Affecting meaning: Subjectivity and evaluativity in gradable adjectives
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is a well-known maxim that “in matters of taste, there can be no disputes”. But it often happens that we disagree with others in matters of taste. A salient feature of such disputes is that they can be very hard to settle. Who is right concerning what is tasty, fun, or beautiful? It appears that no one has the upper hand because taste is, in some sense, subjective.

In recent years, philosophers of language and linguists have turned their attention to these issues, in particular to how taste disputes can be phrased in conversation. The basic hunch is that if a judgement like This cake is tasty is subjective, this is most probably related to the adjective tasty (rather than to, e.g., the noun cake). Linguists have also noted that adjectives like long are similar to tasty in that, for instance, they all have a comparative form (we can say tastier, longer). These are known as gradable adjectives. Common to them as well is that long can also lead to disputes which are hard to resolve, e.g., when we disagree on whether a movie is long. Are tasty and long subjective in the same sense? Probably not. But then, do they have something in common and if so, what might that be?

Another question, one that is somewhat worrisome, is this. If adjectives like tasty are subjective, how can we understand someone else say, e.g., This cake is tasty? If each of us has a different interpretation of the term tasty, then it seems that successful communication is impossible. Of course, if one believes that there is actually no subjectivity in tasty, this problem does not arise, but then we have to give up the seemingly intuitive idea that we started out with.

What exactly does it mean to say that adjectives like tasty and long are subjective? How can they be subjective but still be comprehensible when someone else utters them? This dissertation provides a systematic study of how subjectivity can enter into the meaning of some gradable adjectives in such a way that intersubjective understanding is possible. We mainly focus on the philosophical aspects of this question, so the contribution of this investigation is mostly of philosophical, rather than of linguistic nature.
1.1 Background

A well-established idea in formal semantics inherited from Frege and Tarski is that the meaning of a sentence is given by a specification of its truth conditions. In this tradition, the meanings of terms are determined by showing how they contribute to the truth conditions of sentences containing them. This tradition in semantics yields many successful applications, but it seems not to be able to accommodate the initial idea according to which none of the participants in a taste dispute has the upper hand. Consider this simple example of such a dispute:

(1) Alf: This cake is tasty!
   Bea: No, it’s not!

Suppose the initial idea is cashed out by saying that in taste disputes both dialogue participants say something true and, still, they disagree. Then the traditional truth-conditional view is in trouble because on that account Alf and Bea utter contradictory propositions which cannot be both true at the same time. Prominent efforts to overcome the challenge posed to truth-conditional semantics by example (1) are presented and discussed at length in chapter 3; here we simply want to set the stage in very basic terms.

The first step these attempts take is to adopt a finer-grained take on truth-conditional semantics, such as Kaplan’s distinction of character, content, and circumstance of evaluation. The content of a sentence like \textit{I am 1.47 m tall} is determined by the characters of the expressions appearing in that sentence and by the circumstance of its evaluation. One can see characters as functions from contexts to contents. In particular, the character of the indexical \textit{I} refers to the person who is speaking in the context in which the sentence is uttered. The content of this sentence is true or false when we evaluate it with respect to specific circumstances of evaluation, which for Kaplan basically reduce to a pair specifying time and possible world. So one can see contents as functions from circumstances of evaluation to truth values. Thus, for instance, when M.I.C. utters this sentence, \textit{I} refers to M.I.C., so the sentence is true. If Frank Veltman utters this sentence, \textit{I} refers to F.V., so the sentence is false. (Frank’s height is 1.90 m.)

We group under the labels of contextualism, relativism, absolutism, and expressivism different solutions given so far to the challenge posed above. These four poles differ in where to place subjectivity within the cogs and wheels of post-Kaplanian truth-conditional semantics, i.e., whether subjectivity has to do with the character, content, or the extension of a sentence featuring an adjective like \textit{tasty}. We shall argue that these different solutions have a common denominator. They all conceive of subjectivity as a form of judge-dependence.

Contextualists hold a moderate position because they argue that we do not need a substantial modification of the post-Kaplanian semantic architecture to ac-
1.1. Background

count for the meaning of adjectives like *tasty*, and of sentences where they feature. In particular, one does not need to relativise the truth value of sentences containing adjectives like *tasty* to different judges. In a contextualist account, content and extension of an adjective like *tasty* are judge-dependent, while character remains fixed. When an adjective like *tasty* appears in a sentence, it comes with an argument which has to be filled in by a judge. This judge is either given in an overt judge-phrase, as in *This cake is tasty to Alf*, or it is provided by the context of utterance, where the default is that the speaker is the relevant judge, to the effect that Alf’s utterance in example (1) actually means *This cake is tasty to Alf*. Thus, many contextualists claim, taste disputes are not disagreements but rather misunderstandings, for there is a content shift when the context of utterance changes. In example (1), Bea’s reaction actually means *This cake is not tasty to Bea*, which does not contradict Alf’s claim.

