

# Non-indexical vs. assessment relativism

Alexander Dinges

*Abstract:* It is commonly held that retraction data, if we accept them, show that assessment relativism is to be preferred over non-indexical relativism (a.k.a. non-indexical contextualism). I will argue that this is not the case. Whether retraction data have the suggested probative force depends on substantive questions about the proper treatment of tense and location. One's preferred account in these domains should determine which form of relativism one prefers.

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## 1. Introduction

It is commonly held that retraction data, if we accept them, show that assessment relativism is to be preferred over non-indexical relativism.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that this is not the case. Whether retraction data have the suggested probative force depends on substantive questions about the proper treatment of tense and location. One's preferred account in these domains should determine which form of relativism one prefers.

I will begin by briefly characterizing non-indexical and assessment relativism (§2). I will then present the standard argument for assessment relativism based on retraction data (§3). Finally, I will show that whether this argument works crucially depends on one's views on tense and location (§4).

## 2. Non-indexical and assessment relativism

Non-indexical and assessment relativism have been proposed as candidate semantics for a number of expressions including deontic and epistemic modals, predicates of personal taste, "knows" and more (cf. MacFarlane, 2014). The structural points I will make in this article apply equally in all domains. For concreteness, I will focus on predicates of personal taste, more specifically, the expression "tasty."

Non-indexical and assessment relativists agree that a proper semantics for "tasty" requires a notion of truth relative to a circumstance of evaluation that applies to propositions. A circumstance of evaluation, for them, is a tuple comprising at least a possible world,  $w$ , and (something like) a standard of taste,  $s$ . Let's use  $f$  as a name for the proposition we assert when we literally use "Fish sticks are tasty." Leaving aside other potential parameters of the circumstance of evaluation, relativists will say that

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<sup>1</sup> Two brief notes on terminology: First, non-indexical relativism is also commonly referred to as non-indexical contextualism. Kölbel is the main proponent of this view. He prefers the label "non-indexical relativism" (e.g. Kölbel, 2011: 124n). I am following his usage. I find this usage preferable because I think that non-indexical relativism/contextualism and assessment relativism have more in common than non-indexical relativism/contextualism and indexical contextualism. The reasons will become apparent below. Second, when I speak of assessment relativism, I'll have in mind what MacFarlane also calls truth-value relativism. Thus, I'll leave so-called content-relativism aside (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 72ff).

f is true relative to a circumstance of evaluation,  $\langle w, s \rangle$ , iff, at w, fish sticks are tasty by the lights of s.

*Non-indexical relativists* distinctively hold that we further need a notion of proposition truth that is relativized to a *context of use*. This notion can be defined as follows in terms of the suggested notion of truth relative to a circumstance of evaluation (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 89f; Ninan, 2016: 441f):

A proposition p is true at a context of use, C, iff p is true relative to  $\langle w(C), s(C) \rangle$ .

Here,  $w(C)$  is the world of C, and  $s(C)$  is the taste standard relevant in C. For simplicity, I will equate the taste standard relevant in C with the taste standard that the speaker of C has at the time of C. Nothing should depend on this simplification. We might get false results for so-called “exocentric uses” (Lasersohn, 2005), but such uses won’t feature in the present article.<sup>2</sup> Turning back to our proposition f, we thus get that

f is true at a context of use, C, iff, at the possible world of C, fish sticks are tasty by the lights of the taste the speaker of C has at the time of C.

*Assessment relativists* distinctively hold that we need a notion of proposition truth that is relativized to a context of use and a *context of assessment*.<sup>3</sup> This notion can be defined as follows in terms of the suggested notion of truth relative to a circumstance of evaluation (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 90; Ninan, 2016: 443f):

A proposition p is true as used at a context, C1, and assessed from a context, C2, iff p is true relative to  $\langle w(C1), s(C2) \rangle$ .

Here,  $w(C1)$  is the world of C1, and  $s(C2)$  is the taste standard relevant in C2. As before, I will equate this taste standard with the taste standard that the speaker in C2 has at the point in time of C2.<sup>4</sup> We now get that

f is true as used at a context, C1, and assessed from a context, C2, iff, at the possible world of C1, fish sticks are tasty by the lights of the taste the speaker in C2 has at the time of C2.

How do we determine which of the theories described is correct? Retraction data supposedly show that assessment relativism has the upper hand (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 108; Kölbel, 2015; Ninan, 2016: 445).

