

PREDICATES OF PERSONAL TASTE: EMPIRICAL DATA

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Abstract

According to contextualism, the extension of claims of personal taste is dependent on the context of utterance. According to truth relativism, their extension depends on the context of assessment. On this view, when the tastes of a speaker change, so does the truth value of a previously uttered taste claim, and if it is false, the speaker is required to retract it. Both views make strong empirical assumptions, which are here put to the test for the first time in three experiments with over 740 participants. It turns out that the linguistic behaviour of ordinary English speakers is consistent with contextualist predictions and inconsistent with the predictions of the most widely discussed form of truth relativism advocated by John MacFarlane.

1. Introduction

1.1 Indexical Contextualism

Indexical contextualism is a semantic theory according to which claims involving predicates of personal taste such as ‘delicious’, ‘tasty’ or ‘fun’ are context-dependent.¹ The relevant standard of taste of, say, ‘Spinach is delicious’ is determined by the context of utterance, and it manifests itself, albeit tacitly, at the level of the content expressed by the utterance. Claims of this sort are thus somewhat analogous to utterances invoking strict indexicals such as ‘I’ or ‘now’. What a sentence like ‘I am hungry’ expresses can vary across contexts, since different contexts of utterance may supply different values for the first person pronoun, that is, different speakers. The default value of perspectival claims is also the perspective of the speaker, though sometimes it is the perspective of another individual, or some contextually salient group. Standardly, however, indexical contextualists take (1) to mean (2):

¹ The semantics of predicates of personal taste has received a lot of attention over the last two decades. An incomplete list of important contributions includes Kölbel (2002, 2004, 2004, 2009), Lasersohn (2005, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2017), Stojanovic (2007, 2017), Stephenson (2007), Recanati (2007), Glanzberg (2007), MacFarlane (2007, 2014), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) as well as the Analysis book symposium (2011) about the latter, Sæbø (2009), Moltmann (2010), Egan (2010), Sundell (2011), Schaffer (2011), Huvenes (2012), Collins (2013), Marques (2014, 2018), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014), Zeman (2016), Kneer, Zeman & Vicente (2017), Zakkou (2017, 2019).

- (1) Spinach is tasty.
- (2) Spinach is tasty for me.

This intuitively plausible picture has recently come under attack, principally on the basis of two arguments: The argument from faultless disagreement, and the argument from required retraction. The former has been employed to motivate a position called nonindexical contextualism, the latter to motivate truth relativism. Here we focus on the latter.

1.2 Truth Relativism

Truth relativism² differs from indexical contextualism in three regards: *Firstly*, perspectival elements such as the relevant standard of taste are not part of the Kaplanian *content* of the proposition expressed by an utterance, but a parameter in the circumstance of evaluation like worlds or times. The content itself is perspective-neutral, just as it is time-neutral on a temporalist view of propositions such as Kaplan's (1989) own. *Secondly*, which standard of taste is relevant does not depend on *the* context of *utterance*, but on *some* context of *assessment*. Since there are countless contexts of assessment – in contrast to a single context of utterance per utterance – the truth-value of the proposition expressed is non-constant: It can vary across contexts of assessment, depending on the assessor's standard of taste. *Thirdly*, if the taste of a speaker evolves, her previous claim might no longer be accurate or true with respect to her current context of assessment. In such a case, the speaker – if challenged by an interlocutor – is required to retract or take back her previous claim.³ Here is an instructive passage by MacFarlane:

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

² Defenders of the position, not necessarily limited to predicates of personal taste, are inter alia MacFarlane (2007, 2014), Egan (2007), Lasersohn (2005, 2016) and Beddor & Egan (2018). This paper predominantly focuses on MacFarlane's truth relativism.

³ For detailed discussion of retractions, see Ferrari (2016), Marques (2018), Zakkou (2019), Caponetto (2020).

