

Relativism and Retraction: The Case Is Not Yet Lost

Many times, what we say proves to be wrong. It might turn out that what we took to be a comforting remark was, in fact, making things worse. Or that a joke was inappropriate. Or that yelling out loud was rude. More importantly for this paper, there are plenty of cases in which what we said turns out to be *false*: we spoke without paying attention, we were misinformed or tricked, or we made a reasoning mistake.

A particular instance of this latter phenomenon is when someone changes their perspective and doesn't find their previous assertions true anymore. For example, imagine that you used to like licorice as a child, and that you went around saying things like "Licorice is tasty." But, growing up, you find licorice too strong and quite boring; your tastes have changed. While the taste of licorice itself has not changed, you are not going around anymore uttering "Licorice is tasty." In fact, in certain cases, you might even think that what you said in your childhood was wrong – at least in light of your present preferences.

Sometimes we "take back" the assertions we made when we realize they are no longer true. Such speech acts of taking back can be performed in various ways: more formally, as effected in a court of law or when an official speaks to the press, or more informally in our day-by-day interactions. These acts of taking back are known as *retraction*. Retraction is usually achieved by employing certain linguistic markers ('I was wrong', 'I was mistaken', 'I retract', "Scratch that" etc.) that signal that the retractor takes their previous speech act to be faulty in a certain way.

This phenomenon has formed the basis for a popular argument used by relativists about a variety of natural language expressions (predicates of taste, epistemic modals, moral and aesthetic claims etc.) in support of their view. Recently, several considerations (mostly from contextualists about the same expressions) – both from the armchair¹ and based on empirical studies – have been offered to undercut the support retraction has been taken to provide for relativism. In this paper, I consider and reevaluate that support in light of both types of considerations, showing that neither of them decisively undermines it. However, to survive the contextualist counterattack, the relativist needs to pay a price: that is, she will be forced to make some concessions or rethink certain claims. I show what I think those concessions should be and what needs to be rethought (and how). The upshot is that, while the support retraction offers relativism is not as strong as initially believed, appeal to retraction remains a legitimate move in the debate. Armchair data are investigated in section 2 and proper experimental studies in section 3, while section 4 summarizes and concludes. In the next section, I introduce the views in the debate and clarify the phenomenon of retraction and its dialectical role.

1. Introduction

1.1. The intuitive case for retraction

Assertions made with sentences containing a wide array of natural language expressions have been claimed to be susceptible to retraction. Perhaps the expressions in relation to which retraction has been most discussed are *predicates of taste* – terms like "tasty", "disgusting", "fun", "boring" and the like. I have already given an example above involving licorice; here is an example of an exchange in which the initial assertion was made via a sentence containing "tasty":

¹ By "armchair" I don't mean they are purely theoretical; in fact, they are scenarios of the kind experimental philosophers have tested but based on their proponents' intuitions rather than on the results of large-scale empirical studies.

LICORICE

Bart, a while back, gobbling up licorice: Licorice is tasty.

Lisa, now, noting that Bart hasn't touched licorice recently: Hey, I see you're not eating licorice anymore – are you alright?

Bart, now: Bah, I was wrong. Licorice is not tasty.

Such scenarios presuppose a change in the relevant contextual parameter (which in this case we can take to be a standard of taste) between the two contexts: the assertor's context (Bart a while ago when he was eating lots of licorice), and the retractor's context (Bart at the present time when replying to Lisa and admitting fault). Similar exchanges involving moral terms, epistemic modals, "know" etc. have been proposed to illustrate the phenomenon, too – with the relevant contextual parameters varying accordingly. Here are some examples from the literature:

MICE

Albert, in his childhood: Torturing mice for fun is not wrong.

Lucy, now: You used to think that torturing mice for fun was fine.

Albert, now: I retract. Torturing mice for fun was wrong. (Ferrari & Zeman 2014: 81-82)

BOSTON

Sally: Joe might be in Boston.

George: No, he can't be in Boston. I just saw him an hour ago in Berkeley.

Sally: Okay, then, scratch that. I was wrong. (MacFarlane 2011: 148).²

TRIAL

Judge: Did you know on December 10 that your car was in your driveway?

Sam: Yes, your honor. I knew this.

Judge: Were you in a position to rule out the possibility that your car had been stolen?

Sam: No, I wasn't.

Judge: So you didn't know that your car was in the driveway, did you?

Sam: No, I suppose I didn't, your honor. [I was mistaken.] (adapted from MacFarlane 2005: 213)

It is important to note that in all these exchanges, retraction is done by means of certain expressions (call them "retraction markers"): "I was wrong", "I retract", "Scratch that", "I was mistaken", etc., which signal that the retractor takes their previous self to have made the mistake of saying something false (by the retractor's current lights) when making the initial assertion.

What other essential characteristics do retractions have? There is a growing literature attempting to discern the necessary and sufficient conditions for a speech act to count as a retraction, mostly coming from Speech Act Theory (see, most recently, Caponetto (2020), Kukla & Steinberg (2022), Caponetto (this volume), Kukla (this volume), Bussiere et al. (this volume), etc.). I will not delve into that literature here; instead, I will rely on the intuitive case for retraction provided by the examples above and say a few words about what retraction is *not*.

First, retraction is not merely refraining from uttering the same sentence used to make the initial assertion. Retraction is a speech act, and as such it requires an act of uttering a sentence. Although silence or omission are not devoid of conversational effects (illocutionary or perlocutionary), under normal conversational conditions they don't amount to speech acts. So, just

² See also the many interesting cases involving epistemic modals in Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherston (2005).

refraining in the new context from uttering the sentence used to make the initial assertion is not yet to retract. Second, retraction is not simply uttering the negation of the sentence used to make the initial assertion. While doing so is not unconnected to the previous speech act (at least in the minimal sense of addressing the same topic), uttering in the new context the negation of the sentence used to make the initial assertion is to make a *different* assertion, with a different content and different conversational effects. Third, and perhaps most importantly, retraction is not just merely admitting that the content of the previous assertion is false in the new context. While retraction can be accompanied by such an explicit evaluation of the truth value of the initial assertion, a new speech act that targets the previous assertion and admits fault (one performed via a sentence that includes one of the “retraction markers”) must be produced.³

1.2. Contextualism, relativism, and the challenge

The phenomenon exchanges like the above illustrate has played an important role in the debate over the semantics of the expressions involved – all called “perspectival” because they require the provision of a perspective for their interpretation. The main views in the debate that I will focus on here are *contextualism* and *relativism*. Contextualism is the view that the contribution a certain truth-determining contextual parameter makes is an element of *content*, whereas relativism is the view that the contribution comes via the *circumstances of evaluation* (both terms underlined are Kaplan’s (1989); in his two-dimensional framework, to get a truth value a content needs to be evaluated with respect to a circumstance of evaluation). Differently put, and assuming that the relevant truth-determining contextual parameter in the case of the expressions at stake are *perspectives*⁴, contextualism has it that the semantic content of an utterance of a sentence containing a perspectival expression is perspective-specific, while relativism that it is perspective-neutral.

