

The truth about assertion and retraction: A review of the empirical literature

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Abstract: This chapter reviews empirical research on the rules governing assertion and retraction, with a focus on the normative role of truth. It examines whether truth is required for an assertion to be considered permissible, and whether there is an expectation that speakers retract statements that turn out to be false. Contrary to factive norms (such as the influential “knowledge norm”), empirical data suggests that there is no expectation that speakers only make true assertions. Additionally, contrary to truth-relativist accounts, there is no requirement for speakers to retract statements that are false at the context of assessment. We conclude by suggesting that truth still plays a crucial role in the evaluation of assertions: as a standard for evaluating their success, rather than permissibility.

1. The norm of assertion hypothesis

Assertion, like other speech acts, is governed by “felicity conditions” that determine under which circumstances a speaker can permissibly assert. For example, people tend to agree that asserting what you don’t believe (i.e. lying) is *prima facie* impermissible. Arguably, refraining from lying is not all that the norms of assertion require. This point has been made eloquently by Augustine many centuries ago:

Now whoever utters that which he holds in his mind either as belief or as opinion, even though it be false, he lies not. For this he owes to the faith of his utterance, that he thereby produce that which he holds in his mind, and has in that way in which he produces it. Not that he is without fault, although he lie not, if either he believes what he ought not to believe, or

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thinks he knows what he knows not, even though it should be true: for he accounts an unknown thing for a known. (Augustine, *De Mendacio*, III.3)

Augustine here is considering some ways in which a speaker who is not lying can still be epistemically at fault in making a claim – namely, by expressing (i) mistaken beliefs, (ii) unreasonable beliefs, and (iii) accidentally false beliefs. Although neither of (i-iii) is a lie, it would seem all three are sub-optimal assertions – “not without fault”, as Augustine puts it.

Various authors working in the speech-act theoretic tradition have since suggested that the epistemic standard for appropriate assertion is higher than belief. Grice’s (1989) Maxims of Quality state that speakers should have “adequate evidence” in support of what they say. Searle’s (1969) analysis of the “regulative rules” governing assertion echoes Grice’s remarks, similarly requiring evidence on top of belief. A more demanding standard is defended by Alston (2000), who argues that reasonable belief is not enough for felicitous assertion: only true assertions are genuinely permissible. An even more demanding standard has been defended in recent years by Williamson (1996; 2000), who argues that we are entitled to assert a proposition only if we know it to be true.

In this chapter, we explore how assertion relates to truth, both when we *make* assertions and when we *take them back*. First, there is the question of whether the norm for making assertions is factive (so that only true assertions are permissible) or non-factive (permissible assertion does not require truth). The second question concerns the related phenomenon of retraction. Some authors have suggested that when an assertion turns out to be false, the speaker is expected or required to retract their claim. We will thus also explore potential norms of retraction and their relation with truth and falsity.

This paper focuses on the empirical evidence bearing on these two philosophical issues. Section 2 reviews findings that have been reported concerning the norm of assertion, engaging in detail with a previous review of the literature by John Turri. Section 3 explores norms of retraction. Both surveys suggest that assertion is not as strongly tied to truth as some philosophers assume: truth is not required for a permissible assertion, nor does falsity demand retraction. We conclude by resisting the hasty conclusion that assertion has no relation to truth. Truth, we suggest, is best understood as a standard of evaluation for successful assertions, rather than a rule for their permissible performance.

2. Empirical evidence about the norm of assertion

Scholars disagree about which norm governs assertion. Their proposals can be grouped depending on whether or not they require truth for assertability:

FACTIVE RULES

- (KR) KNOWLEDGE RULE: “Assert p only if you know that p”²
- (TR) TRUTH RULE: “Assert p only if p is true”³

NON-FACTIVE RULES

- (JR) JUSTIFICATION RULE: “Assert p only if you rationally believe that p”⁴
- (BR) BELIEF RULE: “Assert p only if you believe that p”^{5,6}

Is the norm of assertion factive or non-factive? There is growing agreement that this is ultimately an empirical matter: the question to be solved is which norm *actually* governs assertion in natural language (Pagin 2016, 22; Douven 2006, 450; Turri 2013; Kneer 2018). A good account “must face the linguistic data” (Douven 2006, 450), meaning that it should make predictions that are generally consistent with the linguistic behaviour of competent speakers.

By this criterion, which theory fares best? In his *Philosophy Compass* review of the literature, Turri (2017) states:

[C]onvergent evidence from animal communication studies, developmental findings on human children, observations of patterns in everyday discourse, and experiments with human adults all strongly

² Williamson 1996; DeRose 2002; Hawthorne 2004; Reynolds 2002; Engel 2008

³ Alston 2000; Weiner 2005; Whiting 2012; MacFarlane 2014

⁴ Alternatively, “assert p only if it is rational for you to believe that p”. As we note in footnote 5, defenders of this view (Douven 2006; Lackey 2007; Kvanvig 2009; McKinnon 2012; 2013; Gerken 2012; 2017; cf. Searle 1969, Grice 1989) have quite different views concerning what JR requires.

⁵ Oppy 2007; Bach 2008.

⁶ This overview is inevitably not exhaustive, and contains important approximations. We grouped together views that differ in important ways (such as justification rules, which are often articulated in different ways, depending on whether justification is understood to be context-sensitive, internalist or externalist, graded or not, etc.). The simple schema proposed does not make room for prominent alternative views, such as the *knowledge-provision rule*, as defended by García-Carpintero (2004) and Pelling (2013), the *certainty rule*, as defended by Stanley (2008), Petersen (2018), and Vollet (2022a), or the context-sensitive proposal defended by Goldberg (2015). Furthermore, various authors are critical of the very idea that assertion is subject to a distinctive “constitutive” rule (Cappelen 2011; Pagin 2016; Marsili 2019). For a more detailed review of the literature, see Pagin and Marsili 2021.

support the conclusion that knowledge is a central norm of the social practice of assertion. (Turri 2017: 3)

As we are about to see, however, matters are more complicated. In this section, we shall have a closer look at the available evidence. Our exploration will reveal that extant empirical findings in biology, developmental psychology and experimental philosophy and linguistics do not lend much support to the idea that a factive rule like knowledge governs human communication.

Our discussion will be structured around Turri's interesting previous review of the state of the art. Turri's main contention is that (i) animal communication studies, (ii) developmental findings on human children, (iii) observations of patterns in everyday discourse, and (iv) experiments with human adults all offer convergent evidence for KR (or something in the vicinity of KR). Since we are concerned with *quantitative empirical* evidence for norms of assertion, we shall ignore (iii) here,⁷ and assess the other three claims, starting from (i).

2.1 Animal signalling

How do studies on animal communication bear on the human norms of assertion? Violating a norm of assertion comes with associated costs in human communication (losing face, compromising one's reputation or social standing, becoming liable to criticism, and so forth). Researchers have found that also in some animal signalling systems producing unreliable signals has costly consequences.

Consider a well-established⁸ example: "status badges" on male passerines (*Passer Domesticus*, *Zonotrichia querula*) and female paper wasps (*Polistes dominulus*) (Rohwer 1977; Møller 1987a; Tibbetts and Dale 2004; Tibbetts and Izzo 2010; Injaian and Tibbetts 2015; Webster, Ligon, and Leighton 2018). Both species live in hierarchical societies, where status badges signal social dominance, and ability to win fights. Badges allow sparrows and wasps to resolve conflicts without engaging

⁷ Concerning (iii), Turri has in mind theoretical work on the intuitive acceptability of conversational challenges like "How do you know that?" or "Is that true?" (together with intuitions about the appropriateness of some parentheticals) which are taken to offer indirect evidence for KR. While we won't directly tackle this literature here, it's worth mentioning that in this regard, too, the case for KR is weaker than it might at first appear. There is strong disagreement between scholars concerning which view best accommodates conversational patterns. While some identified conversational patterns that allegedly support factive norms (Unger 1975; Williamson 1996; Turri 2010; Benton 2011; Kelp and Simion 2021), others suggested that these patterns equally support other norms, or identified other patterns that support rival views (Stanley 2008; Douven 2006, 468; Kvanvig 2009; McKinnon 2012; 2015; Stojanovic 2014; Mandelkern and Dorst 2022; Caponetto and Marsili forth.; see also McGlynn 2014 and Pagin & Marsili 2021 for a review).