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)

What the example brings out is that the *truth* of claims of personal taste is assessment-sensitive (i.e. it depends on features of the context of assessment), and that this is *demonstrated* by the retraction of such claims at contexts of assessment at which they are no longer true. This can be fleshed out a bit. MacFarlane proposes a norm-driven picture of assertion, that is, a view according to which the practice of assertion is governed by certain constitutive rules. According to one such rule, a speaker should only assert what is true:

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)

The reflexive truth rule might seem puzzling, in so far as the context of utterance (or use) and the context of assessment *coincide*. This means – as MacFarlane acknowledges – that it 'will not help us make sense of relative truth, for it leaves contexts of assessment without any *essential* role to play' (2014, p. 104). However, the truth rule does not exhaust the normative constraints that govern assertion. As illustrated by the fish sticks example, there seems to be another constitutive rule in play, a rule in which contexts of assessment play a central role:

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)

Hence: Young MacFarlane was *permitted* to utter 'Fish sticks are tasty', since the claim was true as used and assessed from the context of utterance. Once his tastes have evolved, however, he has to admit (if challenged) that his claim was *false* since it is inaccurate from his present context of assessment. But if the previously made claim is now considered as *having been false*, MacFarlane

suggests, it needs to be retracted so as to ‘undo the normative commitments’ undertaken by the speaker when it was uttered. In sum, relativism proposes a view that defines truth-evaluation as dependent on contexts of assessment, and suggests that the retraction of taste claims arises *in virtue* of their assessment-sensitivity.

1.3 Two kinds of Data

Truth Relativism about predicates of personal taste is a position that makes empirically testable claims about our practices of truth-ascription and the retraction of assertions. These claims are taken to ground certain constitutive norms of assertion – the truth rule and the rule of retraction. Note that the norms in question are *behaviour-dependent*: They rely on the empirical adequacy of the relevant descriptions of our practice of assertion. If the descriptive claims are false, the norms are fictitious, and the resulting account of assertion is distorted. Legal norms and moral norms (at least on certain assumptions about moral values) differ from linguistic norms in this respect: If nobody acts in accordance with a particular law or moral norm, it does not follow that such legal or moral rules do not exist. Whereas rules of this sort are behaviour-independent, linguistic norms are not.⁴ As such they are suited to empirical investigation.

Advocates of relativism allege they have provided ‘data’ regarding the assessment-sensitivity of predicates of personal taste. This is somewhat euphemistic. They have provided example cases coupled with conjectures to the effect that ordinary language speakers react in line with relativist predictions. Since these conjectures are rather contentious, however, it is perhaps time to turn from ‘data’ to data proper.⁵

2. Experiment 1: ‘Delicious’ and ‘Fun’

2.1 Scenario for ‘Delicious’

The retraction of claims of personal taste, relativists contend, is driven by the assessment-sensitivity of the truth-value of such claims. If a certain taste claim

⁴ For a related point, cf. Horwich (2014).

⁵ This is not intended to sound polemical. Example dialogues which test whether certain utterances sound felicitous make for a perfectly valid preliminary method of assessing their linguistic properties. However, given how contentious even these preliminary assessments are, and given that the debate has raged for over a decade, a more refined method of inquiry is required.

uttered at context c_1 and true as assessed from c_1 at some later context of assessment c_2 is false, the speaker is required to retract *because* it is false at c_2 . We must thus address two core questions: (i) Whether the taste claim, true at a context c_1 , is indeed assessed as *false* from c_2 if, at c_2 the speaker's tastes have changed, and (ii) whether ordinary language speakers share the relativist's intuition that the speaker is required to take back their original utterance in such a situation.

MacFarlane's passage can be worked into the following scenario, which comes in two versions (A and B) so as to address the two questions regarding falsity and retraction separately:

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?

Each participant saw either version [A] or version [B], and had to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' (1) to 'completely agree' (7). Relativists would predict mean agreement with the proposed truth assessment and required retraction to be significantly above the midpoint of the scale. Contextualists, by contrast, would predict the means to lie significantly below the midpoint of the scale.

2.2 Scenario for 'Fun'

The second predicate of personal taste besides 'tasty' that serves as a relativist intuition-pump is 'fun' (Lasersohn 2005, 2011; Stephenson 2007; MacFarlane 2014). We again need a scenario where the protagonist finds a particular activity – building sandcastles, say – fun at some stage, yet at some later context of assessment his preferences have changed. The two versions focusing on truth and retraction respectively of the scenario read:

SANDCASTLE

John is five years old and loves building sandcastles. One day he says to his sister Sally: 'Building sandcastles is great fun.' Twenty years later his opinion regarding sandcastles has changed. Sally asks him whether he still thinks building sandcastles is fun, and John says he doesn't.

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

[B] Sally says: 'So you are required to take back what you said about building sandcastles when you were five.'

Q.: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Sally's claim? (1= completely disagree; 7= completely agree)

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (two scenarios: fish sticks; sandcastle x 2 conditions: truth evaluation v. retraction).