There are many versions of contextualism as there are of relativism, with this diversity stemming from various ways of answering certain questions (e.g., what is the exact mechanism by which perspective enters into the content?, whose perspective is the relevant one?, etc.). One important distinction within the relativist camp that has to be mentioned here is that between *moderate* versions of the view (also known as “non-indexical contextualism” – see MacFarlane (2009, 2014)) and *radical* versions of the view (those which treat perspectival expressions as “assessment-sensitive” – see also MacFarlane (2014)). The main differences between these views concerns the context that supplies the perspective in the circumstances of evaluation against which an utterance is to be evaluated for truth: According to the former, it is the perspective of the context of utterance, while according to the latter, is it the perspective of the context of assessment. Together with contextualism, these are the views in relation to which retraction has been said to play a dialectical role in the literature.

Now, to the challenge retraction is supposed to pose. The reason why retraction is thought to be problematic for contextualism is that insofar as contextualists postulate perspective-specific

³ Does one retract if one only *thinks* a previous assertion to be defective in the required way, without making an assertion? Interesting as it sounds, I leave the issue of “mental retraction” aside – but see MacFarlane (2014, chapter 5) and Ferrari (2016, 2021) for discussion.

⁴ Philosophers on both sides of the aisle have suggested that we could also think of the relevant truth-determining contextual parameter as involving *experiencers* (Schaffer 2011), *judges* (Laserson 2005; 2016), various *standards* (MacFarlane 2014), etc. As far as I can see, nothing hinges on going with “perspective” here (for a precedent in using the term, see Kölbel (2004)). I should also mention that I’m using “perspective” as an umbrella-term covering more specific contextual elements tightly connected to the types of expressions at stake, and I will refer to those when the context requires it (e.g., “taste standards”, “bodies of information”).

utterance contents, retraction becomes both infelicitous and impossible.⁵ To see this, compare the way contextualism renders the contents of Bart’s first and second utterances in LICORICE (bolded font signifies semantic content):

LICORICE (C)

Bart, a while back (t_1): **Licorice is tasty for Bart-at- t_1 .**

Bart, now (t_2): **Bart-at- t_1 was wrong. Licorice is not tasty for Bart-at- t_2 .**

First, given that what Bart asserted at t_1 was and still is true even in the new context, admitting fault (“I was wrong”) is infelicitous. Second, retraction is impossible because there is no content that was true at t_1 but is false at t_2 that should be retracted as a consequence of Bart’s change of taste standards (since the content asserted by Bart at t_1 was and still is true, and that asserted by him at t_2 does not contradict the one he asserted at t_1).

One of these problems is also faced by moderate relativism: since it postulates perspective-neutral contents and takes the relevant perspective to be that of the context of utterance, retraction becomes infelicitous. To see this, compare the way moderate relativism renders the contents of Bart’s first and second utterances in LICORICE (as before, bolded font signifies semantic content):

LICORICE (MR)

Bart, a while back (t_1): **Licorice is tasty.**

Bart, now (t_2): **Bart-at- t_1 was wrong. Licorice is not tasty.**

While there is a content that was true at t_1 but is false at t_2 that should be retracted as a consequence of Bart’s change of taste standards (and the content asserted by him at t_2 does contradict the one he asserted at t_1), admitting fault (“I was wrong”) is still infelicitous, given that it is the perspective in the context of utterance (at t_1) that is relevant for evaluating Bart’s initial assertion, not the one in the later context (at t_2). But, if so, Bart has done nothing wrong at t_1 , so he shouldn’t retract.

Finally, retraction is presumably unproblematic for radical relativism, which also postulates perspective-neutral contents, but takes the relevant perspective to be that of the context of assessment (here, the context of retraction). The view entails that it is both the case that there is a content that was true at t_1 but is false at t_2 that should be retracted as a consequence of Bart’s change of taste standards (and the content asserted by him at t_2 does contradict the one he asserted at t_1) and that admitting fault (“I was wrong”) is felicitous, given that it is the perspective in the context of assessment (at t_2) that is relevant for evaluating Bart’s initial assertion, not the one in the previous context (at t_1). Summing up the dialectic: there is a phenomenon – retraction – for which there is intuitive evidence (the various scenarios in section 1.1.) and which is problematic for contextualism and moderate relativism, but not for radical relativism. Hence, the latter seems superior to the former two in this respect.^{6,7}

⁵ See Zakkou (2019) for an admirably clear description of the problem faced by various versions of contextualism.

⁶ In a recent paper, Dinges (2022) shows that moderate relativism can, in fact, account for retraction, conditional on the acceptance of certain views about time and location. I don’t have the space here to engage with Dinges’ paper, but the mere fact that moderate relativism’s success depends on adopting the views in question makes it problematic. I am not aware of full-blown attempts in the literature to account for retraction from a contextualist point of view (the tendency has rather been to undermine the data, as I will explain in what follows). For a discussion of whether “indexical relativism” (which can be considered a version of contextualism, given the way I have carved the logical space) has a good explanation of retraction, see Pérez-Navarro (2022); his conclusion is negative.

⁷ Of course, the full debate features many other arguments, such the argument from faultless disagreement, arguments from various linguistic embeddings, etc. I ignore these in this paper.