⁸ Although note that consensus here is not universal either (cf. Cervo et al. 2008).

in potentially harmful fights (Krebs and Dawkins 1984; Smith et al. 2003). But what stops dishonest badges from evolving, to the advantage of cheaters? In these species, it has been observed that if a conspecific determines that a badge is misleading, some form of punishment (such as harassment or fighting) will occur. This mechanism of social policing is said to prevent deceptive badges from evolving (Møller 1987b; Tibbetts and Dale 2004; Tibbetts and Izzo 2010)⁹.

These “deterrence mechanisms” (socially inflicted costs that make deception an unpalatable strategy) can manifest themselves in various forms beyond overt aggression. Reputation management, for instance, has been reported to serve a similar function. Ground squirrels (*Spermophilus richardsonii*; Hare & Atkins, 2001), yellow-bellied marmots (*Marmota flaviventris*; Blumstein, Verneyre & Daniel, 2004), Western Australian magpies (*Cracticus tibicen dorsalis*; Silvestri, Morgan & Ridley, 2019), and vervet monkeys (*Cercopithecus aethiops*; Cheney & Seyfarth, 1988) have all been documented to selectively disregard signallers who frequently send unreliable signals. Like with aggressive policing, this mechanism imposes social costs on dishonest signallers, in terms of reduced influence over conspecific behaviour. The prospect of incurring such costs, in turn, provides an incentive for signallers to convey reliable information.

Turri (2017, 2) suggests that the same evolutionary pressures that led animals to develop social mechanisms for keeping their signalling systems reliable might have led humans to develop a similar “socially policed information constraint”, namely the norm of assertion. While this proposal is certainly reasonable,¹⁰ it does not quite establish Turri’s conclusion that there is “convergent evidence from animal communication” in favour of KR.

To establish this conclusion, one must implicitly presume that since wasps, sparrows and other species have been observed policing *false* signals, we can infer that an equally factive norm regulates assertion in humans – specifically, the knowledge rule. It should be clear why this inference is unwarranted. But we find it important to clarify explicitly why.

To draw these conclusions from animal studies, we would have to assume that the epistemic norms that govern animal communication are the same as (or at least closely related to) the epistemic norms that govern human communication – so

⁹ In his review, Turri also cites a study by Thompson and Moore (1991), stating that they found evidence that false status badges in lizards are similarly punished with aggressive behaviour. However, Thompson and Moore state that they did not test this hypothesis (1991, 751), and defend a different theory for why “cheaters” are rare in the population (1991, 750). That said, mechanisms of social policing of dishonest signals have been observed in reptiles, specifically in chameleons (*Chamaeleo calyptratus*) by Ligon & McGraw (2018).

¹⁰ It should be mentioned that there are both precursors and available alternatives. Green (2009; 2023) proposes a model that employs the notion of assertoric commitment to explain social policing in human communication; Graham (2020) offers an alternative, like-minded proposal.

that if we observe punitive behaviour in animals whenever a certain epistemic standard is violated, this indirectly support the hypothesis that the same epistemic standard governs human communication.

This assumption is contentious, but let us grant it for a second. Even once we accept it, the studies reviewed so far can at most support the truth-rule, not the knowledge-rule. Most of the species mentioned so far have been observed to police only *false* signals.¹¹ But the knowledge-rule predicts more sophisticated patterns: punitive behaviour should be observed for signals that are dishonest but true, and (quite implausibly) for Gettiered signals.¹² Presumably, none of the species mentioned so far has evolved such a sophisticated method for social policing – and we currently lack evidence that they did. Evidence supporting KR over TR in animal communication, then, is yet to be found.

At any rate, even if we found it, we would still not be licensed to conclude that human communication is governed by the same epistemic standard. For one, the social conventions of humans and other animals (including primates) differ dramatically in a large variety of domains. From sexual behaviour to eating habits, from distribution of resources to conflict resolution, the list of examples where human norms differ from those regulating animal behaviour is sizable. Crucially, this is especially evident in the domain of communication: syntactic rules, semantic conventions and pragmatic rules in animal communication are known to be much simpler and structurally different from human communication.

Additionally, humans are endowed with higher capacities for language and metarepresentation. Wasps certainly lack the cognitive sophistication to discriminate between false signals (violations of TR), believed-false signals (violations of BR), and sincere signals that are not supported by adequate evidence (violations of JR). More cognitively sophisticated animals (like corvids or non-human primates) are also presumably unable to draw these fine-grained distinctions. Humans, by contrast, can discriminate between the violations of these standards with relative ease. Given these evident cognitive differences, non-factive

¹¹ To be sure, it's not even clear whether all the species we reviewed can identify false signals. If conspecifics are aggressive towards all individuals that signal high status (without detecting "norm violations"), honesty will still arise, as long as low-quality individuals suffer higher fitness costs than high-quality individuals. This alternative hypothesis can explain how honesty is socially maintained in at least some species that engage in aggressive social policing (Tibbetts 2014). Where this hypothesis holds, it clearly invalidates any inference supporting factive rules, since false and true signals are punished equally.

¹² Signals that are accurate and believed to be so for good reasons, but that are not *known* to be accurate by the speaker (cf. Kneer 2018). Gettiered signals are not an impossibility in animal communication: for example, a squirrel might send an alarm call thinking that they detected the movement of a predator, where the movement was actually caused by the wind, but a predator is present.

standards might easily have evolved in humans and not in other animals. We are not entitled, then, to freely draw inferences from one domain to another.

2.2 Developmental psychology

Contrary to Turri's assessment of the evidence, we saw the social policing of signals observed in animals does not corroborate the hypothesis that KR governs human communication. The claim that there is "convergent evidence from animal communication studies" supporting the knowledge norm is therefore not supported by current findings.

Do "developmental findings on human children" support factive norms of assertion instead? A quick look at the available evidence also invites a negative response. In support of factive norms, Turri mentions studies showing that pre-schoolers' (3-4 years old) are able to selectively trust communicators who provide reliable information. But these studies cannot be taken to support KR, for reasons similar to the ones adduced in relation to animal communication. The first issue is that none of the studies tested whether children were monitoring truth as opposed to knowledge, or justified belief, or belief. So the data does not support the knowledge rule over alternative views.¹³

Even hypothesising (counterfactually) that we had evidence indicating that children enforce factive norms of assertion, we would still not be entitled to draw inferences about adults. One obstacle preventing this inference is, once again, cognitive sophistication. Researchers tend to agree that children below 3 lack a Theory of Mind, or at most possess a limited model to work with.¹⁴ Additionally, even when they develop this ability, older children conflate *correct guesses* with *knowledge* (Perner 1991), have a limited mastery of the concept of "knowledge"

¹³ Turri notes that in one study children often explained why they did not trust a speaker by referring to a speaker's lack of *knowledge* (Koenig and Harris 2005, 1266ff). But in this same study children also referred to the speaker's lack of sincerity of the speaker ("because she's sneaky"), to their factual incorrectness ("because she said wrong things"), and their unreliability ("she didn't listen"), meaning that violations of other norms could equally explain their responses. Additionally, most of the answers that mentioned speaker knowledge (like "She didn't know the things") are equally compatible with every alternative account (since knowledge entails justified true belief, lacking any of these three properties is compatible with denial of knowledge). At any rate, Koenig & Harris did not design the study to test for these distinctions. See Gerken (2017, 163-5) for some additional warnings against interpreting ordinary language expressions as crude knowledge ascriptions.

