

On certainty and subjectivity in taste

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Abstract

A trend in philosophy of language and semantics considers adjectives like *tasty*, and evaluative judgements like *This cake is tasty* or *I find this cake tasty*, to be subjective, where subjectivity is construed along largely Cartesian lines. We sketch a non-Cartesian view of how subjectivity is involved in the meaning of *tasty* and of evaluative judgements by relating them to Wittgenstein's discussions of avowals and certainties.

1. Avowals and judgements of taste

Recently, semanticists have turned their attention to adjectives like *tasty* (also called “predicates of personal taste”, PPTs henceforth), and have claimed that these are, in a sense, subjective (a.o. Lasersohn 2005, Kennedy to appear).¹ Notwithstanding the differences among theories, many of them share an assumption: PPTs denote something that belongs to an individual's private realm. The truth-conditions or access to the content of evaluations like those in (1) are subject-dependent. This supposedly explains why there are so-called faultless disagreements as (1) in which interlocutors contradict each other but this does not imply that one of them is wrong:

(1) A: The cake is tasty.

B: No, it's not!

¹ (Lasersohn 2005) initiates a still open debate among contextualists, relativists and absolutists regarding the truth-conditions of sentences featuring predicates of personal taste.

Comment [m1]: This is not an exegetical study of Wittgenstein's works

We adopt a rather systematic (and, given the time available, also a schematic) view on Wg's discussions on certainty and on avowals, and with this to shed light on a problem in contemporary analytic philosophy of language.

Comment [m2]: A bit of a broader context:

The challenge for the semanticist is to give a global account of gradable adjectives like *tasty*, *heavy*, *painful*, *tall*, *empty*, etc., and of sentences in which they feature.

What do GAs have in common? Basically, that they have a grammaticalised comparative form.

Supposedly, adjectives like *heavy*, *empty*, etc. are not subjective at all.

Comment [m3]: Here we are not going to delve into the details of the debate.

Comment [m4]: Why is this called a faultless disagreement?

It seems to be a disagreement, in the sense that the sentences uttered by A and B contradict each other (if one of them would utter both, it would be a contradiction!).

Still, it seems that both A and B in (1) may be right at the same time.

The assumption that PPTs denote something private, we argue, responds to the Cartesian view regarding subjectivity which Wittgenstein examines in his remarks on avowals, like A's in example (2). For the Cartesian, introspection gives A immediate access to her feeling of pain, and hence to the truth of her avowal, making B's attempted correction absurd.

- (2) A: I am in pain.
B: No, you're not.

In his later writings, Wittgenstein dismantles the Cartesian account of subjectivity, and also provides an alternative view on the distinctive security of avowals (cf. a.o. Bax 2011, Overgaard 2004, Schulte 1993). According to him, avowals are non-observational and non-descriptive. There are exceptional cases where A could be mistaken about her own pain, but this is not because A has infallible access to what *pain* designates. Avowals are expressions, rather than descriptions, of our embodied and phenomenological undergoings. Normally I do not say that I have a headache after making empirical observations (e.g., noting that I cannot stand direct light). Normally, there is no room for doubting our own pain or that of our fellow human beings (Wittgenstein 1953, §246). I could pretend that I am in pain and lie, saying *I am in pain* just to get your consolation. But if truth hinges only on truthfulness, there is no criterion; hence, there is no room for empirical mistakes.

Here, (in)correctness does not coincide with truth and falsity. Truth and falsity constitute (in)correctness of how a description fits what is the case. Semantic (in)correctness of avowals is not specified in terms on truth and falsity; it is established by the ensemble of practices associated with them, shaped both biologically and culturally. In example (2), if A's gestures showed relief or pleasure, we would be puzzled. We may think that A is a bad liar, that he is being ironic, or that simply he does not know the meaning of *pain*. Avowals are only part of the criteria for third-person attributions; our embodied reactions are also part and parcel of the criteria for correct use, which allows new members of our linguistic community to learn these terms (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, §269).