### 3. Retraction data for assessment relativism!

There are presumably various ways to understand the idea of retraction. Retraction data critical for the indicated dispute will be data of the following kind: Suppose I liked fish sticks at some point and correspondingly said, “Fish sticks are tasty.” Some time later, I come to dislike fish sticks. Someone reminds me, “Didn’t you say that fish-stick were tasty?” In this

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<sup>2</sup> MacFarlane’s own definition of truth at a context is slightly more complicated than mine because he wants to avoid talk of *the* world of a context of use (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 77). We can ignore this issue here though. Everything I say could easily be rephrased in terms of MacFarlane’s more complicated definition.

<sup>3</sup> See MacFarlane, 2014: 89n for helpful discussion on how one may accept this double-relativization without making it “notationally salient.”

<sup>4</sup> The considerations from footnote 2 apply too.

context, the following response sounds problematic (at least assuming that fish sticks haven't changed their taste),

“I stand by that, but fish-stick aren't tasty (anymore).”

A much better response would seem to be,

“I take that back. Fish sticks aren't tasty” (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 13f).

Some authors reject the intuitions here (cf. Raffman, 2016). Some recent studies confirm them (cf. Knobe and Yalcin, 2014: Experiment 4 for epistemic modals and Dinges and Zakkou, ms: Experiment 3 for predicates of personal taste). In the end, retraction data will have to be assessed on a case by case basis for each domain in which one might want to employ relativism. This is not the task of the present article. I will take retraction data for granted. The question I want to address is whether, if real, they can be used to decide between non-indexical and assessment relativism.

It may seem that they can. The assessment relativist can posit the following retraction norm to explain the data (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 108):

(ARRN) One should retract, in a context, C2, one's assertion that p made in a context, C1, if p isn't true as used at C1 and assessed from C2.

Let's refer to the context where I originally said “Fish sticks are tasty” as U and to the later context where I assess this claim as A. And let's continue to use f as a name for the proposition I assert by means of my utterance in U of “Fish sticks are tasty.” Given the previous characterization of assessment relativism, f will be true as used at U and assessed from A iff fish sticks are tasty according to the taste standard I have at the time of A (at the possible world of U—I'll take the possible world parameter to be tacitly understood in what follows). So since I don't like fish sticks anymore at the time of A, f will come out untrue as used in U and assessed from A. Given (ARRN), this means that my assertion in U should be retracted in A. Thus, it will be problematic to say “I stand by that” and much better to say “I take that back.” The former assertion violates a norm that the latter observes.

Non-indexical relativists cannot adopt (ARRN), for in their framework there is no notion of truth that is relativized to contexts of use *and* contexts of assessment. So if there is no other plausible norm they can adopt, retraction data yield a strong case for assessment relativism.

Note here that it is essential in the suggested argument that we focus on responses like “I stand by that/I take that back” rather than e.g. “what I said is true/false” or “my assertion is correct/incorrect.” For non-indexical and assessment relativism make exactly the same predictions about the latter responses. Via the disquotational nature of (monadic) truth (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 93), they both predict that what is said must be judged as false in the above scenario; via so-called “reflexive” norms of assertion (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 103f), they both predict that the assertion must nevertheless be assessed as correct.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There is a worry that truth-value and correctness judgements shouldn't come apart in this way. See Dinges, 2017 for a possible response. There is a further worry that the indicated predictions about truth-value judgements aren't borne out by the data. See Dinges and Zakkou, ms for how a relativist might respond.

#### 4. Retraction data for assessment relativism?

I will evaluate the presented argument for assessment relativism in the remainder of this article. To begin with, let me present what I take to be the most promising retraction norm for non-indexical relativists. We'll assess below whether it can ultimately be upheld.

(NIRRN) One should retract, in a context,  $C_2$ , one's assertion that  $p$  made in a context,  $C_1$ , if  $p$  isn't true at  $C_2$ .

(NIRRN) straightforwardly predicts the indicated retraction data: According to our definition of non-indexical relativism,  $f$  is true at  $A$  iff fish sticks are tasty according to the taste standard I have at the time of  $A$ . This condition doesn't hold in the envisaged cases. Hence,  $f$  isn't true at  $A$ , and my original assertion in  $U$  has to be retracted in  $A$  given (NIRRN).

In what follows, I will argue that, promising as it looks, (NIRRN) is untenable if we accept certain views about tense and location, namely, what I will call temporalism and locoralism. I will then go on to show that (NIRRN) is impeccable if we don't accept these views. We will thus arrive at our main conclusion, that one's views on tense and location determine which form of relativism one should adopt.