¹⁴ For a recent review (including a discussion of the ongoing debate on how to interpret the contradictory findings about implicit measures of Theory of Mind), see Rakoczy (2022). These cognitive limitations are discussed in some of the studies cited by Turri. Koenig & Harris (2005), for instance, note that current evidence suggests that 3-year-olds lack the cognitive capability to ascribe false beliefs.

(Perner 1993, Sobel 2021), and make systematic mistakes in some tasks involving knowledge ascription (Ruffman 1996)¹⁵. They would therefore be unable (or at best struggle) to draw the fine-grained distinctions between mental states required to aptly enforce the norm. Hence, even if we detected a preference for punishing a subset of violations, we could not assume that these children already have developed a full command of the “adult” norm of assertion: the way in which they police assertions might simply reflect that they are still developing the cognitive skillset needed to appropriately enforce the norm.

Relatedly, research shows that children do not follow the same pragmatic norms as adults. This is true in a variety of communicative contexts: for instance, in relation to what constitutes a violation of Gricean Maxims (Angeleri et al. 2007) or appropriate use of a scalar implicatures (Noveck 2001). Even if children followed factive norms of assertion, then, this would not allow us to infer that adults, too, follow such norms.

Summing up, the claim that there is “converging evidence” from “developmental findings on human children” supporting KR is overly optimistic. Crucially, even if we had such evidence, it would tell us little (if anything) about which norm actually governs adult assertion.

2.3 The evidence from experimental philosophy

Let’s turn to data from human adults – that is, data that is directly relevant to testing the knowledge-norm. Turri (2013) laid the foundation of empirical investigation on the norm of assertion. This first study aimed to determine whether people’s assertability judgments are better predicted by a factive norm, such as KR or TR, or a non-factive one, such as JR or BR. Turri presented participants with vignettes in which a speaker produces an “unlucky assertion” (a false assertion that they reasonably believed to be true). In the first (of six) experiment, the protagonist (Maria) incorrectly believes that she owns a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection, because her inventory says so. At dinner, a guest asks her if she owns that particular model. Participants are asked whether

¹⁵ Against this commonly held view, Nagel (2013) and Phillips et al. (2021) argue that children acquire the concept of knowledge before the concept of belief. However, their argument relies on a one-sided representation of the state of the art: evidence *against* the primacy of knowledge (such as the cited works above; see also Sobel 2021) is not taken into account. Additionally, both reviews offer a disputable interpretation of the available evidence. Phillips et al. (2021, 7-8), for example, take evidence that children correctly ascribe *ignorance* before *false belief* to support the developmental primacy of knowledge (since ignorance can be described as *lack of knowledge*). Like Tomasello (2021), we think that much of the evidence reviewed by Phillips et al. could be explained by appealing to less exotic hypotheses – for instance, that simpler factive concepts, like *perceptual access* or *acquaintance*, are acquired before *belief* (for like-minded considerations, see Starman 2021 and Schlicht et al. 2021). For a critique of Nagel’s (2013) review, see McGlynn (2017).

Maria should answer affirmatively, i.e. whether she should say that she has the Rolex 1990 Submariner. Non-factive accounts predict that participants should agree that she should (since Maria's claim would be justified and believed to be true); factive accounts predict that she should not (since her assertion would be false and therefore not known). Participants overwhelmingly judged that Maria should not say that she owns the watch, matching the prediction of factive accounts. On the basis of these results, and of a dozen further studies with converging findings¹⁶, Turri's (2017) review concludes that laypeople's normative judgements align with factive accounts of assertions in general, and with KR in particular.

The debate seemed settled, until a new wave of studies came out. These new studies challenged the case for KR on two fronts: by presenting results that favour non-factive accounts, and by challenging and revising the methodology of the preceding wave of studies.¹⁷

Kneer (2018) reported a first set of results supporting non-factive accounts. The setup is similar to Turri's: participants are presented with vignettes involving unlucky assertions, followed by a prompt asking whether the protagonist "should say p , whether she "is permitted to say p ," or whether saying p is "appropriate". In Kneer's studies, contrary to previous findings, participants consistently judged unlucky (justified but false) claims to be assertible. *True* but *unjustified* assertions, by contrast, were not deemed assertible. This suggests that the norm of assertion is intimately tied to justified belief, not truth. Kneer (2021a) found that these results are stable across different cultures: Japanese, German, and American-English speakers all display a propensity to judge that false claims are assertible, though only if justified (see Figure 1).

¹⁶ For a review, see Turri (2017) and Graham (forthcoming).

¹⁷ We will only discuss empirical studies here. For an argument that Turri's findings manifest outcome bias, see Gerken (2018).

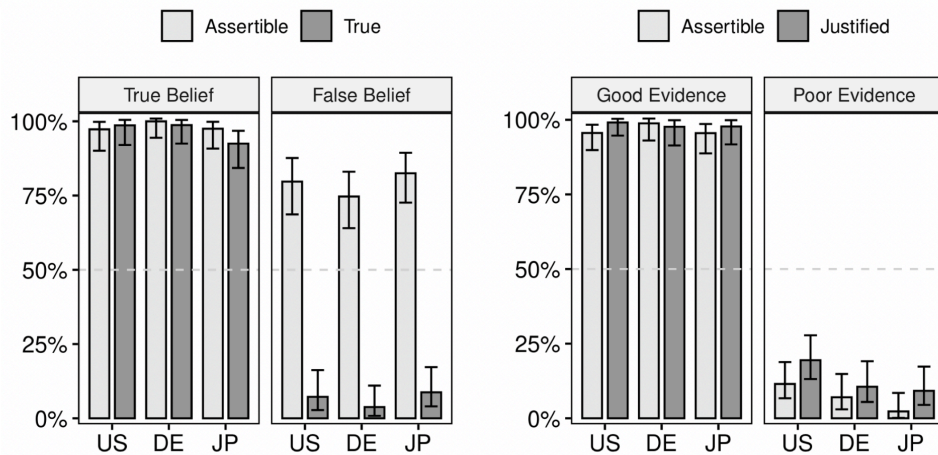


Figure 1: Left - Proportions of participants of participants who judged a justified claim assertible and true across conditions (true v. false); Right – Proportions of participants who judged a claim assertible and justified across conditions (good v. poor evidence). Kneer (2021a, 2).

Reuter and Brössel (2019) also found evidence supporting JR over KR. They argue that two factors might potentially have skewed the results in favour of factive accounts in Turri’s seminal study. First, the protagonist had a defeater against her belief (Maria knows that her inventory contains some mistakes). Second, participants were asked what Maria should say, but it would seem more appropriate to ask whether Maria’s assertion was permissible. Manipulating these factors reverted the results: a majority of participants gave responses aligning with non-factive accounts. Reuter & Brössel then conducted new experiments involving both lucky assertions and unlucky assertions, finding evidence against factive views, and in favour of the non-factive justification rule.¹⁸

A more systematic criticism of the methodology of earlier studies is presented by Marsili and Wiegmann (2021). Turri’s studies share a central methodological assumption: that we can explore laypeople’s intuitions by asking subjects to judge what a particular agent “should do” in a scenario in which they are about to make an assertion. Marsili and Wiegmann take issue with this “assertability assumption”. They note that “should” can be interpreted in two ways: “teleologically”, when it indicates what an agent should do to achieve their aims, and “deontologically”, when it indicates what an agent should do to live up to some norm or obligation. Marsili and Wiegmann suspected that Turri’s subjects interpreted the test question

¹⁸ Turri (2020, 8075-6) objects that Reuter and Brössel manipulated (without acknowledging it) some other aspects of the vignette, including whether Maria has already made the statement when the test question is asked. While Turri is right about these differences, Marsili & Wiegmann (2021) have since put this worry to rest (as we are about to see in the main text; see discussion of the tense structure in their experiment).

teleologically rather than deontologically, which would undermine the “assertability assumption” needed to draw conclusions about the norm of assertion.