2.3 Participants

I recruited 241 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk. In line with the preregistration,⁶ subjects failing an attention check, responding in less than 15 seconds and those whose native tongue was not English were excluded. 164 participants remained (80 female, age $M=40$ years, $SD=13$ years).

2.4 Results and Discussion

The results are rather decisive (Figure 1): In the fish sticks scenario, people manifest strong disagreement with Sally's statements that John's taste claim was false ($M=2.24$, $SD=2.02$) and that it should be taken back ($M=2.77$, $SD=2.10$). In line with contextualist predictions and in contrast to relativist predictions, mean agreement was significantly below the midpoint of the scale.⁷ The same holds for the sandcastle scenario. Again people disagree with the assessment that what John said at the context of utterance was false ($M=2.21$, $SD=1.99$), and they also disagree with the claim that it stands in need of retraction ($M=2.34$, $SD=1.92$). Both means were significantly below the

⁶ <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=p37yp6>

⁷ Truth evaluation: $t(36)=-5.29$, $p<.001$, CI [-2.43;-1.08]. Retraction: $t(44)=-3.88$, $p<.001$, CI [-1.87;-.59].

midpoint, signalling pronounced disagreement with the predictions of truth relativism.⁸

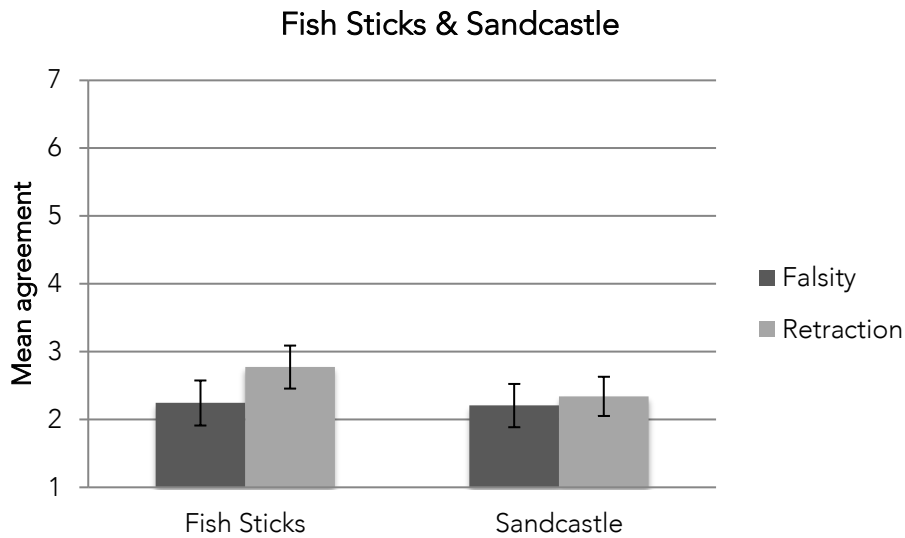


Figure 1: Mean agreement with the statement that John's taste claim was false at the context of utterance and that it must be retracted. Error bars denote standard error of the mean.

Overall, the findings suggest that – consistent with contextualism - truth evaluation is sensitive to the context of utterance even if tastes have changed at the context of assessment. Given that John's claims are not evaluated as false in retrospect, it comes as no surprise that people do not think they must be retracted.

Does the relativist stand refuted? Not quite yet. Though the vignettes employed have been modelled closely on the relativist's own examples, one might reasonably call into question the endurance of the pragmatic commitment to retract a taste claim true at context of utterance c_1 yet false at context of assessment c_2 , if the contexts are separated by two decades.⁹

⁸ Truth evaluation: $t(38)=-5.64$, $p<.001$, CI [-2.44;-1.15]. Retraction $t(43)=-5.74$, $p<.001$, CI [-2.24;-1.08].

⁹ Von Fintel and Gillies (2008: 84-86) discuss time lag with respect to epistemic modal claims, which are also deemed assessment-sensitive by relativists and for which a retraction requirement allegedly arises, too. Since knowledge accumulates over time, the larger the time span that separates context of utterance and context of assessment, the higher the chances that the original claim stands in need of retraction. However, Von Fintel and Gillies argue, 'the facts go the other way, as t_a [the time of assessment] gets much later than t_c [the time of utterance], it becomes increasingly silly to go in for the sort of rejection that [relativism] predicts.' (2008: 86). For instance, if Mary is to guess a randomly chosen card put into an envelope by John, and if the question is only resolved ten years later, it seems exceedingly odd for him to shout 'Wrong!/What you said is false!' (2008:86) and to require her to take back her

Perhaps the requirement to retract wears off over time. Furthermore, it might well be the case that such a requirement does not arise for claims made during childhood, as children are held much less responsible for their actions and utterances than adults. What it takes is thus an experiment with yet another vignette in which (i) the protagonist is not specified to be a child at the context of utterance and in which (ii) the context of utterance and the context of assessment are not separated by a long time span.

