

Personal taste ascriptions and the Sententiality assumption

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Abstract. I defend the assumption that an expression like “for Anna,” as it occurs in a sentence like “Whale meat is tasty for Anna,” is a sentential operator, against two related, albeit opposite worries. The first is that in some cases the putative operator might not be selective enough. The second is that in other cases it might on the contrary be too selective. I argue that these worries have no tendency to cast doubt on the assumption of sententiality for the relevant expressions.

Suppose that asked about what kind of exotic food she likes, your friend Anna answers:

(1) Whale meat is tasty

In this context what she is telling you is that whalemeat is tasty *for her* (or *according to her taste*). Here, a challenge for the truthconditional semanticist is to account for the contribution that (the relevant notion of) context makes, in such a case, to the truthconditions of the *implicit* personal taste ascription in (1). Clearly, the contribution it makes must somehow coincide with that of the prepositional phrase (PP) “for Anna”, as it occurs in the more *explicit* ascription in (2):

(2) Whale meat is tasty *for Anna*

But what exactly is this contribution? To put it more in a more focused way: Should we think of a PP like “for Anna,” as it occurs in a sentence like (2), as a predicate modifier, or instead as a sentential operator which, when affixed to a sentence, operates on it to yield another, more complex sentence?

Max Kölbel (2009: “The Evidence for Relativism”, *Synthese* 166, 375-95) considers the second option as he explores a “relativist” semantics on which those PPs are intensional sentential operators that shift the standard of taste parameter (supposedly part) of the circumstance of evaluation:

(S1) For all sentences ϕ and all singular terms α , $[\text{FOR } \alpha, \phi]$ is a sentence.

(S2) For all ϕ , α , w , s , and a , if ϕ is a sentence and α is a personal name referring to a , w is a possible world, and s is a standard:
 $[\text{FOR } \alpha, \phi]$ is true in a circumstance $\langle w, s \rangle$ iff ϕ is true in $\langle w, s(a) \rangle$ (where $s(a)$ is a 's standard of taste). (p. 384)

This “assumption of Sententiality” for the relevant PPs raises an *underselectiveness* issue, which Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne (2009: *Relativism and Monadic Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press) express as follows:

Suppose something is tasty for Anna, while other things are dignified for Anna. Consider the sentence

(3) [Bob] ate something that was tasty for Anna in a dignified way

If we treat “for Anna” as a sentential operator, it begins to look insufficiently selective. “For Anna, Bob ate something that was tasty in a dignified way” fails to tie “for Anna” to being tasty rather than to being dignified. (pp. 75-6, fn.10)

Cappelen and Hawthorne’s point is well taken, if indeed within the scope of the Sententiality assumption about “for Anna,” there is no representation of (3) available that might capture its intended reading, one on which Anna may not find it dignified at all to eat like Bob did. But there is.

A natural suggestion is to avail ourselves of a version of an event semantics *à la* Donald Davidson (1967: “The Logical Form of Action Sentences”, in *The Logic of Decision and Action*, ed. N. Rescher. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press) that allows quantification over events and reference to “ways” that events might occur, so as to make it possible to say of an event e and a way w that e occurred in way m . On this suggestion, the appropriate structure for (3) can be made perspicuous by

(4) For some e , m , and x , $\langle e$ was a eating of x by Bob \rangle and $\langle e$ occurred in way m \rangle and $\langle m$ was dignified \rangle and \langle for Anna, x was tasty \rangle

(4) does tie “for Anna” to being tasty rather than to being dignified, just as expected. As for being dignified, we can see that it is not tied to a “for” affix. On a relativist semantics *à la* Kölbel, this is rather unproblematic if we assume that when evaluating an unprefixed sentence-like construction with a taste predicate but no articulated reference to a particular judge, the standard of taste parameter is set, by default, to the utterer’s. For then, an utterance of (3) is true only if Bob’s way of eating the food was dignified according to the utterer’s standard of taste, not Anna’s. Again, this is just as expected. So, the underselectiveness issue raised by Cappelen and Hawthorne is not to worry the proponent of the Sententiality assumption for such expressions as “for Anna”.

(Remark. Some might find it too costly to admit both events and ways in their ontology. We could certainly do without bringing events into the picture. An option here would be to let “eat” denote a three-place relation that holds between an agent, some food, and a way iff that agent eats the food in that way, and, as suggested by the surface grammar, to let “dignified” in (3) be about ways. Assuming again that the default standard of taste parameter is the utterer’s, an utterance of (3) would then be true if there is a way m in which Bob ate some food x , Anna finds x tasty, and the utterer of (3) finds m dignified. This too would match the expected reading. Doing without ways might, by contrast, reveal difficult.)

Interestingly, a related, yet somewhat opposite issue, to do with *overselectiveness* this time, might also be raised. Consider the sentence

(5) Bob ate something disgusting that was (nonetheless) tasty for Anna

It has a natural reading on which Bob ate something that was disgusting on the speaker’s standard of taste, yet was tasty on Anna’s standards of taste. But if we treat the PP “for Anna” as a sentential operator, it might begin to look *excessively* selective, this time. Because

(6) For Anna, Bob ate something disgusting that was tasty

would tie “for Anna” both to being disgusting and to being tasty, this would amount to ascribing to a single judge, Anna, contradictory taste judgements about the same thing, and the natural reading on which being disgusting and being tasty are tied to different judges should not be available – or so one might worry.

But the appropriate reading *is* available within the scope of the Sententiality assumption for “for Anna”. Simply, the appropriate structure for (5) is not the one associated with (6), but rather one made perspicuous by

(7) Bob ate something x such that x was disgusting and for Anna x is tasty

If again we assume something akin to Kölbel’s clause (S2) and let the “default” standard of taste parameter be the utterer’s, we get the following truth-conditions for an utterance of (5):

(8) For some d , Bob ate d in $\langle u_w, s(u_a) \rangle$ and d was disgusting in $\langle u_w, s(u_a) \rangle$ and d was tasty in $\langle u_w, s(\text{Anna}) \rangle$

where u_w and u_a are respectively the world and the agent of the context of the utterance u . We thus recover the natural, noncontradictory reading of (5).

So, if we agree that the surface structure of personal taste ascriptions need not reflect their “deeper” structure, neither the underselectiveness concern voiced by Cappelen and Hawthorne, nor the related, albeit opposite overselectiveness concern can be used to put pressure on the assumption that “for” PPs occurring in those ascriptions are sentential operators.