- (3) C: A is in pain.
B: No, she is not.

Comment [m5]: To be found in many of his works, a.o. in PI, Zettel, LCAPRB

Comment [m6]: "I am in pain"

Comment [m7]: See e.g. PI 585, Z 549, etc.

Comment [m8]: I.e., in the case of avowals.

Comment [m9]: Where A says "I am in pain"

Comment [m10]: Like (3)

Comment [m11]: ...such as pain, painful, numb, thirsty, etc.

Second- and third-person attributions like B's in (2) or those in (3) hinge on observations, but they are not mere speculations: they are constitutive of how terms like *pain* get their meaning. The asymmetry between A's avowal and B's challenge in (2) is not due to privileged epistemic access, but to how the bodily and behavioural constitute our minds.

Comment [m12]: "No, you're not in pain"

While in (2) A's and B's utterances speak about the same but ~~they are an expression followed by a description~~, in (3) both C and B exchange descriptions. Evidence for these descriptions may be A's gestures and (linguistic) behaviour. My avowals presuppose that I know the meaning of *pain*, so that when you say it I also expect certain gestures and embodied behaviour. The conventional nature of language is paired up with the natural manifestations of pain. Our natural manifestations are part of the pre-existing practices that give criteria of correct use for avowals.

Comment [m13]: A's is an expression and B's is a description,

[SHORT PAUSE]

Comment [m14]: [SHORT PAUSE]

Subjectivity is thought to be central in the semantics of PPTs like *tasty*, in contrast to adjectives like *pregnant* or *empty*. Different formal accounts of the meaning of PPTs have been given, most of them trying to accommodate the peculiarity of so-called faultless disagreements like (1) in contrast with (4):

Comment [m15]:
(1) A: The cake is tasty.
B: No, it's not!

- (4) A: She is pregnant.
B: No, she is not!

(Lasersohn 2005) and (Kennedy to appear), among others, assume that PPTs denote something that occurs in each of the interlocutors' private realm. The subject-dependence of the truth-conditions (or access to the content) of *tasty*, absent in *pregnant*, explains the contrast between (1) and (4), and why A and B in (1) may be both right while they assert contradictory statements. It also allows embedding PPTs under attitude verbs like *find*, exchanges like (5) supposedly make explicit the hidden subject-dependence in (1):

Comment [m16]: Within a broadly Fregean idea of meaning, as most formal semantics does, it is assumed that the meaning of PPTs like *tasty* is given by their truth-conditions and by how they, by compositionality, contribute to the truth conditions of sentences in which they appear.

Comment [m17]: PPTs are assumed to involve a covert reference to an agent whose experience is described, the truth-conditions of judgements involving PPTs turn out to be subject-dependent.

Comment [m18]: is meant to explain

Comment [m19]:
(1) A: The cake is tasty.
B: No, it's not!

- (5) A: I find the cake tasty.
B: I don't.

Comment [m20]: Something that cannot be done with *pregnant*.

Comment [m21]: covert

This claim is a variant of the Cartesian view on subjectivity in avowals. The subject-dependence in (1) is thought to be a consequence of the fact that evaluations like *This is tasty* report sensory experience to which each speaker has privileged access (cf. Pearson 2012), or direct experience of the individual's internal psychological state (Stephenson 2007). Thus, *find* in (5) is thought to mean broadly the same as *believe* except that the embedded proposition is known via direct experience.

Comment [m22]: The claim made by these among other authors

Such a Cartesian discourse may stem from taking too far this analogy: When I say that an object is long, I compare it with the normal length of other (similar) objects with respect to the relevant dimension. When I say that something is tasty, I compare my current embodied experience with a standard or norm set by past experiences of savouring (similar) things.

Comment [m23]: I.e., to a "comparison class"

2. Certainties about pain and taste

Comment [m24]: What does this amount to? This Cartesian move seems to facilitate the construction of formal models for the semantics of adjectives like *tasty*, at the expense of the epistemological viability of such models.