3. Experiment 2: Time lag Concerns

Experiment 3 addresses the potential concern regarding childhood assertions and time lag. Naturally, tastes do not change from one moment to the next, so while the time lag must be reduced considerably, excess should be avoided. In the new scenario (see below), it has been reduced from twenty years to a few weeks.

3.1 Participants

120 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a paid Qualtrics online survey. After discarding non-native speakers, speed-clickers ($t < 15$ seconds) and participants failing an attention test 87 participants remained (38 female, age $M = 44$ years, $SD = 14$ years).

3.2 Materials & Procedure

The two versions (A v. B) of the target scenario read:

SALMON

It's Ben's birthday. To celebrate the occasion, Mary takes him out to her favourite restaurant. Ben loves salmon, and says to Mary: 'Salmon is delicious.' A few weeks later, Ben's tastes regarding salmon have changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes salmon and Ben says he doesn't anymore.

[A] Mary says: 'So what you said in the restaurant a few weeks ago was false.'

[B] Mary says: 'So you are required to take back what you said about salmon a few weeks ago in the restaurant.'

claim. Note that this train of thought constitutes a counterargument to the very logic of relativism. By contrast, I am trying to explore how similar considerations could be used in favour of relativism, so as to give the position its best shot. More particularly the suggestion is that due to the time lag the anti-relativist evidence of experiment 1 and 2 must be disregarded.

Q.: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Mary's claim? (1= completely disagree; 7= completely agree)

As in the previous experiment, contextualists, according to whom what matters for truth evaluation is the context of utterance would predict mean agreement for both tasks to lie significantly below the midpoint of the scale, signifying disagreement with Mary's claims. Truth relativists, by contrast, would predict agreement to lie significantly above the midpoint of the scale.

3.3 Results

The results for the *Salmon* scenario are basically the same as for the previous two scenarios – mean agreement with *falsity* and *retraction* does not differ significantly across the three vignettes (Figure 2).¹⁰ Again, people strongly disagreed with the claim that Ben's original utterance was false (M=2.41, SD=1.69) or that it must be retracted (M=2.51, SD=1.94). Both means were significantly below the midpoint of the scale.¹¹

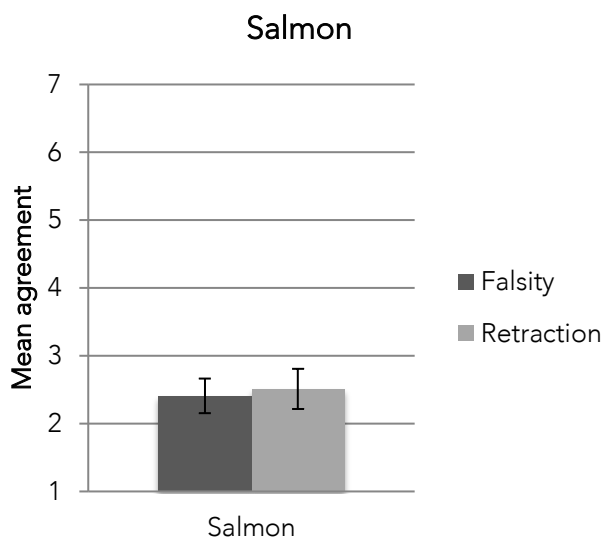


Figure 2: Mean agreement with the statement that Ben's taste claim was false at the context of utterance and that it must be retracted. Error bars denote standard error of the mean.

¹⁰ A 3 (scenario: Fish sticks, Sandcastle, Salmon) x 2 (value: falsity, retraction) ANOVA reveals no significant effect for scenario ($F(355)=.91$, $p=.405$) or value ($F(355)=1.22$, $p=.270$). The interaction is also nonsignificant ($F(355)=.62$, $p=.537$).