To test this hypothesis, Marsili and Wiegmann replicated Turri’s (2013) Experiment 1, using follow-up questions to test how participants interpreted the test questions. They found that most participants interpreted them teleologically (see Figure 2). This suggests that Turri’s method of questioning might not have been perfectly suited for testing intuitions about the norm of assertion, and could explain why the findings of Turri’s team diverge from the findings of other researchers.

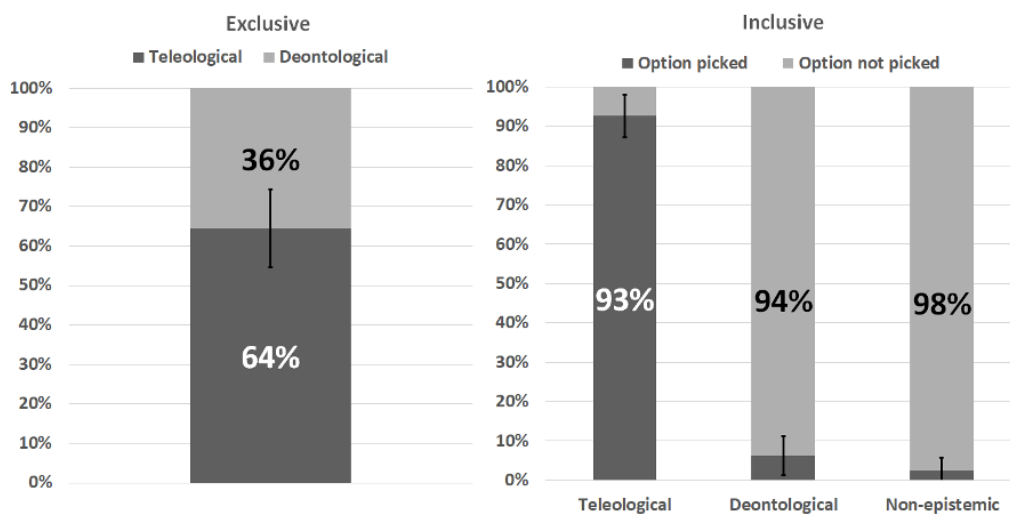


Figure 2: In the follow-up study, participants were asked to explain what they meant when they indicated that Maria “should not say” that she has the watch. The left-side graph displays the ratio of participants choosing the teleological vs. deontological option in the forced-choice “EXCLUSIVE” condition. The graph on the right shows percentages of participants picking each of the three options available (teleological, deontological, non-epistemic) in the “INCLUSIVE” condition (where picking any number of options, including none, was allowed). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. (from Marsili and Wiegmann 2021)

Having found that participants do not always interpret the test question in the intended way, Marsili and Wiegmann then identified some measures to prompt the intended deontological reading, such as modifying the tense structure of the vignette (see also Kneer, 2018, Experiment 4). In their Experiment 2, they found that these measures were effective: most participants interpreted the test question deontologically. And when the question is interpreted deontologically, participants’ judgments align with non-factive views like JR, as opposed to factive rules like KR. – in line with the findings of Kneer and of Reuter and Brössel.

Evidence challenging the factive paradigm also emerged in the psychological literature on confidence and credibility. Several studies show that confident

statements are more persuasive than more hesitant ones (Price and Stone 2004). However, excessive confidence can backfire: confidence can damage your reputation if the information you communicate turns out to be unreliable (Tenney et al. 2007; Sah, Moore, and MacCoun 2013; Vullioud et al. 2017). Until recently, it was unclear whether reputation is best preserved by calibrating confidence according to a factive heuristic (being confident when right and unconfident when wrong) or a non-factive heuristic (being confident when the evidence is strong, unconfident when the evidence is bad). A recent study by Pozzi and Mazzarella (2023) supports the latter hypothesis (cf. also Tenney et al. 2008). Confident assertions that are false but justified were found not to damage the speaker's reputation (Experiment 1). By contrast, speakers who make confident assertions that are true but unjustified suffered some credibility costs (Experiment 2). Only violations of the justification rule, in other words, noticeably damage the reputation of confident speakers. Factive norms of assertions take another hit here: these results are difficult to accommodate within a factive framework, but are exactly what we would expect if assertion were governed by a non-factive justification rule.

2.4. Excuses, excuses

The empirical evidence reviewed so far means trouble for factive accounts only if these views predict that unlucky assertions are simply impermissible. This prediction can be disputed. Factive views, some insist (see e.g. Williamson, forthcoming), predict that although unlucky assertions violate the norm, they do it in a way that is *excusable*¹⁹ and therefore *blameless*. This (and not the fact that no norm has been violated) would explain why experimental subjects deem unlucky assertions “appropriate” or “permissible”.

We frequently excuse others for not fulfilling their obligations, particularly if they do it for reasons that are beyond their control. Suppose you promise to collect me from the airport at 8pm. If you fail to do so because you forget, you violate your obligation in a way that is blameworthy and criticisable. But if your car suffers an irreparable breakdown *en route* to the airport, it could be argued that your failure to meet your obligation is blameless and undeserving of criticism, because you have a good *excuse* for not having picked me up.

A similar line of argument can be applied to unlucky assertions. Consider Maria's assertion that she owns a 1990 Rolex Submariner. The assertion violates KR (and TR). Arguably, however, it is just as blameless as your failure to pick me

¹⁹ In earlier versions of this argument, Williamson (1996, 509; 2000, 264) rather appealed to the *reasonableness* of these mistakes.

up from the airport. Maria has a good excuse for making a false statement: her inventory states that she owns the watch. Keeping into account this excuse, and the fact that she did her best to stick to the rule, her behaviour is permissible *all things considered*. If the foregoing is right, there is a sense in which unlucky assertions are permissible or appropriate also by the lights of factive rules. The empirical findings, then, don't speak directly against factive accounts.

In broad strokes, this is the “excuse manoeuvre” often mounted in defence of factive views.²⁰ While it may appear persuasive, it has been called into questions on various grounds. First, there are methodological concerns. The attentive reader might have noticed something suspicious about the dialectic employed to defend factive accounts. When empirical evidence seemed to support factive views, we were meant to assume that the empirical prediction of factive accounts was that laypeople would classify unlucky assertions as impermissible. Now that a new wave of studies overthrew these findings, we are meant to assume that their prediction is instead that laypeople would *not* classify unlucky assertions as impermissible. This seems too convenient: defenders of factive view should endorse one prediction or the other, but they can't have the cake and eat it.

Some commentators think that this duplicity in the predictions of factive accounts is symptomatic of a more general methodological problem with the excuse manoeuvre. Pagin (2016), for instance, worries that the excuse manoeuvre allows philosophers to discard intuitions that don't fit their favourite theory too easily; once we allow for it, our competing theories become underdetermined by the available evidence. Others have questioned the viability of the manoeuvre on other grounds, or its applicability in defence of factive accounts of the norm of assertion (Douven 2006, 478–80; Lackey 2007; 2008; Kvanvig 2009; Cappelen 2011; Gerken 2011; Schechter 2017; Madison 2018). Some of these objections have been met by replies (Boyd 2015; Kelp and Simion 2017; Williamson forthcoming).