1.3. Two interpretations of the Retraction Rule

In connection to the relationship between the moderate version of relativism and the radical one, and to point out the important dialectical role of retraction, it has to be mentioned that, for some radical relativists like MacFarlane (2014), retraction is not only permitted, but *mandatory*: a norm of retraction makes it obligatory for an agent to retract a previously unretracted assertion whenever what has been asserted is shown to be currently false. Such a norm, MacFarlane claims, distinguishes radical versions of relativism from their moderate cousins in terms of predictions made, and is also needed, in addition to the introduction of novel parameters in circumstances of evaluation, to “make sense of relative truth” (see MacFarlane 2005 and 2014, chapter 5). Here is MacFarlane’s proposed rule:

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 . (MacFarlane 2014: 108)

Although this has not been made clear in the debate, there are at least two interpretations of the Retraction Rule. As stated above, the rule seems to be unrestricted, in the sense that the obligation to retract is entirely general. What this means is simply that, when people find themselves in retraction-like scenarios (that is, scenarios in which an assertion is made with a sentence containing a perspectival expression, followed by a challenge regarding the correctness of the assertion, based on a change of the relevant contextual element), they have the obligation to retract. If the rule is interpreted in this way, then retraction-like scenarios in which not retracting is felicitous or retracting leads to unintuitive results simply lead to the falsification of the rule, thus prompting the radical relativist to abandon it. An alternative interpretation of the rule is that the obligation for people who find themselves in retraction-like scenarios is restricted to certain conditions obtaining (such as various conversational goals, the situation of each interlocutor etc.) or types of scenarios – that is, the rule is tacitly restricted in certain ways. If the rule is interpreted in this way, scenarios like the ones mentioned above merely show that the rule doesn’t apply in the conversational conditions/types of scenarios tested. Since this leaves open that the rule applies in other conversational conditions/types of scenarios, they don’t force the radical relativist to abandon the rule, but rather to look further into the conversational conditions/types of scenarios in which the rule is meant to apply. Either way, the scenarios in question play an important dialectical role, in that they either urge the radical relativist to simply abandon the Retraction Rule (under the *generalist interpretation*) or to modify it by limiting its application to the right conditions/types of scenarios (under the *restricted interpretation*).

MacFarlane seems to have had in mind the generalist interpretation of the Retraction Rule when proposing it, and the same is true about many authors in the debate (including some of proponents of the scenarios to be presented in section 2 and some of the authors of the empirical studies to be addressed in section 3). In any case, the point I want to make here is that the significance of both types of results (from armchair considerations and from empirical studies) varies according to the interpretation at stake: quite obviously, they are more drastic and have stronger dialectical import under a generalist interpretation. To make this transparent, in what follows, when presenting and assessing the relevant results, I will go back and forth between the two interpretations, making clear what the significance of the results is in each case. I myself think that the relativist is better off embracing the restricted interpretation; I will propose a restricted retraction rule in section 3.3.

2. Armchair considerations

2.1. Initial reactions to the retraction data

It wasn't long after the retraction data were brought into the spotlight that reactions from relativism's rivals started to appear. Such reactions have mostly targeted MacFarlane's Retraction Rule and consist in providing scenarios that show that retraction is either *not mandatory* or *not appropriate*. One of the first challenges to taking retraction to be mandatory (and the first to make it in print) comes from von Fintel & Gillies (2008), who put forward the following scenario:

KEYS

[Alex is helping Billy search for his keys.]

Alex: The keys might be in the drawer.

Billy: (Looks in the drawer, agitated.) They're not. Why did you say that?

Alex: Look, I didn't say they were in the drawer. I said they might be there – and they might have been. Sheesh. (2008: 81)

In KEYS, we see Alex clearly refusing to retract his previous assertion and standing his ground when challenged by Billy. Alex's refusal, while possibly indicating some unnecessary stubbornness, seems nevertheless felicitous. Marques (2018) makes the same point in connection to predicates of taste, arguing that refusing to retract previous assertions made with sentences containing such predicates makes us neither irrational nor insincere. As with Alex's refusal to retract, the following seems to be perfectly felicitous:

POCOYO

I used to find Pocoyo funny, and I do not anymore. Still, I was not wrong when I was 3 years old and found it funny. It was the funniest thing back then! (2018: 3346)

With the similar goal of showing that retraction is not mandatory, Raffman (2016) points out that, even if one doesn't explicitly refuse to retract, when one's assertion is proven to be false, there are other ways that one could appropriately respond, as the following exchange attests:

VISA

Sally: Joe might be in China. I didn't see him today.

George: No, he can't be in China. He doesn't have his visa yet.

Sally: Oh, I didn't realize that. Then certainly he can't be in China./Then certainly he isn't in China. (2016: 175)

Von Fintel & Gillies (2008) have also remarked that in the case of epistemic modals, while the retraction markers are present, they can signal fault in connection not to the original assertion made with a sentence containing a bare epistemic modal, but in connection to the falsity of the prejacent (the information embedded into the modal):

VISA 2

Sally: Joe might be in China. I didn't see him today.

George: No, he can't be in China. He doesn't have his visa yet.

Sally: Oh, really? Then I guess I was wrong. (MacFarlane 2014: 240)

George's 'No' is taken to target the information that Joe is in China, not that Joe might be in China, and so Sally's admission of wrongness doesn't count as a retraction, since it doesn't target the previous assertion, just a part of it.

Finally, a fourth scenario extracted from the literature aims at showing that retraction is not appropriate. The case piggybacks on exchanges purporting to show that radical relativism makes the wrong predictions in certain situations. One such situation is that of "knowledgeable assessors" (see Dietz (2008), among others), in which what an assessor knows rules out a certain possibility, yet the evaluation of the initial assertion stating that very same possibility as true seems correct. Here's an example:

MASTERMIND

Pascal and Mordecai are playing Mastermind. After some rounds where Mordecai gives Pascal hints about the solution, Pascal says

There might be two reds.

Mordecai – who knows the solution – can reply by agreeing with the modal claim:

That's right. There might be. (Adapted from von Fintel & Gillies 2008: 83 & 90).

Similar scenarios, but involving retraction, can be constructed. Here is one, adapted from Dowell (2011: 16):

LOTTERY

The day before the lottery's drawing you ask me "Why did you buy that ticket?", to which it is fine for me to reply "I might win."

Imagine now an equally natural exchange the following day, after another ticket was drawn and mine has lost.

You: "Why did you buy that ticket? You didn't win!"

Me1: ["True, but I might have won. So, I was right."]

Me2: ?? ["True. What I said yesterday was false. So, I was wrong."]

Dowell's point is that Me2's reply should be felicitous according to radical relativism, but in fact it isn't (while Me1's is).

2.2. Replies to the initial reactions

The scenarios presented above sow doubt about the retraction data on which radical relativists rely by calling the Retraction Rule into question. The scenarios are interesting in themselves and reveal certain aspects of our use of the expressions at stake; a complete theory should surely take them into consideration. However, it is far from clear that they drastically diminish the import of the initial retraction data or that they raise serious problems for radical relativism. Granted, to accommodate some of these scenarios, some concessions might have to be made, or some claims considered to be essential parts of the framework rethought. In what follows, I will show both how the radical relativist can reply to the scenarios presented and what concessions (if any) should be made in connection to each.