¹¹ Truth evaluation: $t(43)=-6.25$, $p<.001$, CI [-2.10;-1.08]. Retraction $t(42)=-5.02$, $p<.001$, CI [-2.09;-.89].

3.4 Discussion

Experiment 2 addressed two potential sources of distortion of the first two experiments: (i) the fact that the protagonist in the first two vignettes was a child at the context of utterance, and (ii) the time lag of two decades between the context of utterance and assessment. As it turns out, the worry was unfounded: The results for the *Salmon* scenario are equivalent to those of the other two experiments in all respects (scenario did not have a significant effect, see FN 8). The contextualist predictions proved again correct with regards to both dependent variables, and the relativist predictions were shown as empirically mistaken. The truth of claims of personal taste are sensitive to the context of utterance only, and they are not subject to a rule of retraction.

4. Experiment 3 – Benchmark Comparisons

In the previous experiments, we used the *absolute* means as an indicator of agreement and disagreement (as is common practice, see e.g. the related work by Knobe & Yalcin, 2014). Although our results were decisive and robust across three scenarios, one could make a case that they are in parts driven by a certain degree of bewilderment as to the nature of the rather astonishing scenarios and tasks. We could, however, also collect data on more clear-cut cases – cases where the protagonist’s taste does *not* change – and use them as benchmarks for the target tasks tested so far.

4.1 Benchmarks

According to the relativist picture, a change in tastes gives rise to a change in truth-assessment, since taste claims are evaluated at the context of assessment. The results for the *target scenario*, in which John used to like fish sticks yet no longer does (call this condition ‘Yes/No’), should pattern with those from a scenario in which John didn’t like fish sticks as a child and still doesn’t (‘No/No’). In either case the claim ‘Fish sticks are tasty’, uttered 20 years earlier, is false as assessed from the present context of assessment and thus requires retraction. The only difference is that in the relativist benchmark case it was, in fact, *never* true. Hence, relativists and contextualists alike would agree that the claim must be evaluated as having been false. What is more, in such a case it is *prima facie* not implausible to hold that the claim stands in need of retraction on grounds neutral with regards to the debate between contextualists and relativists.

According to contextualism, by contrast, the perspectival feature of taste claims is provided by the context of utterance.¹² Hence, the truth-value of John's claim must be evaluated relative to the context of utterance, and it rests constant over contexts of assessment. A theory-neutral benchmark case for the contextualist's predictions is thus one in which John used to like fish sticks, and *still* does ('Yes/Yes'): Both relativists and contextualists agree that in such a case John's claim should *not* be assessed as false and that he is *not* required to retract it. Hence, with the two control cases in place we can also assess the *relative* fit of the target scenario results with the particular levels of mean agreement gathered in the benchmark experiments.

In short, then, we will compare the results for the target scenarios not only to the midpoint of the scale, but also to benchmark scenarios that broadly mirror the rates of agreement predicted by relativists and contextualists. This procedure allows us to gain some insight as to whether the experiment design is successful on the basis of cases where contextualists and relativists agree.¹³

4.2 Materials

For each of the three vignettes, I devised two benchmark cases of the sort just described. For the *Fish Sticks* scenario, they read:

Fish Sticks (Yes/Yes)

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 not changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes fish sticks and John says he still does.

¹² We will concentrate on the assumptions and predictions of indexical contextualism. So we will set aside nonindexical contextualism, according to which the truth assessment of others' claims pattern with relativist predictions and the truth assessment of one's own previous claims with predictions of indexical contextualism. The results below put pressure on the sort of nonindexical contextualism proposed as a better alternative to indexicalism via faultless disagreement arguments, such as the one defended e.g. by Kölbel (2004, 2004, 2009). The only nonindexical contextualist position consistent with the data here proposed is a very moderate sort, which is truth-conditionally equivalent with indexicalism. For discussion cf. Stojanovic (2007); Recanati (2007) seems to defend a view along these lines.

¹³ Note that the target results might differ significantly from both benchmarks. Given the fact that simple changes in framing can suffice to produce considerable differences in response to an otherwise identical scenario (Tversky & Kahnemann, 1981; Malenka et al., 1993), and that the differences in target and benchmark cases go beyond framing only, this is in fact quite likely. As always with empirical data, we should be careful in interpreting our findings and look to the effect sizes, not just to p-values, if necessary.

Fish Sticks (No/No)

John is five years old and hates fish sticks. One day he says to his sister Sally: 'Fish sticks are delicious.' Twenty years later his taste regarding fish sticks has not changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes fish sticks and John says that he in fact never did and still doesn't.