When philosophers cannot agree, it might seem appropriate, once again, to turn to empirical evidence. And available empirical findings speak against the excuse manoeuvre. Turri & Blouw (2015) found that “when an agent blamelessly breaks a rule, it significantly distorts people's description of the agent's conduct, [and] roughly half of people deny that a rule was broken”. This phenomenon, known as excuse validation, follows fairly consistent patterns: about half the subjects exhibit this distortion of judgements (between 49% and 56% in Turri & Blouw 2015). If participants consider unlucky assertions permissible because they

²⁰ We take the label from Gerken (2011). Prominent articulations include Williamson (2000; forthcoming), DeRose (2002), Kelp and Simion (2017; 2021), Vollet (2022b).

excuse the speaker, we should expect similar response patterns to arise in the empirical studies that appear to support non-factive views.

However, this is not what researchers found. Studies that support non-factive views found that a much higher proportion of participants deemed unlucky assertions permissible (significantly above chance, see e.g. Kneer 2021a, Figure 1 above).²¹ If participants really are excusing impermissible behaviour, their response patterns radically deviate from those usually found when impermissible behaviour is excused. Lacking an explanation for this difference, we are entitled to assume that the results are just what they seem: laypeople are judging that unlucky assertions are simply permissible, as opposed to excusable.

Further support for this interpretation comes from the formulation of some test questions. If viable, the excuse manoeuvre could explain why participants deem unlucky assertions *appropriate* or *permissible* (Kneer 2018 tests multiple formulations; see also Reuter & Brössell, 2018). But across several experiments, participants actively recommend that the speaker *should make* or *should have made* the relevant assertion (Kneer 2018 Exp. 2 & Exp. 3; 2021, Exp. 2; Marsili & Wiegmann 2021, Exp. 2). These findings (that laypeople consistently recommend the assertion of unknown propositions, across different studies) are much harder to square with the excuse manoeuvre, since *forbidden but excusable* behaviour may well be permissible, but hardly warrants such positive recommendations.

The evidence against the interference of excuses presented so far is rather indirect. To settle matters more decisively, Marsili and Wiegmann (2021, Exp. 2 and 3) designed a test to verify whether excuses interfere with laypeople's judgments about the assertability of unlucky assertions. Turri and Blouw (2015) found that excuse validation disappears when participants are permitted to judge that the excusable agent has "violated the norm unintentionally". If participants are just excusing the speaker, their preference for non-factive answers should disappear once they are allowed to state that the norm was violated inadvertently. To test this, Marsili & Wiegmann introduced different follow-up questions, allowing participants to judge that the protagonist violated the norm "inadvertently". Almost no participant chose this option in any of their experiments; the vast majority insisted that the statement was permissible because no norm was violated in the first place. These findings lend further support to the hypothesis that empirical findings supporting non-factive views cannot merely be attributed to excuse validation.

²¹ The only studies that found patterns consistent with the hypothesis that participants engage in excuse validation are Turri (2013) and Turri & Blouw (2015). However, Turri (2013) uses a different test question (which, we have seen, likely elicits intuitions about the goal of the speaker, not the norm), whereas Turri & Blouw (2015) asked if the assertion was "correct"; since "correct" is synonymous with "true", however, this test question might have also received an unintended interpretation.

Further evidence against the viability of the excuse manoeuvre comes from Kneer (2018). Experiment 3 features different versions of a vignette in which the protagonist, Julie, claims that there's yoghurt in her fridge. Except in the control condition where she has knowledge, her situation is not epistemically optimal: in two versions of the vignette her belief is Gettiered, in another it is unjustified and false. Subjects were asked to rate assertability, truth, whether Julie is justified and – crucially – whether “Julie could be *reproached* for saying that there's yoghurt in her fridge” (italics added).

Measuring reproachability can help understand whether participants are merely excusing the speaker when they judge propositions that are not known to be assertable. According to the excuse manoeuvre, participants conflate judgments of blamelessness with those about norm violation: even when Julie is violating the norm of assertion, some deem her assertion permissible because her violation is excused, and therefore blameless. If this hypothesis were correct, reproachability would correlate strongly with assertability, and should mediate the relation between epistemic condition and assertability: in other words, whether participants deem Julie's statement unassertable should depend on whether they find it reproachable (and vice versa). However, a multicategorical mediation analysis falsifies this suggestion: the reproachability of the speaker does not constitute a significant mediator – nor do knowledge or truth of the statement. What does, however, constitute a near-perfect mediator, is justification (Kneer, 2018, 169). Roughly, the data shows that the assertability of Julie's claim across conditions differs in virtue of whether she is perceived to have good reason for believing that *p*, and not in virtue of whether one could reproach her for claiming *p*. The excuse manoeuvre is excused and can take a seat.

In light of these results, defending factive views becomes increasingly problematic. Current empirical evidence indicates that laypeople generally perceive unlucky assertions as inherently permissible, rather than merely excusable. We are now in a position to confidently reject the claim that the knowledge norm of assertion is supported by convergent evidence from (i) animal communication studies, (ii) developmental findings on human children, or (iii) experiments with human adults. Furthermore, while research on human adults is still ongoing, our present review suggests that current findings rather support the justification rule (or something in its vicinity) over alternative accounts.

3. Retraction

Another area of empirical research where factive norms are investigated in relation to epistemically appropriate communication is the debate on “subjective discourse”.²² Here norms of retraction – i.e. norms governing when a speaker is required to take back a previously made claim – have played a prominent role. Naturally, norms of retraction, if they exist, are likely to depend strongly on the operative norms of assertion.

Scholars working on subjective discourse have explored the truth-conditional semantics of utterances that express the speaker’s preferences – what she finds tasty, fun, or beautiful, and those that are semantically tied to her epistemic states, for instance when speculating about the world with epistemic modal claims (invoking e.g. “might”, “must”, or “perhaps”). In this debate, there are three major positions. According to indexical contextualists, a speaker’s utterance of the sentence “Spinach is tasty” contains a tacit indexical – a “judge variable” or a standard of taste j drawn from the context of utterance.²³ The latter makes the communicated content of a sentence such as (1) judge-relative, along the lines of (2). Whether or not the proposition expressed is true is evaluated with respect to a Kaplanian circumstance, whose parameters (world w and time t) are drawn from the context of utterance C^{utt} (Kaplan, 1989).

- (1) Spinach is tasty.
- (2) Spinach is tasty [for j]. $(w, t)^{C^{utt}}$

Nonindexical contextualists (e.g. Kölbel, 2002, 2004), by contrast, locate the standard of taste *not* in the *content* of the utterance, but in the circumstance of evaluation. Beyond off-the-shelf parameters such as a world and a time, the circumstance, on this view, thus also includes a standard of taste or judge parameter j .

- (3) Spinach is tasty. $(w, t, j)^{C^{utt}}$

²² The literature on the semantics of predicates of personal taste is particularly rich; see, *inter alia*, Kölbel (2002, 2004, 2009), Lasersohn (2005, 2017), Stojanovic (2007, 2017), Recanati (2007), Glanzberg (2007, 2022), MacFarlane (2007, 2014), Capellen and Hawthorne (2009), Saebo (2009), Egan (2010), Schaffer (2011), Collins (2013), Marques (2018), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014), Kneer (2015, 2021c), Kneer et al. (2017), Dinges (2022), Zeman (2016, 2023), Zakkou (2019a, 2019b). For recent reviews on subjective discourse, see Lopez de Sa, 2007, Stojanovic, 2017 and Glanzberg, 2022.