##### 4.1. Temporalism and locoralism against (NIRRN)

Consider the sentence "It is raining," and let's use  $r$  as a name for the proposition we assert when we literally use this sentence. Let's now define *temporalism* as a view that entails the following: A circumstance of evaluation comprises a time,  $t$ , in addition to the already established components,  $w$  and  $s$ , such that

$r$  is true relative to  $\langle w, s, t \rangle$  iff, at  $w$ , it is raining at  $t$ .

In maybe more familiar terms, temporalism says that  $r$  is a temporally neutral proposition, one that changes its truth-value depending on the time of evaluation (cf. Richard, 1981: 1). If we adopt temporalism, so understood, the non-indexical relativist will have to adapt her notion of truth relative to a context of use (which assumed that circumstances of evaluation just comprise a world and a taste standard). In particular, we will now get the following principle:

A proposition  $p$  is true at a context of use,  $C$ , iff  $p$  is true relative to  $\langle w(C), s(C), t(C) \rangle$ .

Here,  $t(C)$  is the time of  $C$ , and everything else is as before. Applying this principle to our proposition  $r$ , we get that

$r$  is true at a context of use,  $C$ , iff, at the possible world of  $C$ , it is raining at the time of  $C$ .

Assume temporalism so understood. Assume further that it is raining at a given point in time and that I concurrently assert, "It is raining." It stops raining, and someone reminds me that I said it was raining. Unlike in the case of "tasty," it would be odd to respond,

"I take that back. It isn't raining."

The appropriate response rather seems to be,

"I stand by that. But it isn't raining (anymore)."

According to (NIRRN), however, it should be the other way around: Let's use  $A^*$  to refer to the context where it has stopped raining and  $U^*$  to refer to the context of my original assertion. Let's further continue to use  $r$  for the proposition I assert by my use of "It is raining."  $r$  will fail to be true at  $A^*$  because it isn't raining at the time of  $A^*$ . Given (NIRRN), this means that, in  $A^*$ , I will have to retract my assertion in  $U^*$  of  $r$ .

A similar problem doesn't arise for the assessment relativist. Even granting temporalism, the assessment relativist can adopt the following definition of truth relative to a context of use and assessment:

A proposition  $p$  is true as used at a context,  $C1$ , and assessed from a context,  $C2$ , iff  $p$  is true relative to  $\langle w(C1), s(C2), t(C1) \rangle$ .

In other words, assessment relativists can assume that, while the taste standard is initialized by the context of assessment, world and time are set by the context of use. We thus get that

$r$  is true as used at a context,  $C1$ , and assessed from a context,  $C2$ , iff, at the possible world of  $C1$ , it is raining at the time of  $C1$ .

Given that,  $r$  will be true as used at  $U^*$  and assessed from  $A^*$  iff it is raining at the time of  $U^*$ . This condition is satisfied, so even given (ARRN), no retraction is required when I find myself in  $A^*$ .

Similar points can be made with respect to location. Let's say that *locoralism* is the view that adds a location to the circumstance of evaluation in the same way in which temporalists add a point in time (cf. Kaplan, 1989: 504). Given locoralism, (NIRRN) will make the problematic prediction that we may have to retract assertions of  $r$  just because we have moved to a different location. As before, the assessment relativist can avoid this commitment as long as she assumes that locations are provided by the context of use rather than the context of assessment.<sup>6</sup>

(NIRRN) is untenable if we accept temporalism or locoralism as defined. A non-indexical relativist who subscribes to either of these positions will thus have to abandon (NIRRN) in favor of some other plausible principle that predicts retraction data in the domain of taste but not tense and location. It is far from obvious what this principle would be and, in any case, no such principle has been provided in the literature.<sup>7</sup> So if we accept temporalism or locoralism, we have a strong case for assessment relativism.

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<sup>6</sup> One might think that a further problem arises for (NIRRN) if we assume that e.g. "My pants are on fire" can be used to assert a *de se* proposition that varies in truth-value with the speaker (cf. Lewis, 1979). This is not the case, however. (ARRN) and (NIRRN) impose retraction requirements only on one's own assertions. Thus, the speaker cannot relevantly vary. There will be an additional problem for (NIRRN), though, if, for instance, we think that the proposition asserted with e.g. "Your pants are on fire" varies in truth value with the addressee. This position should be added to the list of positions that make trouble for non-indexical relativism to the extent that it is deemed defensible.

