶ The communicative point of replies like 'That's true' / 'That's right' / 'That's correct' is not evaluation of a proposition as 'true from the replier's perspective'. If the proposition that cheesecake is tasty is the salient proposition, the only interpretation that makes the replier's reaction relevant is that of signaling that a preference can now be taken to be shared ground. Speaker and audience triangulate preference-wise on one single proposition which does not itself contain a reference to standards.

When the focus of the speaker is on *informing others* – *i.e.* helping others by letting them know what choices one is prepared to make without seeking alignment of attitudes – an explicit reference to personal standards, or standards of a community, is useful. One typically lets others know that according to your standards, *F* (a taste predicate) applies to *x*, or that (in exocentric use of predicates of personal taste) according to the standards of a community *C*, *x*'s are *F*, and this makes the enriched (and sometimes *de se*) proposition the focal point of attention. The asserted content specifies knowledge two speakers come to share. In asserting that, according to his standards, *x*

¹⁴ Practical norms for assertion need not be speaker-directed. Whether to assert that *p* can depend on what I think the audience ought to know.

¹⁵ The objection is further explored by (Marques, 2014). It is, as she put it, 'perfectly rational for reflective and sincere speakers not to accept the commitments with which assessor relativism saddles them'.

¹⁶ 'True from the assessor's perspective' is not a truth predicate at all (Harth, 2014).

is F, a speaker typically represents herself as knowing that she herself finds that x is F. That is what the other person comes to know, and this content fits the knowledge norm of assertion and many weaker variants thereof (Williamson, 1996). The reply ‘That’s true’ to an act of informing others sounds strange because the speaker cannot require from her intended audience that they confirm that she (the speaker) finds that x is F. ‘That’s true’ is, for the familiar Gricean reasons (‘be informative’) supposed to add new information to the conversational context, but it does so only in the context of the alignment game – the game in which it reveals uptake of a preference. You are, in saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, revealing your own preferential position *viz à viz* a proposition. Your point is not to confirm what I know anyway. When the focus is on the game of informing, ‘yes’ can only mean that you acknowledge that you now know what the speaker knew anyway – that common knowledge *about what the speaker prefers* has been arrived at.

John MacFarlane has suggested that it speaks for his version of assessment relativism that both parties in an exchange in which they disagree think of themselves not at changing the other’s attitudes, but as trying to *refute* them, since both attitudes cannot both be accurate (McFarlane 2014). I find this implausible. When I utter ‘cheesecake is tasty’, I let you know (or put you in a position to know) that, according to my standards, cheesecake is tasty. Why should you try to refute *that*? What I assert is objectively true in the sense that its truth is never going to depend on standards determined by you, or perhaps your own standards. But now shift your attention to the alignment game: what would *refuting* a preference consist in?¹⁷ Only if you have antecedently supposed that disputes in matters of taste should be settled at the level of belief makes refutation sense. Neither could it be right to hold that speaker and audience are negotiating a common or shared standard. Consider again, the KFC/McDonalds dispute: negotiations are about who is going to give way in order to respect a shared preference (having lunch together). One of the disputant’s preferences, while remaining in place, will not so much be refuted as being overruled by agreeing (by the person who thereby ‘gives in’) with the other’s proposed way of satisfying the shared project.

5. Presenting oneself as having a preference, vs. expressing a preference

Our approach suggests that speakers, when pronouncing judgements of taste, can highlight or accentuate various dimensions of their speech acts. Under which circumstances, or conditions, should one *articulate in so many*

¹⁷ Distinguish this from convincing someone that a preference is not fitting, or inappropriate.

words that one speaks on the basis of one's own standards? Following suggestions by Steven Pinker and colleagues, I suggest that the reasons depend on the level of public commitment we have towards our attitudes. There is a subtle shift in commitment between 'That's delicious' and 'I find this delicious'. In the latter case I present myself as having a preference, and you thereby acquire knowledge by testimony of what I prefer. I can plausibly deny that I sought alignment with you ('but I'm sure you won't like it') and you can rationally ignore the alignment dimension if you feel there was a covert attempt without offending me (see Malamud & Stephenson 2015, for a study of commitment modifiers). When I assert 'This is delicious according to their standards', any trace of seeking alignment disappears. In biology, a handicap is a signal that can only be faked with great difficulty as a result of being costly to produce. Green (2007) has pointed out that *expressing* an attitude, from an evolutionary point of view, creates a *handicap* (Zahavi, 1975). The expresser's gain is, intuitively, to convey something like 'Look how confident I must be of my attitude (sentiment, preference) viz à viz p that I express it (and not just describe that I am in a state of preferring p)'. A signal's being a handicap may appear incompatible with the signaler's being able to choose whether or not to produce that signal, but when signaling is brought under intentional control, signalers can make themselves subject to a loss of credibility when it turns out that aligning with the preference she expresses leads to a disappointing result. As Green puts it, 'a loss of credibility will reduce the weight of a speaker's future contributions, thereby hobbling her ability to serve as a conversational player' (Green 2007, p. 177). A bald value judgement is thus more credible as a creator of a bond, a way to join forces, to urge you that nothing will be lost if you follow my advice. An explicitly self-centered judgement, on the other hand, reduces commitment: 'I find cheesecake tasty, but you'll find it horrible!' is perfectly coherent and doesn't suggest that the alignment game is being played, although alignment can be sought here albeit in a polite, indirect way. How this is achieved in language is an important empirical issue to be explored in cultural pragmatics.

Conclusion

Letting others know how things are with respect to one's own attitudes towards an object or state of affairs and seeking alignment over an attitude towards an object or state of affairs make different propositions salient. The object of acceptance in the informing game that seems to give rise to a state of faultless disagreement is a speaker-centered content (and it is hard to reject the truth of that content, since the speaker is authoritative about her own preferences). The object with respect to which speakers seek to align preferences is a

subject-insensitive proposition. Alignment consists in adopting the same preference as the speaker's or forming a suitable complementary attitude.

The informing game adds common knowledge about each contributor's preferences to the context of the conversation. The alignment game reveals that, when the intended audience accepts what is being presented to her, that values or preferences are now in sync. The insight behind contextualist approaches to the semantics of personal taste is that the **informing game** requires a subject-centered reading of judgements of taste. But contextualism cannot explain the remaining sense of disagreement. Assessment relativists takes the role of an assessor and her standards seriously, but can't make sense of what an assessor who rejects a judgement of taste comes to know anyway. Making the unrelativized semantic content the direct object of evaluative attitudes – something both contextualists and assessment-relativists are reluctant to do – makes perfect sense, for it is the salient content over which disputants seek coordination.

There is a subtle difference between replying 'that's true' and 'that's right' or 'that's accurate' or 'correct', and just saying 'yes'. The former, on a minimal conception of truth, looks exclusively at the propositional content of the utterance. But when someone's attitude is said to be the the right one, or the correct one, the focus is also on X – X has the attitude toward p the other party aligns with. The truth of one's assertion is, as such, never an achievement of the speaker. Having the right **attitude** towards p is not determined by the truth of p , but rather by what someone else or a community or a social milieu, prefers, and you and I have the right attitude with respect to p if our preferences with respect to that proposition align.¹⁸

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¹⁸ An objectivist about preferences or values can then add that preferring x is the right attitude if x is intrinsically preferable.

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