The questions were identical to the ones from Experiment 1. The benchmark vignettes for the *Sandcastle* and *Salmon* vignettes are stated in full in the Appendix. For each scenario, there were thus three variations. Each participant was randomly assigned to either the truth evaluation or retraction task of one of them.

4.3 Participants

A total of 386 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk. After excluding inattentive participants, non-native English speakers and those responding in under 15 seconds, 297 participants (126 female) remained.

4.4 Results

For *truth assessment*, a 3 (case type: Yes/No v. Yes/Yes v. No/No) x 3 (scenario: Fish sticks v. Sandcastle v. Salmon) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for case type, a nonsignificant effect for scenario and a nonsignificant interaction (see Figure 3).¹⁴ Given the absence of any effects for scenario, the means were averaged across scenarios. Consistent with the results from above, agreement for the target scenario ($M=1.72$, $SD=1.08$) was significantly below the midpoint.¹⁵ Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc comparisons also showed it to be considerably below the relativist benchmark case No/No ($M=5.96$, $SD=1.83$)¹⁶ – which itself was significantly above the midpoint.¹⁷ Importantly, however, there was *no* significant difference in truth assessment across the Yes/No case and the contextualist benchmark Yes/Yes ($M=1.38$, $SD=1.23$).¹⁸

¹⁴ Case type: $F(2,132)=162.02$, $p<.001$; scenario: $F(2,132)=1.74$, $p=.180$; interaction: $F(4,132)=1.11$, $p=.353$.

¹⁵ $t(38)=-13.26$, $p<.001$ CI [-2.63;-1.93].

¹⁶ $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=3.03$.

¹⁷ $t(49)=7.58$, $p<.001$, CI [1.44;2.48]

¹⁸ $p=.911$, Cohen's $d=.31$

Expectedly, mean agreement for the Yes/Yes case was significantly below the midpoint.¹⁹

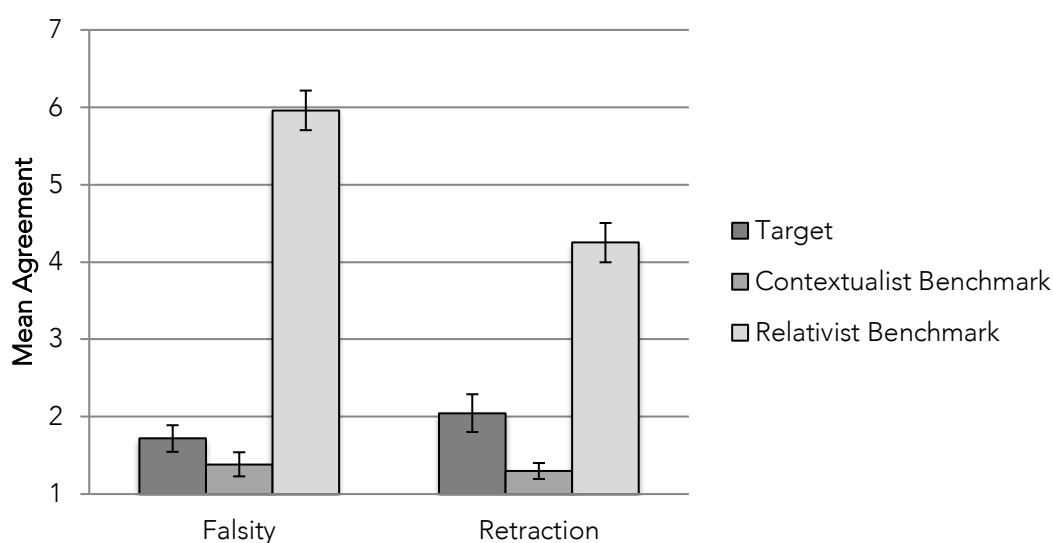


Figure 3: Mean agreement with falsity and retraction for the target scenario (Yes/No), the contextualist benchmark (Yes/Yes) and the relativist benchmark (No/No). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

For *retraction*, a 3 (case type: Yes/No v. Yes/Yes v. No/No) x 3 (scenario: Fish sticks v. Sandcastle v. Salmon) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for case type, a nonsignificant main effect for scenario and a nonsignificant interaction.²⁰ Given the absence of any effects for scenario, the means were averaged across scenarios. Consistent with our previous experiments, mean retraction for the target scenario (M=2.05, SD=1.60) was significantly below the midpoint.²¹ Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc comparisons also showed it to be considerably below the relativist benchmark case No/No (M=4.25, SD=1.97)²² which – interestingly, did *not* differ significantly from the midpoint.²³ Again, the means for the target scenario differed but little from the contextualist benchmark case Yes/Yes (M=1.30, SD=.78), just about making the significance threshold.²⁴

¹⁹ $t(51)=-16.80, p<.001, CI [-2.93;-2.30]$.