First, KEYS, POCOYO and similar scenarios pose the most serious threat, in that they feature characters directly refusing to retract, which are taken to have spoken felicitously, to not be irrational or unreasonable, etc. Under the generalist interpretation of the Retraction Rule, such scenarios lead to its abandonment. One way to counteract this outcome would be to dispute the felicity (rationality, etc.) of the refusal to retract showcased in the scenarios at stake. However, this

is not the route I will take. Instead, I think that the radical relativist should simply bite the bullet here and give up the claim that retraction is obligatory. This sounds like a significant concession, but I don't think it is as momentous as it sounds. First, even though MacFarlane takes the Retraction Rule to be part and parcel of the relativist view, this can be resisted: while the relativist should undoubtedly account for our practice of retracting, it doesn't need to be done by adopting the Retraction Rule. This would shield the radical relativist from any direct attack on the rule itself. Second, and more importantly, the fact is that even if retraction is not mandatory (as the scenarios at issue prove), there *will* be some cases of retraction, at least if the intuitive case for the phenomenon on which I have relied so far is to be trusted. Such cases do require an explanation, and the problem for radical relativism's rivals (i.e., that of explaining how retraction is possible in their respective frameworks in those cases) remains, with the advantage relativism has enjoyed being preserved.⁸ If, on the other hand, the second, restricted, interpretation of the Retraction Rule is adopted, then what the scenarios in question show is less dramatic: namely, that *in the cases at hand* retraction is not mandatory and that, as a result, the radical relativist has work to do in finding the right conversational conditions/types of scenarios to which the rule applies.

A worry that might be raised at this stage is that if radical relativists don't take retraction to be mandatory, then they will experience a kind of identity crisis. As I mentioned in section 1.3., the main reason MacFarlane has put so much weight on retraction is that it serves to distinguish his radical version of relativism from the more moderate version. But, arguably, giving up on the claim that retraction is mandatory will *not* make radical relativism indistinguishable from other views, as MacFarlane fears. For one, it will still be the case that radical relativism is semantically distinct from its rivals, in that it postulates contexts of assessment in addition to contexts of utterance, while the other views don't. Second, as Berškýtė and Stevens (2022) and Wyatt & Ulatowski (this volume) show, there is still an *empirical* difference between the two versions of relativism which manifests itself in the fact that they generate different predictions vis-à-vis truth value assessments. And, of course, if the Retraction Rule is restricted, then radical relativism's predictive power is not cancelled at all: it will certainly not predict that people should always retract, nor will it predict that they should in the scenarios at hand, but it will predict that they do so when in a restricted number of (carefully circumscribed) cases to be uncovered.

Taking all of this on board, let us move on to the next scenario. Regarding VISA, the relativist can agree with Raffman that Sally's answer is appropriate; however, this in itself is no impediment to retraction being appropriate as well. In replying to Raffman, MacFarlane confesses that "[these] remarks make me worry that a negative answer needn't mean retraction" (2016: 198). Indeed, it needn't; but if one gives up the claim that retraction is mandatory (which is what the concession amounts to under the generalist interpretation of the Retraction Rule), Raffman's point has no dialectical force against radical relativism: the two types of data can simply co-exist. If, on the other hand, the second, restricted, interpretation of the Retraction Rule is adopted, then Raffman's scenario shows that there are cases in which retraction is not mandatory and, as before, that the radical relativist has work to do in finding the right conversational conditions/types of scenarios to which the rule applies.

In relation to VISA 2, the reply is a bit more complicated. In fact, several answers have already been given to such scenarios. MacFarlane (2014), for example, replies that targeting the epistemic modal can easily be made explicit. As far as intuitive exchanges go, Sally's reply can be something like "It's not the case that he might be in China". And, as before, the fact that Sally can felicitously reply in VISA 2 in the way she does is no obstacle to taking the more explicit answer

⁸ Indeed, some participants in these debates (e.g., Zakkou (2019)) have taken retraction itself, rather than its being obligatory, as one of the data to be explained.

just given to be felicitous as well. A second point MacFarlane makes is that other cases of targeting embedded material show different behavior. Thus, consider:

RUMOUR

Sally: It's rumored that you are leaving California.

George: No, that's false. (2014: 240)

Were Sally to reply with something like "Oh, really? Then I guess I was wrong", we would think that this is infelicitous, since she was just reporting the rumor in the first place, not saying that George is in fact leaving California. The asymmetry between such cases and the epistemic modal cases has to be explained. A third point is that even if von Fintel & Gillies are right about epistemic modals, their point doesn't apply to less complex expressions. Epistemic modals are indeed quite complex; orthodox accounts have it that they are composed of at least two elements: the prejacent and the base (and, according to the contextualist, a restrictor). But other predicates in relation to which retraction has been discussed – such as predicates of taste – are not. A similar point to von Fintel and Gillies' cannot be made in connection to these, and thus their case is at best incomplete.

Finally, regarding LOTTERY, the solution consists in a small departure from the radical relativist playbook. Radical relativism is mostly conceived of as a rigid position, according to which the perspective, which is always initialized in the context of assessment, is *that of the assessor*. But *flexible* versions of radical relativism have been also proposed, and they have been contenders in the debate for a while (see, for example, Zeman (2010) for knowledge attributions; MacFarlane (2011, 2014), Khoo (2015) and Beddor & Egan (2018) for epistemic modals; and Dinges & Zakkou (2020) for predicates of taste). According to such versions, not only can the assessor adopt a perspective that is not their own (as when an exocentric assessment is made, or from the point of view of a group, etc.), but they can sometimes adopt the perspective that is relevant in the initial assertion's context of utterance (regardless of whether the initial assertion was made by themselves or by someone else).⁹ This type of flexibility is what allows the radical relativist to account for scenarios like MASTERMIND (Mordecai is simply taking Pascal's point of view – i.e., is judging the truth of the epistemic modal sentence based on the body of information available to Pascal) and, more importantly for us, scenarios like LOTTERY. The radical relativist could argue (as does MacFarlane (2011)) that in this scenario, the body of information Me2 should take as relevant is the one of the initial assertion's context of utterance – that is, the body of information available to Me when buying the ticket, not the one of the context of assessment – that is, the body of information available to Me2 after buying the lottery ticket and learning that the ticket has lost. Of course, according to *that* body of information, there was still a chance for the ticket to be the winner. The flexibility inherent in this more sophisticated radical relativist view makes room for such a switch. What still needs to be explained is *why* in this case Me2 should adopt that body of information instead of the other one; I will turn to this issue in section 3.4., after we will see flexible radical relativism make another appearance. For now, though, we have an explanation of why Me2's reply is infelicitous (to repeat: because Me2 bases their judgment on the wrong body of information), thus countering Dowell's charge.¹⁰

The contextualist might offer one final rejoinder here. They might claim that the relativism-friendly responses I've provided entirely miss the point, which is that simply there are no proper

⁹ From now on, I will use "the perspective of the context of ..." instead of the more cumbersome formulation above.

