

Retractions

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Abstract Retraction and disagreement data have been used to motivate relativist accounts of certain types of claims. Among these figure epistemic modals, knowledge attributions, or personal taste claims. On the relativist proposal, sentences like “the ice cream might be in the fridge” or “Pocoyo is funny” only get assigned a truth-value relative to contexts of utterance, indices of evaluation, and contexts of assessment. Retractions play a crucial role in the argument for assessment-relativism. A retraction of a past assertion is supposed to be mandatory at a context of assessment whenever the asserted sentence is not true at the context of use *or* the context of assessment. If retractions were not obligatory in these conditions, there would be no normative difference between assessment-relativism and non-indexical contextualism. This paper has two main goals. The first is to offer a review of several objections to the obligatoriness of retractions. This review is a reminder of the need for an alternative account of retraction. The second goal of this paper is to offer the outline of an original account of retraction compatible with contextualism (indexical or not) and the mere *permissibility* of retractions in the core cases. This will satisfy a further aim, which is to undermine the claim that assessment-relativism is normatively distinct from contextualism.

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1 Retraction and Relativism

Everyone has said things that shouldn't have been said. One may have spoken falsely or, if not falsely, perhaps misleadingly. Other times, one may have been unkind, offensive, or just callous. For these or other reasons, retracting *might be* the thing to do. The reasons why one might retract are different in the two sorts of cases. It is not the same to speak falsely or misleadingly as it is to be offensive or unkind. One may retract in the former sort of case because it is wrong to induce others in error. One may retract in the latter sort of case because it is wrong to disrespect others. My focus in this paper is on retractions of the former kind, where we induce others in error either by asserting false things, or by otherwise conveying false information. I will review three recent objections to the use of retraction data in contemporary semantic relativist theories. I will also review some recent experimental results involving retraction data. The objections against relativism, and the experimental results, both tell us that retraction data do not support assessment-relativist semantics. The present paper goes one step further and outlines an account of the conditions in which retractions are permissible and appropriate. The account is compatible with the experimental data available, and is also compatible with semantic contextualism.

Retraction and disagreement data play a crucial role in arguments for assessment-relativism about epistemic modals, deontic modals, conditionals, knowledge attributions, and value and personal taste claims. Statements of these kinds seem to be dependent on people's perspectives: either one's body of information at a time, or one's standard of taste, for instance. The apparent perspective dependence complicates possible accounts of how a person can be at fault for inducing others in error. While objectivists seem unable to capture the perspective dependence of claims in that range, contextualists seem unable to account for disagreement and retraction data with the same claims. Disagreements between people with different perspectives in these areas of discourse clearly occur, as do retractions of past claims made by subjects after a change of perspective (where the perspective-independent facts remain the same). In recent years, assessment-relativism has presented itself as a novel position, one that purports to accommodate not just the apparent perspective dependence of the cases at stake, but also disagreement and retraction data involving those cases. The main argument for relativism rests, crucially, on the pragmatics of some retraction cases.

On the relativist proposal, sentences making an epistemic modal claim, like "the ice cream might be in the fridge", or a personal taste claim, like "Pocoyo is funny", only get assigned a truth-value relative to contexts of utterance, indices of evaluation, and contexts of assessment. The novelty that relativism introduces with respect to contextualism is the new type of context, the context

of assessment. Assessment relativists claim that the *perspective* required for the truth of an epistemic modal claim, or of a claim of personal taste, is provided by the epistemic evidence, or the standard of taste, of the assessor at the context of assessment. By contrast, contextualists (indexical or not) take the relevant perspective to be the the epistemic evidence or the standard of taste determined at the context of utterance.

Contexts of utterance can be understood in at least two ways – as the concrete situations where sentences are uttered, and as formal sequences of parameters (fixed at the concrete situations of use). The latter are formal theoretical models of those features that are considered necessary for a semantic representation of the content and truth-conditions of a given sentence as used. *Contexts of assessment* can also be understood as concrete situations where a previous use of a sentence is assessed and as formal sequences of parameters (fixed at the respective concrete situations of assessment). It is to contexts *qua* formal entities that sentential (or propositional) truth is meant to be relative. But it is not the relativization of sentential (or propositional) truth to formal sequences of parameters that makes assessment-relativism a radical departure from other theories. assessment-relativism is distinctive because of the normative difference that sets it apart from either indexical or non-indexical contextualism. It is this normative difference that constraints what a speaker is, allegedly, obliged to do at a context of assessment *qua* new concrete situation. To put it simply and briefly, that normative difference concerns the putative obligation a speaker has of retracting a past perspective dependent claim when she has come to see things from a different perspective.