²⁰ Case type: $F(2,147)=57.51, p<.001$; scenario: $F(2,147)=1.06, p=.349$; interaction: $F(4,147)=.14, p=.966$.

²¹ $t(43)=-7.99, p<.001, CI [-2.45;-1.46]$.

²² $p<.001, Cohen's d=2.04$

²³ $t(55)=.99, p=.329, CI [-.26;.76]$.

²⁴ $p=.043, Cohen's d=.62$; The contextualist benchmark – like the target scenario – was significantly below the midpoint: $t(56)=-26.21, p<.001, CI [-2.91;-2.50]$.

4.5 Discussion

The benchmark scenarios suggest that our experimental design works well. In clear-cut cases where the protagonist's claim was true at the context of utterance, and remains true at the context of assessment (Yes/Yes), disagreement with its assessment as false as well as required retraction are low. In the relativist benchmark case (No/No), by contrast, where the protagonist's claim was false both at the context of utterance and the context of assessment, agreement with its assessment as false is very pronounced. Agreement with the view that it must be retracted is also quite high – or at least much higher than in the other two cases (more on this retraction result below). With the possible exception of the retraction in the No/No scenario, the results for the benchmark cases thus came out exactly as predicted by both contextualists and relativists.

Replicating the findings from Experiments 1 and 2, the absolute results for truth assessment and retraction in the target case are again consistent with contextualism and inconsistent with truth relativism. Moreover, the *comparative* results replicate this pattern: Truth assessment in the target case (Yes/No) does *not* differ significantly from the results of the contextualist benchmark case (Yes/Yes). They do, however, differ significantly from the results of the relativist benchmark (No/No). For retraction, the target results also differ significantly from the relativist benchmark. In fact, they also just about make the threshold for significance in the contrast with the contextualist benchmark. However, whereas the latter difference must certainly be acknowledged (Cohen's $d=.62$), the effect size of the difference is quite small *vis-à-vis* the contrast with the relativist benchmark (Cohen's $d=2.04$), and this is what matters here (see FN 13).

One interesting feature of the results bears mentioning: Even for taste claims which are and have been blatantly false (the No/No cases), and which are clearly assessed as such, there is no decisive support for a retraction requirement. This is illustrated by Figure 4, where the No/No cases for all three scenarios are plotted in a single graph:

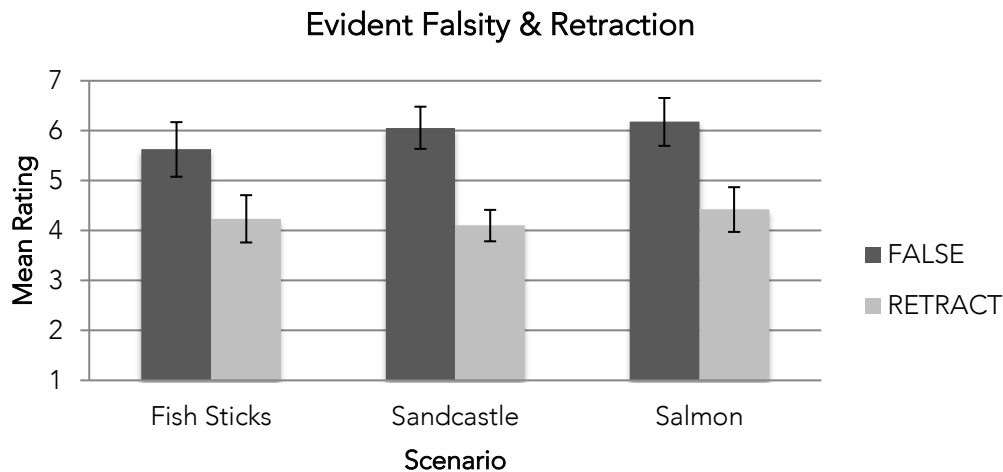


Figure 4: Mean agreement with the statement that the target claim was false/stands in need of retraction for the No/No conditions of the Fish Sticks, Sandcastle and Salmon scenarios. Error bars designate standard error of the mean.