Semantic relativism instead takes a more daring route, for it claims that to accommodate the subjectivity of adjectives like *tasty*, we have to modify the semantic framework. Basically, the idea is to introduce a judge parameter alongside time and possible world determining the circumstance of evaluation, while character and content remain fixed. Relativism has been argued to have superior explanatory power when tackling the semantics different areas of natural language, such as epistemic modals, counterfactuals, moral terms, etc. The case of adjectives like *tasty* has become in the last decade a decisive scenario in which relativists argue that their view proves its worth. If the truth of a taste judgement hinges on the judge assessing it, then the opposing judgements made by dialogue participants in a taste dispute can be held to be simultaneously true. Character and content of adjectives like *tasty* are fixed, which means that in example (1) there is indeed a disagreement and not a misunderstanding.

An absolutist position would argue that, contrary to what one may think, there is no subjectivity in adjectives like *tasty*, that taste disputes are just like any other disagreement. But there are less drastic routes in this direction. A nuanced form of absolutism stands against the relativisation of truth, but like the relativist it accepts that there is indeed something to the idea that no one has the upper hand in disputes like (1). A judgement like *This cake is tasty* roughly means *One finds this cake tasty*, and this claim has absolute truth conditions. But there is a form of judge-dependence in how *One* is interpreted, for this introduces a form special form of quantification through which the speaker selects people she identifies with. In example (1), Bea’s reaction roughly means *One does not find the cake tasty* which contradicts Alf’s claim, but if Bea identifies with people different from Alf then it seems that each of their respective claims can be true at the same time.

Expressivism akin to Ayerian or Stevensonian non-cognitivism has long faced the quandary posed by disagreement in prescriptive matters like those concerning ethics and aesthetics. Expressivism concerning the meaning of taste judgements basically claims that their meaning cannot (just) consist in having a truth-
conditional content. Unlike descriptive sentences for which truth-evaluable propositions can be determined, sentences like *This cake is tasty* rather express a non-cognitive attitude of approval (or disapproval) of the object under assessment. Judge-dependence appears here as well for it is a judge’s attitude, normally the speaker’s, that gets expressed in a taste judgement. The truth-conditional framework can be left intact because taste judgements have a a sort of meaning that is to dealt with in a different framework. The main challenge for expressivist theories are cases where taste judgements interact with ordinary judgements, where the most famous objection is the so-called Frege-Geach problem. Does *This cake is tasty* mean the same when we state is as a plain judgement as when we embed it under a conditional, e.g., in *If this cake is tasty, we will buy the same one next week*? The basic insight of this objection is that prescriptive and descriptive language interact without trouble, that we can reason with our taste judgements, that sentences expressing them have strikingly similar properties as ordinary descriptive sentences. By defending the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive attitudes and, correspondingly, between two sorts (or layers) of meaning, the expressivist is forced to explain how these sorts of attitudes and sorts of meaning are related.

A general issue with subjectivity of adjectives like *tasty* and *long* has to do with the place it can find within the dominant semantic frameworks of gradability. Degree-based approaches analyse gradable adjectives like *long* as relations between individuals in a domain and degrees. Basically, when we say of the film “*Sátántangó*”[^1] “Sátántangó” is long, what we say is that the film’s length exceeds a contextually given standard of comparison. When this framework accommodates subjectivity, it does so by including a judge who sets the the standard of comparison, or the measurement procedure. The picture we get roughly says that a sentence like the one Alf utters in example (1) means that this cake’s tastiness exceeds his standard. Meanwhile, delineation-based approaches claim that gradable adjectives behave like any other adjective, except that their extension depends on a contextually given comparison class. So when we compare “Sátántangó” with “*Novecento*”[^2] we might say “Sátántangó” is long, but when we compare it to “*Shoah*”[^3] we will probably say “Sátántangó” is not long (after all). Subjectivity can enter in this picture by becoming a contextual factor fixing the selection of objects we compare, or the way different dimensions of a complex adjective are ranked. So in example (1) Alf may say *This cake is tasty* because, compared to the cakes he has tried, this one is fine, while Bea might have been luckier in her past experiences with cakes and is thus disappointed with this one. Or Alf may be delighted by the bitterness of the chocolate this cake contains, while Bea detests bitter tastes, so their priorities in calling something *tasty* differ.