²³ Strictly speaking, the content can be relative to some other individual’s standard of taste, see Lasersohn’s (2005) “exocentric” readings. The speaker’s standard of taste is the usual case, and there’s little need to complicate for our purposes.

According to both views, the Austinian proposition (consisting of content and circumstance, see e.g. Recanati, 2007) expressed by (2) is relative to a standard of taste. The main difference regards whether the content itself is taste-relative (indexicalism) or not (non-indexicalism). Some have argued that this makes a significant difference in modelling “faultless disagreements” (Kölbel, 2002, 2004, Lasersohn, 2005; for discussion, see Stojanovic, 2007), though it seems that philosophers have tired of the debate without converging on a conclusion.²⁴

The two accounts just sketched do not exhaust the options, as there is a third position, namely relativism. Relativists (e.g. MacFarlane, 2014; Egan, 2007, on some interpretations Lasersohn, 2005; see also Lasersohn, 2017) agree with nonindexicalists that standards of taste (and other subjective elements) are best located in the circumstance of evaluation. However, they argue, the latter is determined not by the speaker’s context of utterance, but by a context of assessment C^{ass} , of which there are infinitely many:

(3) Spinach is tasty. (w, t, j)^{C_{ass}}

This opens up the possibility of dynamic updating: A person’s tastes, aesthetic preferences, and epistemic circumstances can change, and if they do, the truth-value of the uttered proposition can have different truth-values at different contexts of assessment. MacFarlane writes:

When our own tastes change, so that a food we used to find pleasant to the taste now tastes bad, we may say that we were mistaken in saying that the food was “tasty.” When I was a kid, I once told my mother, “Fish sticks are tasty.” Now that I have exposed my palate to a broader range of tastes, I think I was wrong about that; I’ve changed my mind about the tastiness of fish sticks. So, if someone said, “But you said years ago that fish sticks were tasty,” I would retract the earlier assertion. I wouldn’t say, “They were tasty then, but they aren’t tasty any more,” since that would imply that their taste changed. Nor would I say, “When I said that, I only meant that they were tasty to me then.” I *didn’t* mean that. At the time I took myself to be disagreeing with adults who claimed that fish sticks weren’t tasty. (2014: 13,14)

This account of relative truth, MacFarlane holds, “can be rendered precise and intelligible by embedding it in an account of assertion” (2011: 2; see also 13),

²⁴ For some interesting empirical evidence regarding matters of taste and disagreement, see Wyatt (2018, 2021).

which he takes to be governed by two constitutive norms: One regards the *making* of assertions (the *Reflexive Truth Rule*), the other one their *retraction* (the *Retraction Rule*).

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

By itself, the reflexive truth rule cannot bring out what is special about relativism, because the context of utterance (or use) almost invariably coincides with the context of assessment: The rule thus ‘will not help us make sense of relative truth, for it leaves contexts of assessment without any *essential* role to play’ (2014, 104). However, as illustrated by the fish sticks example, contexts of assessment do play a central role in the practice of assertion and retraction, and this comes out when an interlocutor challenges a speaker as regards their previous utterance:

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

Reconsider the example: At the context of utterance, MacFarlane’s utterance “Fish sticks are tasty” is true as used and assessed from the context of utterance (the context of use and assessment coincide). When evaluated at a later context c_2 , at which MacFarlane has lost his appetite for fish sticks, his previous claim must be deemed as *having been false* – and if challenged, MacFarlane would have to retract it.²⁵ MacFarlane conceives of the *Reflexive Truth Rule* and the *Retraction Rule* as *constitutive norms of assertion* (2014: 103; 108). By this he means to say that the provision of such constitutive norms *define* what assertion is (2014:101).

To summarise, MacFarlane’s influential proposal provides both a definition of assertion, and an account of relative truth inextricably tied up with it. Assertion is characterised by two constitutive norms (the *Reflexive Truth Rule* and the *Retraction Rule*), which make semantic truth assessment-sensitive and therefore relative. Importantly, MacFarlane highlights, it is an “empirical question whether any of our thought and talk is best understood in terms of a relativist semantics” (2014:24). Consequently, he agrees with the authors cited at the outset of Section 2, who highlight that plausible accounts of linguistic norms of assertion “must face the linguistic data” (Douven 2006, 450) and should be broadly consistent with it (Pagin 2016, 22; Turri 2013; Kneer 2018).

²⁵ Retraction has received considerable attention over the last few years. See e.g. Ferrari (2016), Marques (2014, 2018), Kneer (2015, 2021b), Zakkou (2019); Caponetto (2020); Dinges (2022); Wyatt & Ulatowski (2023); Almagro et al. (2023) and Zeman (2023).

We would like to put forth two observations: The first one builds on our review of the literature presented in the preceding sections, and it is as simple as it is potentially devastating for the relativist agenda (for detail, see Kneer, 2022): Whether the norm of making assertions is factive is far from evident, and the results of recent empirical work on the matter rather point towards a nonfactive norm. But if the norm of assertion is not factive, then the *Reflexive Truth Rule* cannot be true. No rule governing assertion that relies on the truth of the claim uttered would be adequate. But if the *Reflexive Truth Rule* is false, then the *Retraction Rule*, which depends on it, is also likely to be false. And in fact, as we are about to see, empirical research directly exploring the *Retraction Rule* suggests that retraction is not governed by a factive rule either (nor by a rule that takes truth to be assessment relative, as envisaged by MacFarlane).

4. Retraction Data

Take a situation involving a taste change as the one described by MacFarlane, which, in an empirical study, can be presented to participants in the following form:

FISH STICKS

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

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

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

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

Participants disagree with both of Sally’s claims made in [A] and [B], see Figure 3 (data from Kneer, 2015, 2021b), indicating that their intuitions don’t align with the *Reflexive Truth Rule* or the *Retraction Rule*. According to ordinary English speakers, the truth of claims of personal taste does not depend on the context of assessment, but on the context of utterance (in line with contextualist views). Furthermore, when the taste of a speaker changes, he is not required to retract a previously made taste claim that no longer fits his gustatory preferences at the context of assessment. Findings of this sort also extend to other predicates of

personal taste, such as the building of sandcastles being “fun” (Sandcastle vignette), and they robustly replicate if one reduces the time-frame between the contexts of utterance and assessment (Salmon vignette, Kneer 2021b, Exp. 2).

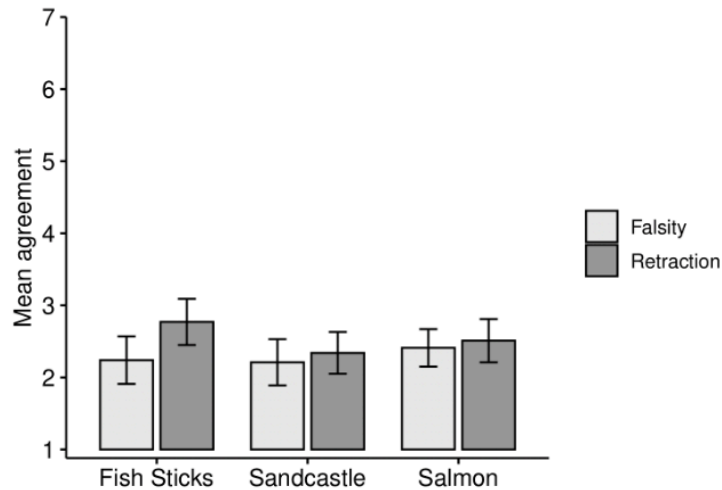


Figure 3: Mean agreement with the statement that an original taste claim was false at the context of utterance and that it must be retracted given preference reversals across different scenarios. Error bars denote standard error of the mean.