Participants tend to neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the false taste claim must be retracted. This suggests that assertion simply is not governed by a constitutive norm of this sort, even in cases most favourable to its potential application. Beyond the empirical refutation of retraction predictions in the cases in which the relativist takes such a norm to *also* apply, doubts thus accrue whether *any* theory would be justified to invoke a retraction norm as an empirically confirmed phenomenon. Assertion is not subject to a retraction norm and the extensive pragmatic machinery the relativist builds atop the norm is devoid of any empirical foundation.²⁵

²⁵ One reviewer made the following interesting point: In the No/No vignettes of Fish sticks and Salmon, the agent is specified not to like a certain food at time t_1 and still doesn't at t_2 , yet at t_1 says it is delicious. The low retraction rates, the reviewer suggests could be due to the fact that participants assume that, at t_2 , the agent does not like the particular food, yet says it is delicious. I agree that in certain domains, such as aesthetics, what one likes and what one deems beautiful can come apart if one advocates an objectivist conception of value. In the debate at hand, however, one is hard-pressed to find a defender of objective values concerning what is fun or tasty. This is why the claim "The salad is delicious but I don't like it" sounds infelicitous.

Naturally, it is possible to construct a clever case in which claims of this sort do not sound quite so bad. I doubt, however, that participants – in the clear and simple cases at hand – seriously entertain the thought that the agent dislikes the food yet deems it delicious and that this explains low retraction rates even in No/No cases. In the Sandcastle vignette, the No/No scenario specifies that, at t_1 the agent doesn't like building sandcastles yet says it is fun, and at t_2 says it is not fun, yet the retraction ratings are nearly identical to the ones of Fish sticks and Salmon. Furthermore, in experiments regarding epistemic modals [author a], I also found people unwilling require retraction in cases where the modal claim was clearly false at the

5. Conclusion

The results are decisive and robust: In three experiments modelled on a scenario 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 speaker-centred indexical contextualism, on the other hand, are confirmed in both respects.²⁶ What is more, it is doubtful whether assertions are ever subject to a constitutive norm of assertion. Even when the contentious claim was false with respect to the context of *utterance*, ordinary language speakers see no evident need for the speaker to retract their assertion.²⁷

Relativism with regards to truth in English, we said, is an empirical position. The least demanding version of this view is easy to verify: All it takes is a demonstration that the extension of a single English expression is in fact used in assessment-dependent ways. Said version of the view is hard to falsify: According to relativists, there are many such expressions – predicates of personal taste, aesthetic predicates, moral expressions, epistemic modals, as well as the verb ‘to know’ and cognates, to name but a few. Given that the relativist predictions regarding truth-assessment have been empirically called into question for epistemic modals (Knobe & Yalcin, 2014; Khoo, 2015, author a), and given that they turned out inadequate with respect to predicates of personal taste, too, one might see the burden of proof shift back to the relativist. In this regard, it is important to mention the excellent work of Beddor & Egan (2018), who present data on epistemic modals consistent with a “flexible” form of relativism, i.e. a form of truth relativism, where the relevant context of assessment is constrained by the Question under Discussion (see

context of utterance. Taken together, the evidence points towards the conclusion that there simply are no norms of retraction of the sort envisioned by MacFarlane.

²⁶ The results for the particular cases tested are not inconsistent with indexicalist approaches according to which the type of value of the tacit taste argument is somewhat flexible and allows, in certain contexts, for exocentric, generic or group readings. The particular cases at hand just favour an autocentric (or speaker-dependent) reading which, though not necessary in general, is quite likely the default.

²⁷ The data for epistemic modals presented by (author a) suggests the same. Knobe & Yalcin’s (2014) data on modals might suggest otherwise. This is likely due to the framing of their retraction question, which diverges strongly from the diction employed in MacFarlane’s retraction rule.

e.g. Roberts, 1996/2002, 2015). As I discuss elsewhere (author, b), this picture does not neatly carry over to predicates of personal taste, and the flexibility invoked to save relativism might easily collapse into an *anything-goes* picture. That said, with the many sophisticated theoretical materials at our disposal, the debate should – as demonstrated by Knobe & Yalcin, Khoo, as well as Beddor & Egan – be taken to the next, that is, the empirical, level.

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