John MacFarlane defends assessment-relativism in his recent book (MacFarlane (2014)), while recognizing that both non-indexical contextualism and assessment-relativism have the same consequences concerning the permissibility of making assertions, given the norm regulating the very speech-act of assertion (MacFarlane, 2014, 105).¹ Imagine that a subject *A* says *p* truly at *c*₁, and that a subject *B* says *p* truly at *c*₂. Assume furthermore that *p* is a claim of the relevant sort in this debate, for instance an epistemic modal or personal taste claim. Neither *A* nor *B* need to retract or justify their claims when they are challenged by each other, either on non-indexical contextualism or on assessment-relativism.² They are both right (“accurate”) at their respective contexts. *A* asserts correctly at context of use *c*₁ and context of assessment *c*₁. And *B* asserts correctly at context of use *c*₂ and context of assessment *c*₂. Since the same predictions about the correctness conditions of assertions are made by contextualism (indexical or not) and assessment-relativism, we could

¹ The Reflexive Truth Rule for assertions that MacFarlane defends is this: “*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*₁*.” See MacFarlane (2014, 103).

² “...the relativist account predicts, [that when challenged] she is warranted in standing by her original assertion.” (MacFarlane, 2014, 133). See also (MacFarlane, 2005, 320)). It obviously does not follow that there is no difference whatsoever between the two theories with respect to predictions about disagreement – whether or not there is a difference may depend on what disagreement is, and MacFarlane does take great pains to distinguish between various kinds.

drop mention of contexts of assessment entirely, if contextualism and relativism did not make radically different predictions with respect to retractions. Contexts of assessment, *qua* formal sets of parameters, would be idle wheels in the theory.

Non-indexical contextualism does not require that asserters retract a previous assertion when the proposition that was truly asserted turns out to be false at the (new) context of assessment. It is part of the now familiar relativist's argument that the available forms of contextualism cannot explain retraction or disagreement data.³

It is the obligatoriness of retractions that provides the normative difference between assessment-relativism and non-indexical contextualism. Making sense of assessment-relative truth, as MacFarlane (2014) stresses, is a matter of making sense of the normative constraints and commitments undertaken by speakers in using perspective-dependent sentences. If we cannot make sense of these constraints and commitments, then we cannot make sense of assessment-relativism. As he says,

The basic thought is that the pragmatic difference between R[elativism] and C[ontextualism] manifests itself in norms for the retraction of assertions rather than norms for the making of assertions. R[elativism] predicts that an assertion of p at c_1 ought to be retracted by the asserter in c_3 , while C[ontextualism] predicts that it need not be retracted. Thus, the Reflexive Truth Rule is not so much wrong as incomplete. It needs to be supplemented by a constitutive norm for retraction:

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 .*

By “retraction,” I mean the speech act one performs in saying “I take that back” or “I retract that.” The target of a retraction is another speech act, which may be an assertion, a question, a command, an offer, or a speech act of another kind. The effect of retracting a speech act is to undo the normative changes effected by the original speech act. (MacFarlane, 2014, 108).

In this paper, I focus on retractions only because of their centrality to the argument for relativism. I will show, first, that the alleged obligation to retract is nonexistent. The next section reviews the main objections that have been recently made to the idea that a retraction of a claim of the relevant kind is obligatory in the conditions described. The objections show that there is no such obligation, that speakers that hold their ground are neither insincere nor

³ Kölbel (2004), Lasersohn (2005), Egan (2007), Egan (2010) and MacFarlane (2014) use disagreement data against indexical contextualism. Yet, recently, arguments have been offered also against the relativist's prospects of giving an explanation of disagreement, or, at least, of giving one that is not also available to the contextualist. See García-Carpintero (2008), von Fintel and Gillies (2008), Stojanovic (2007), Glanzberg (2007), Coliva and Moruzzi (2012), and AUTHOR-a. See AUTHOR and CO-AUTHOR, Sundell (2011) and Huvenes (2012) for suggestions on how contextualism can explain resilient disagreements.

irrational, and moreover that the imposition of that obligation would commit speakers to either irrationality or insincerity.

It is important to have these objections present, for they rule out a possible line of defense for the relativist, namely securing similar strategies to explain *the permissibility* of (not) retracting to the strategies that are open to the contextualists. The objections reviewed are moreover supported by recent experimental work by Knobe and Yalcin (2014), which I will also briefly expound.