¹⁰ In both VISA 2 and LOTTERY, the effect of the interpretation of the Retraction Rule on the dialectical import of the cases seems to be the same as in KEYS, POCOYO and VISA, so I'll save the reader some time and not spell this out.

cases of retraction, only the types of reactions showcased above.¹¹ I feel the force of this reply, but I also worry that it just boils down to a clash of intuitions between relativists and contextualists, and is thus very unlikely to spur progress in these debates. What would move the debate are experimental studies purporting to show that retraction is, or is not, something that ordinary users of language do, and under what conditions. Such studies are the topic of the next section.

3. Experimental studies

3.1. Extant studies and their conclusions

Experimental work concerning retraction in relation to perspectival expressions is very recent. Despite its novelty, though, there seems to be somewhat of a consensus in the literature (supported by strong claims made by the authors of some of the studies) that the data clearly favor contextualism (or moderate relativism) over radical relativism. My aim in this section is to show that this consensus is misguided. I will focus on two of the most relevant studies, discussing them in turn.

I start with the pioneering paper by Knobe & Yalcin (2014). In it, using scenarios involving epistemic modals, the authors show both that retraction is a less robust phenomenon than presumably assumed in the debate and that, even though retraction is judged appropriate by the participants in the experiments, there is a significant rift between truth-assessments and retraction judgments (while the expectation, fueling the radical relativist view, is that they would go together). They arrive at the first result by comparing judgments about retraction in two similar scenarios. The first involves a sentence without an epistemic modal, and the second involves a sentence with an epistemic modal. Both sentences are uttered by an expert, there is a change in context consisting in the expert gathering more information, and the expert then uses the retraction marker “I was wrong.” (ibid., Experiment 3). Participants were asked to register their agreement/disagreement with the sentence “Expert [x] was right to say ‘I was wrong.’” on a Likert scale from 1 (“completely disagree”) to 7 (“completely agree”). The mean in the non-modal condition was between 6 and 7 while the mean in the modal condition was approximately 4. Knobe & Yalcin thus conclude: “Participants did not strongly agree with the claim that it would be correct in [the modal condition] for the speaker to retract, but at the very least, they did not specifically disagree with this claim.” (2014: 10:13) As they also mention, this is not a terribly favorable result for relativism, but one that I take to be sufficiently robust to require an explanation.

Knobe and Yalcin arrive at the second result by again comparing two types of scenarios, which are very similar to BOSTON, but without the retraction (ibid., Experiment 4). One involves a sentence without an epistemic modal and the other involves a sentence with an epistemic modal. A change in context occurs consisting in the speaker gathering more information. This time the experiment featured two questions: one about the falsity of the initial assertion (“What Sally said is false.”), the other about the appropriateness of retraction (“It would be appropriate for Sally to take back what she said.”). As in the previous experiment, participants were asked to register their agreement/disagreement with the two sentences on a 7-point Likert scale. Here is the result, in the form of a graph:

¹¹ I thank Graham Stevens for bringing up this point.

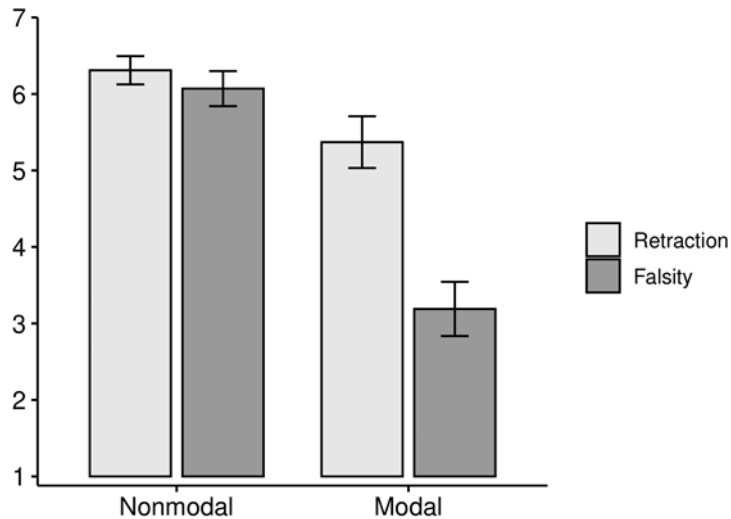


Figure [1]. Mean ratings by condition for Experiment 4. Error bars show standard error of the mean. (Knobe & Yalcin 2014: 10:15).

About this result, Knobe and Yalcin write: “[T]his (...) study showed a significant divergence between people’s judgments about retraction and their judgments about falsity (...) [T]here is clearly something that makes people think it would be appropriate for the speaker to retract, but whatever that something is, we cannot say in general that it owes to a judgment that the original [modal claim] itself is false.” (2014: 10:16)

This is an important and interesting finding, one that questions the tight connection between the falsity of the initial assertion and the obligation to retract postulated by the radical relativist. However, one defense of radical relativism on this issue comes from Beddor & Egan (2018), who have responded precisely to this result. Their reply is that the divergence in truth-value assessment and retraction judgments comes from the participants making the former based on one body of information (that of Sally in her initial situation, before the new information came in) and the latter based on another body of information (that of Sally in the later situation, after the new information was processed). This explains the rift found by Knobe & Yalcin, as well as why judgments about retraction scored higher on the scale than judgments about truth-value assessment. As Beddor & Egan make clear, the possibility of assessing the truth value of an assertion by taking the relevant perspective (in this case, a body of information) to be that in the context of utterance is the mark of a *flexible* radical relativist view. So, while perhaps Knobe & Yalcin’s results sink a non-flexible version of radical relativism, they *are* compatible with a flexible one. While this doesn’t show that the retraction data directly support radical relativism, it does show that Knobe & Yalcin’s result is not threatening to radical relativism as such.

Knobe & Yalcin’s study has aimed to undermine the support retraction has been taken to offer radical relativism by showing that certain assumptions made by the proponents of the view (e.g., that there is a tight connection between the falsity of the initial assertion and retraction) are contestable. There are also some studies that question retraction more directly. Kneer (2021, 2022) and Marques (this volume) provide data to the effect that people, in fact, don’t retract assertions made by using sentences that contain predicates of taste or epistemic modals.