The privatisation of the criteria for correctly applying adjectives like *tasty* leads to a loss on the grip on the normativity of their meaning.

Taste evaluations allow us to express our readiness to act in accordance with certain practices, rather than describe facts about ourselves. Evaluations like *I find this tasty* work like avowals, if we consider how the strangeness of B's reaction in (6a) is parallel to (2), and the acceptability of (6b) is similar to the contrast introduced by (3).

Comment [m25]: Here we sketch our non-Cartesian view of how subjectivity is involved in the meaning of *tasty* and of evaluative judgements.

(6)(a) A: I find this cake tasty.

B: No, you don't.

Comment [m26]:
(2) A: I am in pain.
B: No, you're not.

(b) C: She finds this cake tasty.

B: No, she doesn't.

Comment [m27]:
(3) C: A is in pain.
B: No, she is not.

C in (6b) can take a judgement like A's in (6a) into account as evidence, together with A's gestures and behaviour. A non-Cartesian view of subjectivity fits in the picture, and no talk about direct or private evidence is needed to shed light on the strangeness of B's reaction in (6a).

Comment [m28]: "I find this cake tasty."

Comment [m29]: Restricted ones

But if we say that evaluations like *This is tasty* work like avowals as well, we would blur the differences between such unrestricted judgements and *I find this tasty*, while we use them in constrained sequences and to perform different dialogue acts (see 7 below).

Comment [m30]: Work within CA provides insights into the type of dialogue practices in which judgements of taste are used in actual conversation. They analyse corpora of family mealtime dialogues, of online fora, etc. and show that unrestricted and restricted judgements are used to perform different types of acts.

Unrestricted judgements can be perceived as compliments and can be used as attempts to persuade. In contrast, restricted judgements are not used for complimenting or persuading but function well as e.g. refusals to offers.

- (7)(a) A: This is tasty.
 B: It's not tasty!
 A: Well, I find it tasty. (Retreat)
- (b) A: The cake looks great but I don't find sweets tasty. (Refusing)
 A: The cake looks great but sweets aren't tasty. (Rejecting)

So the subjectivity of *tasty* displayed in disagreements like (1) remains unexplained.

Wittgenstein's view on avowals is closely related to his characterisation of certainties. Normally, statements like *This is a hand* or *My name is Inés* are not descriptions for which I have evidence, but rather assertions that stand fast for myself. They are manifest in my reactions, just like *This is painful*. In our everyday uses of such evaluations, doubt is logically excluded. Like certainties, avowals are learnt in a process of socialisation from which the constitution of our subjectivity results. We are born in communities which already live by certainties; we grow up with these steadfast points in our frameworks drilled into us rather than being taught to us explicitly. Certainties may fluctuate between normative and descriptive uses. In exceptional situations, certainties like *I have not been on the moon* may cease to be such, for instance if I become an astronaut. Avowals are, in a sense, are a subclass of certainties: those like *My name is Inés*, in which "the other person, though not himself having the same certainty as I have, nevertheless blindly presupposes that I am certain" (Stein 1997, p. 266). Other certainties are taken to be shared with everyone, like *The earth has existed for more than five minutes*.

We think that evaluations like *This cake is tasty* function in some respects like certainties.² Taste judgements do not describe individual standards stemming from comparison classes; they express our practical coping, our readiness to act in accordance to patterns of behaviour shared by our community, being thereby informative to others of our readiness to act in particular ways.³ Taste judgements are normally exempt from doubt because they are not

Comment [m31]:
 (1) . A: The cake is tasty.
 B: No, it's not!

Comment [m32]: ...thus far...

Comment [m33]: When a certainty enters into a descriptive use, it gives room to doubt, so it ceases to have its "hinge" role.