Dinges & Zakkou (2020) have reported some interesting diverging data, according to which people tend to agree neither with the predictions of indexical contextualism nor relativism in taste reversal cases. However, further experiments suggest that this might be due to a contentious framing of the contextualist response option (Kneer, 2022). Epistemic modal claims (i.e. claims containing “might”, “perhaps” etc.), whose semantics is considered similar to that of taste claims (Egan, 2007; Schaffer, 2009; MacFarlane, 2014; von Fintel & Gillies, 2011) also defy the predictions of the Reflexive Truth Rule (see Knobe & Yalcin, 2014; Kneer, 2015, Ch.6, Marques, 2023). Judgments regarding their truth-value, the evidence suggests, depend on the context of utterance, not the context of assessment.²⁶

Extant findings, we take it, are inconsistent with the relativist proposal that the truth of certain claims is assessment-sensitive, or that “false” claims (in the

²⁶ In an interesting recent paper, Almagro et al. (2023) report evidence that shows that in a public setting, people manifest some agreement with the need to retract (and more than in private settings). The target claims were of the sort “Luka is a lousy basketball player” when it turned out later that he won the NBA’s young player of the year award. However, “lousy”, as the authors acknowledge, is not a predicate of personal taste, and in judgments of this sort moral norms (e.g. of not slamming very capable sportsmen in public for no reason) could have had an impact on participants’ judgments, too. So we do not view these findings as inconsistent with the evidence reviewed so far.

relativist sense) at a certain context of assessment need to be retracted. There is, however, one puzzling bit of data: In an experiment closely modelled on one of MacFarlane's (2011) examples, Knobe & Yalcin (2014) do seem to find support for the *Retraction Rule* in the domain of epistemic modals. The vignette was the following:

Sally and George are talking about whether Joe is in Boston. Sally carefully considers all the information she has available and concludes that there is no way to know for sure.

Sally says: "Joe might be in Boston."

Just then, George gets an email from Joe. The email says that Joe is in Berkeley. So George says: "No, he isn't in Boston. He is in Berkeley."

On a 7-point Likert-scale, participants were asked to report to what extent they agreed or disagreed with one of the following two claims:

[Truth assessment] What Sally said is false.

[Retraction] It would be appropriate for Sally to take back what she said.

Besides the target scenario, there was a control condition with a sentence in the indicative. In this version, Sally says that Joe *is* (rather than *might be*) in Boston. The results of the experiment, which took a 2 *claim type* (indicative v. modal) x 2 *question type* (truth assessment v. retraction) between-subjects design, are presented in Figure 4 (left panel). Evidently, truth relativism would predict that the modal claim is assessed as *false* at the context of assessment (which is not the case) and that it stands in need of *retraction* (which is the case).

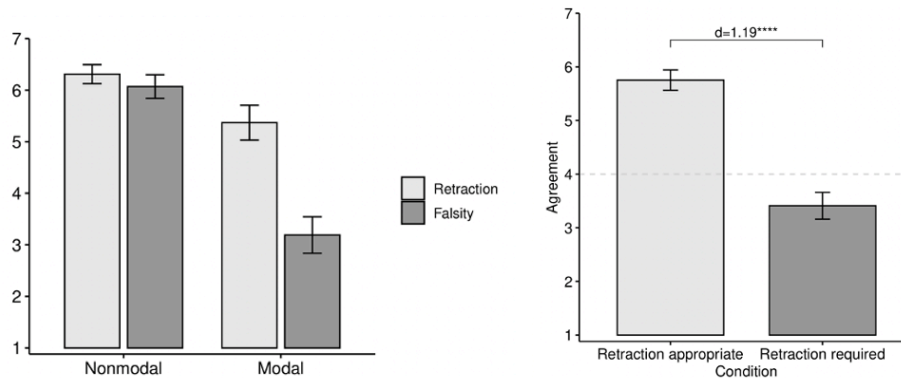


Figure 4: Left panel: Mean ratings for the nonmodal and modal condition, from Knobe & Yalcin, (2014, 15). Right panel: Agreement with proposed retraction across formulation ('retraction appropriate' v. 'retraction required'), from Kneer, (2022, 130). Error bars denote standard errors.

The results are surprising in two regards: First, they contrast with the findings according to which a change in epistemic situation or taste does *not* trigger a perceived need for the speaker to retract their previous claim when challenged. Second, and even more curiously, it seems that people do *not* consider the modal claim false at the context of assessment (thus defying the Reflexive Truth Rule), and *still* think it should be retracted.

However, appearances deceive: Knobe & Yalcin do not actually test whether participants hold that the speaker is *required* to retract their previous assertion, but whether it would be *appropriate* to do so. A replication of these two experiments shows that, while retraction might be deemed appropriate, it is not required, see Figure 4, right panel (from Kneer, 2022, section 6). MacFarlane's Retraction Rule, however, is a strict rule: it's phrased in terms of what the speaker is "required" to do. It's not a lenient rule, concerning what it might be appropriate or permissible for her to do. And it is surely no accident that MacFarlane opts for a strict, rather than a lenient rule. First, it is doubtful whether a lenient rule could serve the purpose of a *constitutive* norm of assertion as MacFarlane (2014) understands it. Second, Semantic Relativism is a position in truth-conditional semantics, and it is questionable whether lenient rules are of much use in semantics thus conceived. On this approach, we infer the meaning of an expression from the hard requirements of truth and falsity, i.e. clearcut *dos* and *don'ts*, and not from what it would be appropriate, permissible, or nice to say. The extent to which we can infer meaning, cast in terms of truth-conditions, from such weaker rules is unclear at best (for discussion, see Marques, 2023; Kneer, 2022; see also Wyatt and Ulatowski, 2023 and Zeman, 2023).

Some scholars have advocated for “flexible” versions of relativism with respect to different types of perspectival claims (e.g. Zeman, 2010 for knowledge attributions, Beddor & Egan, 2018 for epistemic modals, and Dinges & Zakkou, 2020 for predicates of personal taste). Roughly, the idea is that, at a certain context of assessment c^2 , the truth of a target claim could be relative to that context c^2 , or relative to the original context of utterance c^1 (which, after all, also constitutes a possible context of assessment). This reconciles the predictions of relativism with the empirical findings, but at the price of making competing theories underdetermined by the data. It is no longer clear what would falsify relativism: If people in a taste-reversal case deem the target proposition wrong at the context of assessment c^2 , this does not validate contextualism (nor invalidate relativism), but merely shows that people view the context of utterance c^1 as the relevant context of assessment. We are unsure how much promise such views hold, given that (i) the relativist’s own favourite examples (most of them drawn from MacFarlane, 2014) should presumably be the kind of cases that survive empirical scrutiny without need to add epicycles to the relativist model; and (ii) to date there exists basically no evidence that decisively speaks clearly *in favour* of any type of relativist account (as e.g. Beddor & Egan, 2018: 39 acknowledge). For a detailed discussion regarding flexible relativism, see Zeman (2023).

Let’s take stock: The truth-value of claims containing predicates of personal taste and epistemic modals is not assessment-sensitive. Instead, it depends on the context of utterance. Furthermore, in cases of preference reversal or updating of the epistemic situation of the speaker, there is no requirement to retract a previously made claim. And yet, it might still be deemed appropriate to do so. This, in our view, chimes well with the broader results of the empirical literature about norms of assertion: While the making and retracting of assertions clearly appears subject to certain norms, the available evidence fails to support the hypothesis that these norms are factive.