Kneer (2021) presents several experiments with various scenarios involving predicates of taste in which the protagonist’s taste standard changes and they are then confronted about it. Participants were asked to mark their level of agreement/disagreement (“To what extent do you agree or disagree with [x]’s claim? (1= completely disagree; 7= completely agree)”) with two

utterances by the challenger: “So what you said back when you were five was false.” and “So you are required to take back what you said about ...”.¹² The experiments were repeated in Kneer (2022), where he both directly questions relativism and aims to show that some of the more favorable results for the view (the first one from Knobe & Yalcin above, as well as what Dinges & Zakkou (2020) call the “direction effect”) are flawed. Here is a summary of the results arrived at by Kneer that are most relevant here (“Fish Sticks”, “Sandcastle” and “Salmon” are the names of the scenarios tested):

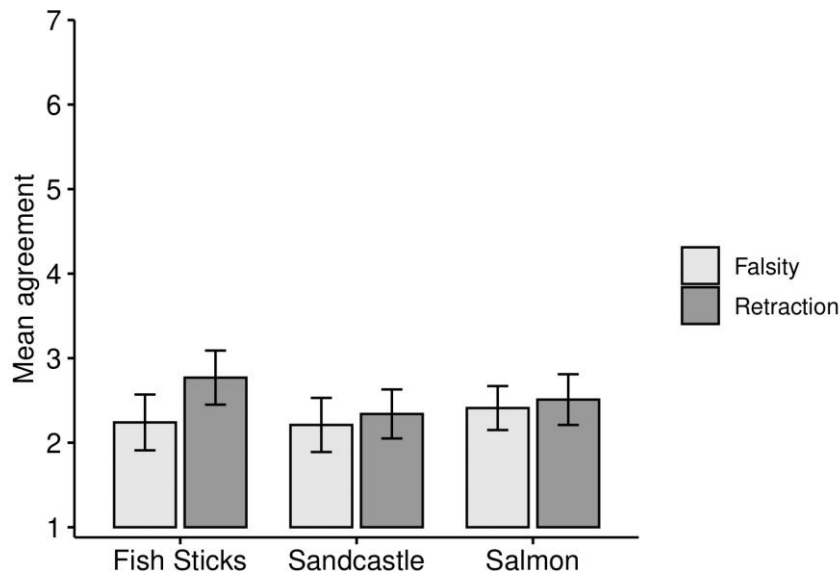


Figure [2]: Mean agreement with the statement that an original taste claim was false at the context of utterance and that it must be retracted given preference reversals across different scenarios. Error bars denote standard error of the mean. (Kneer, 2022: 5).

These numbers show a very low tendency both to judge the initial assertion as false and to judge retraction as correct (and are, thus, in tension with Knobe & Yalcin’s results). They seem to give a fatal blow to relativism, which would predict these numbers to be much higher. Here is Kneer’s conclusion:

The findings presented in this paper are quite clear: In three experiments modelled on a scenario which truth relativists present as data in favour of their semantics, empirical data proper suggests otherwise. The predictions of MacFarlane-style relativism regarding truth-assessment and retraction stand refuted both in terms of absolute results, as well as vis-à-vis the relativist benchmark levels. The predictions of contextualism, on the other hand, are confirmed in both respects. (2021: 6469)

Similar results – with the same conclusion – are arrived at by Marques (this volume), who tested Spanish speakers about the use and retraction of epistemic modals.

¹² Kneer also tests scenarios with less of a time lag between the initial assertions and the challenge, as well as benchmark scenarios (in which the relevant protagonists’ taste doesn’t change). I ignore here time lag concerns, as they don’t seem to make any difference for the results.

3.2. Replies to Kneer

The results reported look solid. There are, however, reasons to doubt that Kneer's results lead directly to a refutation of radical relativism. Some of these have to do with the experimental set-up, others with the availability of a version of flexible radical relativism that is consistent with the data. I will expand on these reasons below.

First, it is obvious that once radical relativists give up the claim that retraction is mandatory, Kneer's insistence on testing whether participants agree that the characters in the vignettes are *required* to retract is misplaced. (Kneer doesn't explicitly discuss this, but it seems that he favors a generalist interpretation of the Retraction Rule. If a restricted interpretation is adopted instead, the results merely show that in the types of scenarios/conversational conditions tested, the rule doesn't apply.) If one dispenses with the claim that assertions must be retracted when contexts change in relevant ways, then Knobe and Yalcin's question about whether retraction is *appropriate* regains its significance. And, as we've seen above, the results they present when that question is asked are far from damaging to radical relativism. Granted, there's the issue (one that Kneer (2021) tackles) of what exactly retraction being appropriate amounts to. More needs to be said about this (and I myself don't have an answer), but the fact remains that Beddor & Egan's reply to Knobe & Yalcin's study shows that retraction of an assertion being appropriate has some connection with the assertion being false in the assessor's context. After all, in the result provided by Knobe & Yalcin (see Figure [1] above), about half of the cases in which their participants deemed retraction appropriate are cases in which they also judged that the previous assertion was false. This overlap strongly suggests that there is a connection between the two – even if the sense of “appropriate” in the remaining cases still has to be elucidated.¹³

Second, even if one agrees with Kneer that what needs to be tested is whether the relevant assertions must be retracted, I'm not convinced that the results arrived at are safe. More precisely, I am worried that the experimental set up used in the studies has not controlled for a possible shift in perspective similar to that mentioned by Beddor & Egan (2018) in the case of judgments about truth-value assessments. Since in the scenarios given, more than one taste standard is available (to repeat, at least two: that of the context of the initial assertion/utterance and that of the context of retraction/assessment), the question arises of which standard the participants adopt. Since, in essence, participants are asked to make a judgment by embracing an exocentric stance (or to identify with one of the characters in the vignettes at a certain time/context), the possibility of adopting one or the other remains open. But which standard they do adopt in making the judgments *crucially* matters for the results of the experiments. For example, if they adopt the standard of the context of the initial assertion/utterance, then retracting would indeed make very little sense; the results are significant only if the standard adopted by the participants is that of the context of retraction/assessment. As far as I can tell, though, in none of Kneer's or Marques' studies has it

¹³ Kneer (2022) opposes this conclusion by denying that judgments about the appropriateness of retraction are significant for semantics. I tend to agree, but the argument above is that judgments about that *in combination* with judgments about truth-value assessments are. Now, on the latter, Kneer's findings agree with that of Knobe & Yalcin (2014) (they only disagree when it comes to judgments about retraction) – in both studies judgments about truth-value assessments scored low on the scale. But since it targets those judgments in Knobe & Yalcin's study, Beddor & Egan's flexible relativist story easily applies to Kneer's results as well (for a similar take targeting judgments about retraction, see below). Incidentally, Kneer's results in the “No/No” benchmark scenario (Kneer 2021: 6467, figure 4), which he takes to be evidence against relativism and to show that a retraction norm is fictitious, can instead be interpreted as suggesting that the “appropriate to retract” question is the right one, not the “must retract” one.