<sup>7</sup> Some contextualists have provided candidate accounts of retraction data that are, in principle, compatible with non-indexical relativism (e.g. López de Sa, 2008; Plunkett and Sundell, 2013). But these accounts are designed to undermine the motivation for any form of relativism. So it would be self-defeating for the non-indexical relativist to take them on board. Note also that it won't do to assume domain specific norms of retraction e.g. one for tensed propositions tied to the original utterance

#### 4.2. (NIRRN) without temporalism or locoralism

What if we reject temporalism and locoralism? I contend that (NIRRN) is unproblematic under these conditions. To support this contention, let me disarm possible worries with (NIRRN) that arise independently of temporalism and locoralism.

First, one might worry that (NIRRN) is incompatible with non-indexical relativism because it already entails assessment relativism. This is not the case, for (NIRRN) can be formulated with a notion of truth that is relativized only to contexts of use. And on my definitions—following MacFarlane (2014: 60)—we cross the “philosophically interesting line” to assessment relativism only if “we relativize truth not just to a context of use and an index, but also to a *context of assessment*.”

One might object that this line has been crossed because, in (NIRRN), we evaluate the truth of  $p$  relative to  $C2$ , and  $C2$  is a context of assessment. Note first though that  $C2$  is also a context of use. MacFarlane (2014: 60) describes a context of use as “a possible situation in which a sentence might be used” and a context of assessment as “a possible situation in which a use of a sentence might be *assessed*.” Given that the assessment of a sentence plausibly involves the use of another sentence, *every* context of assessment is also a context of use. In any case, it would be entirely unproblematic to just restrict the range of  $C1$  and  $C2$  in (NIRRN) to contexts of use in the sense defined.

At best, then, (NIRRN) requires the relativization of truth to contexts of use that also happen to be contexts of assessment. This cannot suffice for assessment relativism though. After all, almost all contexts of use will also be contexts of assessment: when I can use a sentence, I can normally also use a sentence to assess a previous use of a sentence. Thus, on every theory that relativizes truth to contexts of use, truth will sometimes be relativized to contexts of use that are also contexts of assessment.<sup>8</sup>

Second, one might worry that (NIRRN) implausibly requires us to retract assertions made in relevantly different possible worlds. Assume that I assert that the earth is flat in a possible world,  $w$ , where the earth is flat. This proposition isn’t true at my actual context, where the earth isn’t flat. Thus, it has to be retracted by (NIRRN); which is implausible. Note, however, that (ARRN) already has this consequence. Just assume that I assert that the earth is flat in a possible world,  $w^*$ , where the earth isn’t flat. This proposition isn’t true as used in the original context and assessed from the actual context. After all, the earth isn’t flat in  $w^*$ . By (ARRN), the assertion has to be retracted. We can easily avoid these problems if we stipulate that  $C1$  and  $C2$  in (NIRRN) and (ARRN) must belong to the same possible world.

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context and one for taste propositions tied to the context of assessment. After all, taste propositions can themselves be tensed. We would thus get contradictory requirements on whether to retract.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, there may be other ways of drawing the boundary between non-indexical and assessment relativism. Kölbel (2015), for instance, suggests that “the important dividing line is the one beyond which the normative status (i.e. as permissible or obligatory) of the use of a sentence is not absolute but depends on the situation in which its status is assessed.” One who accepts (NIRRN) would come out as an assessment relativist on this definition if we take requirements to retract as part of the “normative status” of an assertion. I think it is interesting in its own right to observe that Kölbel’s and MacFarlane’s definitions aren’t on a par. In fact, one way of reading the above considerations is as showing that Kölbel’s definition captures the spirit of assessment relativism better than MacFarlane’s own definition does. But this is not to say that MacFarlane fails to carve out an interesting position. It simply turns out that whether one should adopt this position depends less directly on retraction data than is standardly assumed; it also depends on issues regarding tense and location.

Third, one might worry that (NIRRN) fails to make sense of retraction. Leaving aside social, pragmatic or moral shortcomings, non-indexical relativists will say that an assertion that *p* is correct iff *p* is true at the context of the assertion (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 101). (NIRRN) will thus entail that we sometimes have to retract correct assertions; namely, when our taste standard has relevantly shifted so that the asserted proposition is no longer true at our present context. This can seem puzzling. After all, isn't it just obvious that one shouldn't retract correct assertions?

To respond, note once more that the very same problem arises with respect to (ARRN). For the assessment relativist, an assertion that *p* will be correct—modulo social, pragmatic or moral shortcomings—iff *p* is true as used and assessed from the context of the assertion (cf. MacFarlane, 2014: 103f). As before in the case of (NIRRN), the satisfaction of this condition doesn't rule out a requirement to retract in a later context. So once more, we arrive at the conclusion that correct assertions have to be retracted sometimes.