What, however, *does* underpin the appropriateness of retracting perspectival claims (e.g. those invoking epistemic modals) which are *not* false? Differently put, what *could* explain Knobe & Yalcin’s (2014) findings, given that truth does not seem to be of any help? The authors themselves put forth an intriguing proposal. Drawing on a Stalnakerian (1978, 1999, 2002) framework, they suggest:

One possible approach would be to view retraction as a phenomenon whereby speakers are primarily indicating that they no longer want a conversational common ground incorporating the update associated with a sentence that they previously uttered. On this approach, *what is retracted* is a certain conversational update; retraction is in part a means of undoing or

disowning the context change or update performed by a speech act. (2014, 17)

The thought, developed in detail by Khoo (2015) and Khoo & Knobe (2018), is that challenging a speaker, or rejecting a claim of theirs, does not necessarily point to the *falsity* of the (original) assertion. Instead, the challenge might be rooted in the fact that the claim, if it were uttered at the present context (characterised by change of taste or epistemic situation) would not be appropriate, and that a conversational update is required. This is a plausible rule. Whether such a rule, with its limited force cashed out in terms of what moves are appropriate, commendable, or permissible can amount to a *constitutive* norm that captures something essential about our assertive practices, remains, however, an open question. And whether such lenient rules can help adjudicate between the different positions in the contextualism/relativism debate – a debate in *truth-conditional semantics* – is also contentious (for recent discussion, see Kneer, 2015, 2022; Marques, 2023; Wyatt & Ulatowski, 2023; Zeman, 2023). The debate is about the *truth-conditional semantics* of perspectival expressions, such as predicates of personal taste and epistemic modals. As argued, in order to make falsifiable predictions, a relativist theory of semantic meaning needs *strict* rules as to whether one must, or is required to, retract an utterance *because* of its truth-value. But weaker rules – rules framed in terms of what it would be permissible, appropriate, or perhaps nice to retract – do *not* provide clear evidence regarding the claim’s truth-value, and hence can do but little to clarify its meaning.

5. Reconciliation: Back to the truth

This paper has surveyed the empirical literature on making assertions and retracting them. The evidence gathered so far suggests that the norm for making assertions is not factive, and that retraction patterns don’t fit the predictions of truth-relativism.

Should we conclude that truth has nothing to do with the normative evaluation of assertions and retractions? This would be too hasty. As we are about to argue, there are reasons to think that there is a strong normative link between assertion, retraction and truth, a link that is compatible with the empirical findings just reviewed.

Let’s begin by considering the evaluative standards for *making* assertions. Truth and falsity are central to our assessment of assertions. False assertions are typically deemed *incorrect* and *improper* precisely in virtue of being false. And the falsity of an assertion is often considered sufficient ground for challenging or even criticising

the speaker. Proponents of factive norms would contend that this is because false claims violate the norm of assertion. But our review indicates that assertions are most likely not governed by a factive norm. What, then, can explain the centrality of truth in our evaluation of assertions?

Different alternatives are available. Some authors (Dummett 1973; Williams 2002; Marsili 2018; 2021) argue that truth sets the “goal” or “aim” of assertions: it establishes a speaker-independent standard for evaluating the *success*, as opposed to the *permissibility*, of this speech act²⁷. In this sense, assertion is like other activities with intrinsic (agent-independent) goals. For instance, in football, a penalty shot can be evaluated as successful or unsuccessful based on whether a goal is scored, independently of whether the player aimed to score a goal. Similarly, an assertoric description “scores a goal” (and can be evaluated positively) when it “hits” truth, and fails to meet its purported goal when it fails to represent reality accurately (when it is false). Unlucky assertions, according to this view, are defective (they fail to achieve their purported goal) but still permissible (they do not violate a norm). It therefore makes sense that retracting them is *appropriate* (since the assertion failed to perform its function), but not *required* (since no norm-violation has occurred).

This “teleological” account fits well with some widely held views in pragmatics. In speech act theory, “directions of fit” are often understood in a teleological fashion: they set “success conditions” for illocutions (Humberstone 1992, cf. also Searle 1976:2-3). Fact-stating²⁸ speech acts (including assertions) are said to have *truth* as a success condition: these illocutions put forward descriptions whose purpose is to ‘fit’ the world.

A similar idea is found in dynamic pragmatics, and specifically in work on common ground inaugurated by Stalnaker. Discourse is here modelled as a communal inquiry whose end or purpose is to find out “the way things might be” (the set of possible worlds that is compatible with the propositions that are mutually accepted as true in the conversation; Stalnaker 1978:151; 2002:704). It is thus *appropriate* to retract assertions that were true at a certain context of utterance but false as evaluated from the current context of assessment (e.g. because the speaker’s taste or epistemic situation has changed). Insisting on them from the current context would complicate the joint inquiry into “the way things might be”. However, the speaker would not necessarily violate a norm in *not* retracting the assertion if it turns out to be false (cf. Kvanvig 2009, McKinnon 2015, 156-9).

²⁷ For like-minded proposals, see also Jackson 2012, McKinnon 2015, Ch. 8, Mehta 2016, Gerken 2017, 125-7). The distinction between aims and norms invoked here parallels the distinction between standards and norms drawn by Thomson (2008).

²⁸ “Thetic” speech acts, in Humberstone’s vocabulary, or speech acts with a word-to-world direction of fit, in Searle’s terminology.

Embracing “teleological” views is not the only way to establish an alternative normative link between assertion and truth. Some authors²⁹ have suggested that truth is required for “good” assertion, but not for permissible assertion. Truth is on this view “suberogatory”: it is preferable to falsity, but it is not required for permissible action. Unlike teleological views, “goodness” is not determined by the achievement of a presumed goal on these views. Nonetheless, the key idea is virtually the same: truth is not required for permissible assertion, just for good or successful performance.

Regardless of whether non-factive views are complemented with an account that restores a link with truth, there is an independent sense in which non-factive accounts maintain a link between assertion and veracity. Non-factive rules still constrain assertions in ways that relate to the speaker’s *perspective* on the *truth* of the utterance: they demand that the speaker *believes* the asserted content to be *true*, or that it is rational for the speaker to believe it to be *true* (or both)³⁰.

Not only this: we might think that the function of non-factive rules is to maximise the ratio of assertions that achieve the goal of being truthful, within the boundaries of what the speaker can feasibly control – much like, say, traffic regulations are meant to maximise the chance that we achieve the goal of avoiding accidents. The function of some social rules like the norm of assertion, so understood, is to ensure that we achieve a collective goal (e.g. maximise claims that are truthful, cf. McKinnon 2015, ch. 8). Here the goal of the practice only *indirectly* determines what it is permissible to do: just like traffic regulations do not forbid accidents *per se*, but rather introduce requirements that are meant to reduce their likelihood, the norms of assertion do not demand that you only assert true propositions, only that you put your best effort in achieving this goal.

What we have described so far is just a programmatic sketch of how a link between assertion and truth can be maintained within a non-factive framework. There is space for refinement, and for building in different views about which non-factive rules govern assertion, and which normative guidance is exactly provided by truth. Hopefully, we have shown that there are several appealing

²⁹ Turri (2014, 564) argues that knowledge is only required for “good” assertion (“you well assert that p only if you know that p”), while “reasonable belief sets the standard for permissible assertion (that is, you may assert p only if you reasonably believe p)”. In subsequent work Turri (2016, 65-7) has distanced himself from this hypothesis, endorsing (partially on the basis of his empirical work) the stronger thesis that knowledge is required for *permissible* assertion.

³⁰ In fact, some studies have found that a good proportion of ordinary speakers classifies beliefs that are true *from one’s perspective* as true (even when they are false, see Reuter & Brun 2022). From this perspective, non-factive norms maintain a much more direct link between assertion and “truth”.

possibilities available, and that assertion and truth can coexist also outside a framework that relies on factive rules.³¹

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