been ruled out that the participants have adopted the standard of the context of the initial assertion/utterance when making the relevant judgments, which puts the results into doubt.¹⁴

To this it might be replied that by following the stories in the vignettes, participants are automatically led to adopt the perspective of the assessor, or to identify with the assessor in the scenarios given. This seems like a natural thought, but it strikes me being little more than an assumption. As I made clear, this issue is crucial for the viability of the results of the experiments, so simply assuming that the participants will follow this route is suboptimal.¹⁵ What Kneer (and others) need to show is that the possibility of the participants adopting the taste standard of the context of utterance rather than that of the context of assessment when judging retraction as appropriate/mandatory is *ruled out*. That people are generally able to make such shifts in perspective when faced with a choice (“to walk in someone else’s shoes”, as the saying goes – basically, to adopt a cross-contextual exocentric stance) seems to me hard to deny. Perhaps the participants in the studies didn’t do it in the experiments at hand; but we need a stronger assurance that they haven’t for the results to be significant.

Kneer might reply to this worry by saying that I’ve misconstrued the dialectic by turning things around and that the fact that participants’ judgments about retraction are situated very low on the scale *shows* that they, in fact, adopt the taste standard of the context of utterance and not that of the context of assessment (which is taken to support contextualism or moderate relativism). However, this doesn’t follow, simply because there are versions of radical relativism with which the results are compatible (as Kneer himself admits – see the final paragraph of Kneer (2021: 6469-6470), for example). In fact, this is true independently of Kneer having the problem with the experimental set-up I presented above, which is my third point. The road from Kneer’s results to the demise of relativism is not as direct as we are led to believe, due to the availability of a flexible version of radical relativism. We have already seen this strategy at work in Beddor & Egan’s reply to Knobe & Yalcin’s results. However, they employ it in order to fend off problematic results in connection to judgments about truth-value assessments, and it isn’t immediately clear that it also helps with judgments about retraction *per se*. In fact, as Beddor and Egan employ the strategy, it doesn’t. The reason is that, despite adopting flexibility when it comes to truth-value assessments, they hold an orthodox, non-flexible view when it comes to retraction. The following quote supports this take on their view:

Finally: what is it to retract some earlier claim? It is to publicly signal that one no longer accepts it, or no longer advocates others accepting it. And so if someone discovers that their earlier claim is false relative to their current context, then it should be appropriate for them to retract it. (After all, they no longer accept its content, and presumably they no longer wish to advocate for their current interlocutors to accept its content.) On the picture that emerges, judgments about truth-value are flexible, in that they can track truth/falsity in different contexts of assessment. By contrast, judgments about the normative status of accepting/rejecting/retracting a claim are inflexible, in that they invariably track truth in the context of assessment of the person doing the accepting/rejecting/retracting. (Beddor & Egan 2018: 15)

¹⁴ The thought here is that adopting a certain standard and retracting, although related, are two different things, conceptually and practically speaking. The general point I’m making takes adopting perspectives as the more fundamental act, on which disagreement, retraction and other phenomena depend.

¹⁵ In the experiments they conduct, Beddor & Egan (2018) explicitly control for the factor they believe allows participants to adopt the relevant body of information: the question under discussion. I’m not sure whether they are successful, but such an endeavour seems a step in the right direction.

Allowing flexibility with truth-value assessments but not with retraction explains both the rift between the two found by Knobe & Yalcin *and* the fact that judgments about retraction are situated higher on the scale than judgments about truth-value assessments (see Figure [1] above). However, it doesn't explain Kneer's results (Figure [2] above), because according to Beddor & Egan's solution, people's judgments about retraction should be higher on the scale (regardless of what happens with judgments about truth-value assessments). The claim made in the last sentence of the quote strikes me as too strong, so I think it should be given up so as to allow judgments about "the normative status of (...) retracting a claim" to be flexible and to deny that they "invariably track truth in the context of assessment of the person doing the (...) retracting". The required flexibility can be incorporated into the framework – in addition to the flexibility pertaining to truth-value assessments – by making the choice of the relevant perspective play a role in determining the conditions under which people should retract. Thus, I propose to replace MacFarlane's Retraction Rule, which Beddor & Egan seem to adopt, with the following:

Retraction Rule^F: An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of p made at c_1 if

- (i) p is not true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 and
- (ii) the perspective with respect to which p is assessed in c_2 is not the perspective with respect to which p is assessed in c_1 .

Since the proposed version of radical relativism is flexible, the relevant perspective in a context of assessment need not be that of the context of assessment, but can be that of the context of utterance. Retraction Rule^F restricts the conditions in which retraction is mandatory by restricting the choice of the relevant perspective. This doesn't seem such a great departure from the flexible framework already proposed by Beddor & Egan, and as I mentioned above, it seems to be in line with the shifts in perspective that people are able to undergo. But, importantly, adopting Retraction Rule^F makes Kneer's results compatible with flexible radical relativism: the low position on the scale of participants' judgments about retraction (as well as those about truth-value assessments) can be explained by the fact that the conditions stated by Retraction Rule^F have not been met. That is, the scenarios haven't ruled out that the perspectives with respect to which the initial assertions are assessed in the relevant contexts of assessment are, indeed, the perspectives of the relevant contexts of utterance. Of course, the relativist has to specify, in a principled way, *when* such shifts in the relevant perspective are allowed or not in a context of assessment (an issue to which I turn shortly); but, for now, the conclusion is that despite the robustness of the findings and the strong wording of his conclusions, Kneer hasn't shown that radical relativism is doomed.¹⁶

3.3. Flexibility worries

The flexibility envisaged by the flexible radical relativist – both in the version provided by Beddor & Egan and the one canvassed above – raises legitimate worries. One of these worries, which has been flagged by contextualists, is that positing flexibility is simply *ad hoc*. Considering whether the relativist should go flexible in the case of epistemic modals, Dowell replies that "then he will

¹⁶ A similar conclusion is arrived at by Wyatt & Ulatowski (this volume), who argue that Kneer's results constitute a problem for absolutists, but not for the other views in the debate. They claim that the radical relativist should not follow MacFarlane in taking retraction to be mandatory, a point with which I surely agree. Doing so, however, doesn't put (in their opinion) radical relativism in a superior position when it comes to accounting for retraction. But surely, they must admit that there are cases of retraction, and, if so, the issue of how the other views account for them reappears (see section 2.2.). A more in-depth comparison of the two positions would be worthwhile.