[^1]: Béla Tarr, 1994, 432 min.
[^2]: Bernardo Bertolucci, 1976, 317 min (original cut).
[^3]: Claude Lanzmann, 1985, 613 min.
1.2. *Research question and hypothesis*

We face two obstacles if we follow the existing approaches to the subjectivity of gradable adjectives. The arguments are given in chapter 3 and developed further in subsequent chapters. Here we just lay down their basic traits.

First, when subjectivity is conceived as some form of judge-dependence, the condition of being a subject is reduced to the confines of an individual, as a phenomenon that is demarcated by the limits of a singular body or mind, those of the contingently designated agent in a context. But if we thus conceptualise the rule for correct application of a term as something that is completely internal to an agent, we are left with no public and intersubjective criterion according to which we can distinguish applications from misapplications. It becomes impossible to see how dialogue participants of taste disputes can understand each other.

Second, when the subject is brought into the existing analyses of gradability, subjectivity is objectivised. A judge-dependent standard of comparison or delineation is an expression of how an object relates to other objects, and not an expression of what we experience with that object. If we decide whether to call something *tasty* as the result of a measurement procedure, the adjective actually expresses a reflection on our experience, rather than our experience *tout court*. If instead a subject fixes a comparison class or the priority among dimensions of an adjective, the subject is a mere contextual factor deciding the selection of objects or a ranking of dimensions, but it is ultimately a relation among the objects under comparison what determines what the subject calls *tasty*.

We believe that accommodating subjectivity in the semantics of gradables adjectives requires a foundational revision of our conception of normativity, subjectivity, and linguistic meaning. This is the central philosophical contribution of the dissertation, to be found in chapters 4 and 5. What we want is to arrive at a notion of normativity that does not create a gap between descriptive and prescriptive meaning, to put on the table a notion of subjectivity that does not cut off agents from the intersubjective arena in which language occurs, and to bring into semantics a notion of embodied intentionality.

This revision is a broadening of the notion of meaning that semantics usually works with. As we said earlier, truth-conditional semantics is very successful in various domains, and its achievements should not be thrown overboard. But the case of subjectivity in gradable adjectives suggests, we argue, that semantics should not always be concerned with truth-conditional meaning, that this powerful characterisation of meaning helps us tackle *some*, but not all phenomena.

Our view, we shall see, shares with the expressivist approach the idea that affective reactions are part of the meaning of taste judgements. But the main difference between the expressivist approach and ours is that we do not claim that modeling the meaning of taste judgements requires a framework that is
different from the one needed to handle sentences with no subjectivity involved. Nor do we claim that one needs a hybrid system combining the truth-conditional framework with a non-truth-conditional one. And we do not acquiesce to the view that prescriptive and descriptive language carry different sorts of meaning. What we need is to step back and see what idea of intentionality or aboutness, in particular of linguistic expressions, one should try to model. The idea of aboutness developed in the truth-conditional tradition stems from a strongly anti-psychologistic stance, and this results in a drastic trimming of the subject from the meaning of linguistic expressions. We do not advocate here the position that, among others, Frege and Montague were combating, namely that linguistic meanings are internal representations. We are against such view. We believe that the aboutness of linguistic expressions in natural language stems from the interaction of human, embodied agents.

Our revision of the notion of normativity benefits from Kant’s analysis of taste judgements, and how these relate to what he called “cognitive judgements”, roughly what the expressivist sees as the content of descriptive sentences. We will see in chapter 4 that Kant offers a way to see how taste judgements can make a claim to the agreement of others even though they are based on a feeling. He argues that the faculty of reflective judgement, i.e., our ability to take our perceptions to be universal, is involved in both taste and cognitive judgements, but in a different way in each case. This will help us make a distinction between adjectives that are weakly evaluative like long, for which we have developed conventionalised methods of measurement, and those which are strongly evaluative like tasty. In the sequel, we refer to sentences featuring adjectives like long or tasty “evaluative judgements”, with the proviso that we are not isolating them as having a different sort of meaning than that of claims containing no such adjectives.

