

Assessment Sensitivity, Retraction and Norms of Assertion

John MacFarlane (e.g. 2003, 2005, 2009) has argued that certain types of discourse (e.g. about future contingents, predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals or knowledge attributions) exhibit *assessment sensitivity* which means that the truth of assertions containing expressions such as *tasty* or *knows* depend in addition to the context of use on the *context of assessment*. To illustrate, the proposition *p*: *Beer is tasty*, as asserted and assessed by Peter at *t1* is true, but false as assessed by Paul, a beer-hater, at *t2*. Thus, according to the view truth is assessment sensitive which is why the view is also known as *genuine relativism*.

Another recently popular view labelled *non-indexical contextualism* (or *moderate relativism*) (Kölbel 2002, Lasersohn 2005, Recanati 2008) holds that in the above example the same proposition is evaluated relative to different values of a judge parameter at the index whose values are determined by the two contexts of use. Since contexts of assessments are also contexts of use, the two views will give the same predictions in cases like the one above. When Paul is assessing *p* he is also asserting *p*, and therefore according to non-indexical contextualism it is his context of use that determines the value of the judge parameter, not Peter's.

According to MacFarlane (2009), the essential difference between the predictions of non-indexical contextualism and genuine relativism concerns retraction. If Peter's taste regarding beer at *t3* has changed, according to genuine relativism he should now retract his earlier assertion if challenged, since relative to the present context of assessment the proposition is false (and consequently, the proposition *was* false at *t1* since the truth always depends on both the context of use and the context of assessment). But since the non-indexical contextualist takes the context of use to determine the truth, according to him Peter at *t3* cannot truthfully say "What I said then [at *t1*] was false". Instead he should say "What I said then was true, but it is false now since beer is not tasty anymore" which does not correspond to the ways people actually speak. Thus *prima facie*, the retraction data seems to give genuine relativism a decisive advantage over non-indexical contextualism.

The aim of our talk is to discuss a tension that follows from the norms of assertion that MacFarlane (2009) takes to be responsible for retraction. Since the norms he considers only motivate the assertions of non-relativistic propositions, we argue that in order to make sense of relativistic discourses the genuine relativist should offer some specific norms that govern assertions of relativistic propositions. However, the relativistic norms that explain retraction also assume that the speakers are aware of the relativity of truth. Therefore the norms that would make sense of relativistic discourses have to explain, among other things, why speakers willingly participate in disagreements about relativistic propositions which they know to be true or false only relative to contexts of assessments. This is especially pressing considering that explaining disagreements is supposed to be one of the strong points of relativism. Thus we conclude that the relativist faces some serious challenges: on the one hand he is committed to certain norms in order to explain retraction, but on the other hand these very norms make it extremely difficult to give a plausible account of relativistic disagreements.

References

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