(...) owe a story about how different contexts of assessment are able to select the different bodies intuitively needed to get all the cases right” (2011: 18). Kneer envisages an even more dramatic upshot: “[T]he flexibility invoked to save relativism might easily collapse into an anything-goes picture.” (2021: 17). This concern is indeed important, and the relativist is well-advised to address it.

One way to tackle this issue is already available in the literature: Beddor & Egan’s proposal that the shift in a context of assessment from the perspective of the context of assessment to that of an assertion’s context of utterance is determined by the question under discussion (QUD). Thus, they propose what they call the “QUD Constraint”:

Suppose someone in a conversational context *c* is assessing an utterance of a [sentence containing an epistemic modal] for truth or falsity. *Ceteris paribus*, they will be inclined to assess the utterance using whichever context of assessment is most relevant to answering the QUD in *c*. (Beddor & Egan 2018: 10).

They illustrate how the QUD Constraint works by drawing attention to two types of situations in relation to the scenarios involving epistemic modals they present: in one, the QUD is strictly about the truth of the prejacent; in the other, the QUD is about the speakers’ competence. When the latter is in place, then the body of information available in the context of utterance is the one to go by; when the former is in place, then the body of information available in the context of assessment is the relevant one. This strategy explains all the cases in which flexible radical relativism is called upon, and does this in a principled, non-*ad hoc* way.

However, Beddor & Egan readily admit that the QUD Constraint cannot be the only factor underscoring flexibility (“it would be implausibly strong to claim that the QUD Constraint is the only principle governing the choice of a context of assessment” (2018: 11)). This leaves it open that there are other constraints that guide flexibility. Indeed, Beddor & Egan themselves mention another factor that could play this role: a charity principle. The thought here is that the assessor adopts the perspective of the context of utterance so as not to construe the assessor as speaking falsely or as being irrational. In the same vein, it seems to me that there are other types of constraints that are tightly (perhaps essentially) connected to the type of endeavor in a given conversation.

For example, in a conversation in which the goal is to find an explanation for someone’s behavior, elements having to do with the nature of explanation could direct the choice of perspective. To illustrate, consider LOTTERY. The issue in that scenario was explaining someone’s action – that is, explaining why I bought the lottery ticket (the question in the challenge is “Why did you buy that ticket?”). One common claim is that the explanation of someone’s actions appeals to the body of information of that person at that time. Given that this is such a case, it makes sense to take the body of information that was available to the person whose assertion we are trying to explain at the time of their assertion as that relevant for the evaluation of this assertion. Thus, Me1 is right in taking the relevant body of information to be that of the context of utterance (that is, at a time before the lottery draw), while Me2 is wrong in taking the relevant body of information to be that of the context of assessment (that is, after the lottery draw). Importantly, the reason this is so has to do, first and foremost, with the nature of explanation¹⁷.

The fact that there is a plethora of constraints that can be invoked to limit the flexibility at stake suggests that there might be a general, more encompassing constraint or principle available

¹⁷ This doesn’t exclude the other principles from playing a role, too: for example, the QUD “find an explanation for my behaviour” subsumes the situation quite well, while charity might be employed in order to not make my action irrational.

(a “meta-principle”, if you will). I want to propose that this meta-principle should be based on the notion of the *importance*, in a context of assessment, of the assertor’s situation for the issue at stake (I’ll call that “the assertor’s situation”, for short). Note that, generally, what is important in a context of assessment depends crucially on the conversational goals – or perhaps on what the interlocutors take those goals to be, and the same holds for the importance of the assertor’s situation. Additionally, what exact form this meta-principle takes in a context of assessment depends. However, allowing for a more general meta-principle of the kind suggested instead of postulating a multiplicity of particular constraints has its advantages. For example, there might be cases in which following the dictates of the QUD (or the other constraints) might be impossible, while understanding that the assertor’s situation is important in that context might not. Beddor & Egan note that there are cases in which the QUD in a conversation is difficult or impossible to identify, or cases in which more than one comes to the fore. The notion of importance of the assertor’s situation might help here: while the interlocutors might not access the (unique) QUD, they might have a better grasp on what is important to the issue in that particular context of assessment. There might also be cases in which it is not clear what constraint should be followed; here, again, just grasping the fact that the assertor’s situation is important to the issue at hand might do the trick. Importantly, while the importance-based meta-principle is itself flexible in the form it takes, it amounts to a principled, non-*ad hoc* way of solving the flexibility worry.

Finally, there is at least one surprising consequence of understanding flexible radical relativism along these lines that deserves to be mentioned.¹⁸ Whether the assertor’s situation is important in a certain context of assessment varies: it might be so in one such context but not in another. Given that importance is a non-linguistic contextual factor, it follows that the very same exchange in a retraction-like scenario (consisting of the initial assertion and the challenge, but not the reaction to it) might meet the conditions for retraction in one context, but not in the other.¹⁹ However, I don’t think this is problematic for the radical relativist. After all, it is difficult to deny that importance is a context-sensitive (and perhaps even assessment-sensitive) notion, and so putting it to work by appealing to precisely this trait is not unreasonable. Besides, many other notions are taken by the radical relativist to be relative to contexts of assessment (e.g., correctness); the place of importance might just be among them.

4. Summary and conclusions

In this paper, I have investigated whether the support retraction has been thought to offer radical relativism can survive the recent two-pronged attack launched against it in the literature: one prong being based on “armchair” considerations consisting in scenarios to the effect that retraction is either not mandatory or not appropriate, and the other being based on experimental studies. I concluded that the support still stands if the radical relativist is ready to make some concessions. First, she has to settle on a restricted interpretation of the Retraction Rule. In this connection, I have proposed a new rule, with the restriction stemming from the choice of perspective in a context of assessment. Second, she must go flexible, both when it comes to truth-value assessments and to retraction. In this connection, I proposed a principled way to determine when the relevant perspective shifts happen, based on the (context-sensitive) notion of the importance of the assertor’s situation in a context of assessment. The version of flexible radical relativism these concessions lead to is compatible with the negative results vis-à-vis retraction found in the literature, while the initial challenge retraction poses for rival views remains. In other words: the case for retraction offering support to radical relativism is not yet lost.

¹⁸ I thank Joanna Odrowąż-Sypniewska for pointing out this consequence of the view.

¹⁹ See Beddor & Egan’s (2018: 6) examples (3) and (4), which are precisely such a pair.

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