Our revision of the notion of normativity can also benefit from Wittgenstein’s considerations on judgements which are in a way similar to taste judgements, as for instance avowals like I have a headache or certainties like Moore’s notorious claim This is a hand. As in the case of taste judgements, we cannot convince others of what we say by providing evidence. Crucial to their meaning is how they relate to bodily expression, and more generally, to action in a social setting. Wittgenstein’s observations on avowals and certainties relate to his idea of subjectivity, one that will shed light on our problem, for he delineates a view in which subjectivity depends on what happens outside rather than inside a subject. Our revision of the notion of subjectivity will thus draw on Wittgenstein’s take on it.

This take is actually close to the one developed by Merleau-Ponty. The subject is social and embodied, these two are common features in their views. For Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is a constitutive feature of subjectivity, and also constitutive of intentionality. Our revision of the notion of linguistic meaning is achieved through a broadening of the notion of intentionality guided by Merleau-Ponty’s perspective. For him, operative intentionality, the kind of directedness we recognise in purposive movement, is basic for all cognition. We will claim that
evaluative judgements are in some sense subjective because they are made by embodied agents who signal their affective stance. In chapter 5 we argue that the meaning of a sentence, in particular of evaluative judgements, and more specifically of adjectives like *tasty* and *long*, involves a mesh of information and affect. Intentional states consist of an entanglement of how we feel, how we can act, how we expect others to act, and what we know and believe. An embodied conception of intentionality accommodates the subjectivity of adjectives like *tasty* and *long*, and it shows how intersubjective understanding is possible.

One may wonder whether this revision leads to a feasible way of modeling linguistic meaning formally. We offer in chapter 6 a sketch of a model to show that some of the central insights of our revision can be brought into a semantics for gradable adjectives. The formal implementation of the core of these ideas leads to an update system in which the meaning of a sentence is analysed as a function that modifies the intentional state of an agent, where intentional states are seen to comprise not only partial knowledge about the world but also expectations about the reactions of others. The system we get does not assume that either the positive or the comparative form is basic, which facilitates the modeling of similarities and differences in the subjectivity of adjectives like *tasty* and *long*.

1.3 Chapter overview and methodological notes

We give here a chapter overview and, *en passant*, we add a few comments concerning the general argumentative strategy.

In chapter 2 we locate adjectives like *tasty* within the big family of gradable adjectives. We give details about how to minimally characterise a gradable adjective, and how *tasty* stands closer to *long* or *skilful* than to *dry* or *empty*. Interesting for us is that adjectives like *tasty* or *long* are, in a specific sense, evaluative, though they are not evaluative in the same way. The latter belongs to those we call weakly evaluative adjectives, those for which we have developed conventionalised procedures to compare objects, while the former belongs to the strongly evaluative ones. In subsequent chapter we will elaborate on this distinction, and discuss how this view on evaluativity relates to other views. We will present three markers of subjectivity and indicate that these do not apply uniformly to weakly and strongly evaluative adjectives.

In chapter 3 we present two prominent approaches to the semantics of adjectival gradability, and the main poles in the debate concerning the subjectivity of adjectives like *tasty*. We develop an encompassing argument showing that current approaches to subjectivity in gradable adjectives fail to deliver a means to guarantee intersubjective understanding, and that the main trends modeling adjectival gradability objectivise subjectivity.

A first remark concerns the perhaps surprising route we follow in the next chapters. We go from linguistics, in particular semantics and philosophy of lan-
guage, through epistemology and phenomenology, and then back to semantics. Why do this? Our crossing is not a confusion of these fields but rather a strategy to reconstitute the notion of intentionality, in particular of linguistic expressions. But why try to lay down bridges between epistemology and semantics, between phenomenology and semantics? We believe that the prevalent notion of intentionality in semantics is bound to a narrow perspective that neglects the situatedness given by our embodiment for fear that this might lead to psychologism.

These crossings should not be surprising, at least not to those who have noticed that intentionality is a central concern in both analytic philosophy, in particular in philosophy of language and mind, and in phenomenology. This move should not be surprising either to those familiar with the embodied turn in artificial intelligence. What we are trying to do here can be seen as a similar, though more constructive move, to that of Dreyfus with respect to AI.

In chapter 4, we undertake a modest epistemological inquiry into the normativity of evaluative judgements. Our goal is to explicate the notion of (in)correctness at stake here, to get a better idea of why in taste and related disputes no one seems to have the upper hand. We will investigate how Kant’s idea of reflective judgement, with some stretching, can bridge taste judgements, other evaluative judgements, and regular non-evaluative ones. This cake is tasty or This film is long, and This cake has nuts, are actually not that different. In all cases we take it that others should agree with us, they all make normative claims, but not all of the same nature, which is explained by how reflective judgement is involved in each case. We also deploy Wittgenstein’s views on avowals (first-person present tense ascriptions of bodily or psychological states) and on certainties (statements not voicing pieces of knowledge, but rather expressing steadfast assumptions of our community). Wittgenstein’s late epistemology and philosophy of psychology provides a rich source of observations on how the (in)correctness of certain claims lies outside the realm of what we prove true or false. It also suggests how subjectivity heavily depends on a subject’s reactions, and how it is largely developed on the basis of intersubjectivity, on what happens among rather than within men.