² We do not thereby claim that judgements of taste function exactly like statements like *This is a hand*. Various classifications of certainties present systematic differences between certainties and taste judgements. For instance, we normally agree on certainties like these but often we do not agree in our taste judgements. Moreover, certainties like *This is a hand* are seldom voiced in conversation, unlike taste evaluations.

³ "What is it like when people do not have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It is as though there were a custom among certain people to throw someone a ball, which he is supposed to catch &

empirical generalisations made upon evidence. What could count as evidence? (Wittgenstein 1969, §175) What would a mistake be like? (Wittgenstein 1969, §17) I can tell someone why I like something and this may not take me any further. *The cake is tasty because it has ginger* can be met with a blunt: *Ginger is disgusting!* What is the difference between *This is tasty* and *I know this is tasty*? *I know* here does not mark a justified epistemic claim; it just signals that I have tried the cake.

Comment [m34]: Just like "I know that I have a hand" does not mark a justified epistemic claim.

Communities of public and shared practices are crucial in shaping what we find tasty. Disagreement is possible only against the background of agreement in what we (don't) call tasty (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, §242). There is a host of gestures, facial expressions and other embodied reactions related to food ingestion that we share (cf. Panksepp 2005). Furthermore, there are naturally and culturally shared aversions (to e.g., very bitter or pungent tastes or coprophagia). When we join basic eating practices, caretakers react to our gestures and behaviour, they call the things we are fed with *tasty* (Wittgenstein 1969, §148). This is not a game of ostension but rather a series of repeated interactions among caretakers, infants and (age-adequate) edible stuff (Wittgenstein 1969, §476).

Comment [m35]: A triadic interaction among minds, bodies and the world in which these are embedded and where they interact.

Early on, young infants show taste preferences and aversions that may not be shared by their caretakers. This is not always noticed or tolerated but in general it is observed and, to some extent, taken into account by caretakers. These responses (when repeated) are responsible for the differentiation that contributes to the shaping of the individual's subjectivity. But we should stress that these differentiations (a) are normally not massive, they occur against the background of shared reactions and (b) they are not always accommodated: there is a negotiation by which "the individual is able to disentangle itself from the world picture it has inherited" (Bax 2011, p. 171).

Our taste judgements can change, both via taste acquisition and development of expertise (e.g., when learning to appreciate wasabi) and also via circumstantial conditions of our environment and/or ourselves (a wine may become acidic if left uncorked; a wine may taste poorly if tasted after eating chocolate). Change is possible but, like when certainties change, this resembles more a change in a world picture (e.g., if we become more competent as judges) than a blunder, a wrong observation we now see we made in the past (Wittgenstein 1969, §645).

throw back; but certain people might not throw it back, but put it in their pocket instead. Or what is it like for someone to have no idea how to fathom another's taste?" (Wittgenstein 1980 MS 138 32b)

Taste judgements normally do not describe, so their semantic (in)correctness is not given by their truth and falsity. Correct use of taste judgements is established by the ensemble of shared practices, shaped partly biologically and partly culturally, associated with them. In example (1), if A's gestures and bodily reactions show aversion or disgust, we will probably be puzzled. We may think that A is a bad liar, that he is being ironic, or that simply he does not know the meaning of *tasty*. Correctness conditions hinge on our public and shared practices.

In dialogue (1) none of the dialogue partners is wrong, not because the judgements exchanged are based on subjective evidence, but because these judgements are simply not based on evidence. This exchange marks a disagreement in how the interlocutors are prepared to act and how they expect each other to act. So-called faultless disagreements are not a result of there being a subjective determination of the truth-conditions or cognitive content of the judgements, but rather a clash of different ways to be in the world to which we invite others to participate when we say "This is tasty" rather than "I find this taste". Our subjectivity, the existence of a self that is different from others, is revealed in disagreements like (1). But why does such a conversation start anyway? To create community!

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Comment [m36]: They do not constitute epistemic claims for which we have grounds.

Comment [m37]:
(1) . A: The cake is tasty.
B: No, it's not!

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