Maybe this means that we have to abandon both (NIRRN) and (ARRN) and that neither non-indexical nor assessment relativism can properly accommodate retraction data. Strictly speaking, this would be unproblematic as far as the present article is concerned. My goal here is to elucidate how we can decide between non-indexical and assessment relativism *if* we want to subscribe to relativism of one variety or another. I don't want to argue that we should, or plausibly can, subscribe to such a view at all. Still, some remarks might be in order to show that relativism is not a hopeless position.

The force of the indicated worry with relativism will depend on just how obvious it is that we shouldn't retract correct assertions. To me at least, this principle doesn't seem obvious at all when we look at domains where relativism has been applied. In fact, these domains seem partially defined by the observation that assertions can seem correct even though there is an intuitive pull towards retraction after a relevant shift in the respective parameter (e.g. a shift in taste). That's part of what makes these domains so puzzling. And that's what relativism is supposed to capture by way of principles like (NIRRN) and (ARRN).

One might want to rephrase the worry in light of this response. Ninan (2016: 445), for instance, wonders, "why is it [...] that one should retract an assertion that one was permitted to make in the first place?" He suggests that "[o]ften one retracts a past assertion so as not to continue to risk misleading the audience one was addressing at the time of the assertion." Then he goes on to argue that relativists cannot plausibly employ this idea. But they can.

Assume that, following non-indexical relativism, retraction is governed by (NIRRN). Suppose now that I assert "Fish sticks are tasty." My hearers will presumably infer that fish sticks are tasty by my present taste standard. For otherwise I shouldn't have made the assertion. Now suppose that even when the issue arises, I don't retract the statement at a later occasion. Given (NIRRN), my hearers will infer that fish sticks must still be tasty relative to my now present taste standard. For otherwise I would have been required to retract by (NIRRN) and presumably would have done so. Suppose that, as a matter of fact, my taste standard has relevantly changed. Clearly then, my audience will be misled. So, *pace* Ninan, I should retract in order not to risk misleading my audience about my present taste standard. A completely analogous story could of course be told in terms of (ARRN).

One might think that this just pushes back the question. Why is it that retraction is governed by (NIRRN) or (ARRN) respectively? But here we might have reached rock bottom at least

as far as philosophy is concerned. It might be that we can offer a deeper explanation of why these norms hold in terms of e.g. the nature of retraction (cf. e.g. MacFarlane, 2011: 89 for how one might derive norms of assertion from the idea that assertion is a proposal to update the common ground). It might also be thought that the norms already constitute the nature of retraction so that no deeper explanation is to be had (cf. MacFarlane, 2011: 87f for discussion of such a view). In any case, this issue goes beyond the scope of this article.

Note here that (NIRRN) and (ARRN) seem pretty economical. One needs to assert only once that e.g. fish sticks are tasty. From then on, people can assume that one likes them even if one doesn't constantly reassert what one asserted already. This economy comes at the cost that one will have to retract the assertion once one's taste standard shifts. But this seems easily bearable given that such shifts are rare. In a sense then, it seems quite reasonable to have a language with a relativistic design.

In sum, (NIRRN) seems unproblematic if we reject temporalism and locoralism. So if we reject these views, retraction data will be unproblematic for the non-indexical relativist. In the absence of other reasons to prefer assessment over non-indexical relativism, we should stick with the latter view simply because it's simpler.

## **5. Conclusion**

We have seen that whether we accept temporalism or locoralism should determine whether we accept non-indexical or assessment relativism. If we reject temporalism and locoralism, we should stick with non-indexical relativism. For (NIRRN) makes perfect sense of retraction data and there is thus no need to adopt the more complicated assessment relativist framework. If we accept temporalism or locoralism, then we should go for assessment relativism. For (NIRRN) becomes untenable and there is no obvious alternative retraction norm a non-indexical relativist could adopt.

Should we accept temporalism or locoralism? I won't take a stand on this here, just let me note one thing. Rejecting temporalism and locoralism as defined doesn't amount to rejecting temporally and locationally neutral propositions across the board. We just have to deny that these propositions feature as the objects of assertion. This leaves open the possibility that they play an important role e.g. as inputs to a compositional semantics.

What should we do if we are undecided whether temporalism or locoralism holds? There's a methodological choice to be made. Either we go for assessment relativism in order to be safe. Assessment relativism properly accounts for retraction data even if temporalism and locoralism turn out to be true. Or we go for non-indexical relativism because we don't want to complicate our theory unless we are forced to. We can have it either safe or simple. I tend to side with the latter approach, but both strategies seem acceptable.



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