In chapter 5, we will diagnose the challenges voiced at the end of chapter 3 as being due to the disembodied character of the notion of intentionality underlying the idea of meaning that comes with truth-conditional semantics. We sketch an alternative notion of embodied intentionality. For this revision we draw on Merleau-Ponty’s view on cognition, a view according to which cognition is embodied and embedded. We appeal to the notion of affordance in order to specify the way expected patterns of behaviour can come to be part of the meaning of evaluative judgements. On this basis, we develop a view according to which the meaning of a sentence is specified by determining the action possibilities it signals.

But one should also note that the interest of these perspectives is different, for analytic philosophy of language mainly considers the aboutness of linguistic expressions whereas phenomenology considers the conditions of possibility of such aboutness, how is it possible that an agent can have contentful states at all. Cf., Kelly in particular in ch. 1.
The third methodological point is that in chapters 4 and 5 discussions concerning Kant, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty, will take some space. We rely on these philosophical works as sources of expansion of the idea of intentionality underlying linguistic meaning. We do not intend our rendering of the concepts we present to be deep scholarly contributions, but simply to stand as useful reconstructions which will hopefully allow the reader who is not familiar with the notions we draw on to follow our argumentation. This has two immediate consequences. On the one hand, we do not try to be exhaustive in including all nuances in exegetical debates. We try to make up in footnotes for some of the details we omit in the main text for the sake of simplicity. On the other hand, we do not ask the reader to fully endorse Kant’s idea of reflective judgement, Wittgenstein’s view on avowals and certainties, or Merleau-Pontyian intentionality. We lean on these notions but we do not need to commit to them beyond the basic needs we set in our inquiry.

In chapter 6 we sketch a semantic model for gradable adjectives, a model that takes the shape of an update system. We exploit the notion of expectation to cash out the way in which action possibilities can enter into a formal model of the meaning of tasty and long. Our fourth methodological point concerns how the formal system we sketch in chapter 6 stands with respect to the philosophical analysis of intentionality we develop in chapters 4 and 5, and with respect to existing frameworks of gradability. On the one hand, the system simply provides a proof of concept that will let us see whether our reasoning in chapter 5 can lead to a systematic treatment of structural features of the meaning of evaluative judgements. So, one should not see chapter 5 as the culmination of our investigation but as a tentative exploration of how to take our philosophical analysis into the formal arena. On the other hand, the theory we offer is not intended to stand on a par with respect to the predictive power of existing semantic theories of gradability. It simply purports to show that a broader conception of linguistic meaning as the one we sketch can lend itself to formal treatment.

1.4 Output

The contents of this dissertation have been presented in several venues. Peer-reviewed submissions (journal articles, book chapters) based on these materials are currently in preparation.

Chapter 1. Introduction


Author contributions. Structured the data: IC and RF. Developed the semantic: IC and RF. Developed the dialogue analysis: mainly RF. Wrote the paper: IC and RF.


Author contributions. Structured the data: IC. Contributed the conceptual analysis: IC. Developed the dialogue analysis: mainly RF. Set up the presentation: IC and RF.

I. Crespo: Kant’s merely reflective judgement and the semantics of taste. Initially developed in 2012 during a research visit at UC Berkeley, under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Hannah Ginsborg.


Author contributions. Structured the data: IC. Contributed the phenomenological tools: ER, JK. Developed the semantic analysis: mainly IC, with assessment from ER, JK. Wrote the paper: mainly IC, with revisions by ER and JK.


Author contributions. Structured the data: IC. Contributed the phenomenological tools: ABH. Developed the semantic analysis: mainly IC, with assessment from ABH. Wrote the paper: IC and ABH.

I. Crespo and F. Veltman: Tastes differ. First presented in at the University of Tilburg in 2013. Improved versions were presented by Frank Veltman at the University of Utrecht, Peking University, University of Maryland College Park, and University of Barcelona in 2014.

Author contributions. Structured the data: IC. Developed the update system: mainly FV, with insights from IC. Assessed the semantic analysis: IC and FV. Set up the presentation: IC and FV.