Given that retractions of perspectival claims are not obligatory, we need an account of retraction that explains why a retraction of a past assertion of sentence that was true that is not true at the context of assessment is anyway *permissible*. At first sight, it seems that under contextualism it should always wrong to retract. In the final section, I offer an original outline of a pragmatic account of the permissibility of retractions that is compatible with both semantic contextualism and with the experimental data available.

2 Objections - not obligatory or not rational

Relativists' emphasize the importance of retraction in the first sense discriminated earlier, namely, the retraction of a past assertion that may on assumption presently induce others in error. The examples typically offered by relativists seem to confirm the claim, central to their case, that retractions of past perspective-dependent claims are *mandatory* when the speaker's perspective has changed. Consider for instance, that Mimi says (1) when she is 3, but says (2) when she is 9:

1. Pocoyo is funny!
2. Pocoyo is not funny; I was so wrong when I was 3.

If Mimi has done the right thing in retracting, assessment-relativism would seem to make the right normative prediction, but contextualism presumably would not. Mimi would be right in taking back her assertion of (1) when she is 9. Contextualism, however, cannot explain in a straightforward way why Mimi should presumably retract, since, on contextualist semantics, she was right when she made her assertion, and her assertion is still correct even at future contexts where a new utterance of the sentence in (1) is false. Hence, so the argument goes, relativism is the preferable view.

Recently, several authors have developed objections against assessment-relativism and the normative predictions it makes. I will review what I take to be the main objections available in the current literature, in particular, the reasons given by von Fintel and Gillies (2008), AUTHOR-b, and Ross and Schroeder (2013) against the obligatoriness of retraction. The objections show that there is no obligation to retract claims of the considered kind, that speakers that hold their ground are neither insincere nor irrational, and moreover that assessment-relative norm of retractions commits speakers to either insincerity or irrationality.

Von Fintel and Gillies discuss several *might* claims where the prediction that one must retract fails. Consider for instance, that a speaker asserts (3) and later finds that the kids finished the ice cream.

3. There might be ice cream in the fridge.

According to the relativist, when it is revealed that there is no ice cream left, the asserter of (3) ought to retract with something like “Oh, I guess I was wrong” or “I take that back, there’s no ice cream left then”. The point von Fintel and Gillies make (pp. 81 ff), however, is that not all *mights* are retracted in the face of new evidence. Often, speakers resist an invitation to retract. A speaker could resist thus:

4. Look, I didn’t say *there is* ice cream in the fridge; I said *there might be*. Maybe the kids finished it last night. Sheesh.

They further point out that constructions under *if* are particularly resistant:

5. If the kids haven’t found it, there might be ice cream in the fridge.

There is no impression that the speaker should retract “there might be ice cream in the fridge” when it is embedded in a conditional. Edgington (1995) would consider that examples like (5) actually count as conditional assertions. For Edgington, a conditional assertion of “If the kids haven’t found it, there is ice cream in the fridge” is an unconditional assertion that there might be ice cream in the fridge, when it is true that the kids haven’t found the ice cream. If the kids had left a note on the fridge saying “we ate all the ice cream!” there would still be no expectation that the conditional assertion should be retracted. This is suggestive of an explanation that contextualists may develop. I’ll return to this in the final section.

In previous work, AUTHOR-b focuses on aesthetic and personal taste predicates instead of deontic modals, and argues that a speaker who refuses to retract a past claim after a change of perspective is neither irrational nor insincere. Recall Mimi, aged 3 years old, saying “Pocoyo is funny”. Suppose that, at 63 years of age, she recalls what she thought of Pocoyo when she was 3. According to the relativist, she should retract, because she is not now disposed to find Pocoyo funny. Presumably, if the truth of the proposition expressed by “Pocoyo is funny” varies across time, it’s because Mimi’s dispositions towards children’s characters change across time. Her dispositions to find Pocoyo funny earlier in life are no more veridical than her dispositions not to find it funny later in life. Her utterance of “Pocoyo is funny” is true when she is 3, and her utterance of “Pocoyo is not funny” is true when she is 63. But she should, according to the relativist, retract her earlier assertion when she is 63. She should, moreover, be already committed to retract when she initially asserts “Pocoyo is funny”.

This description of the data is generalized beyond Mimi when she is 3 and applies to anyone who makes a claim about taste, humour or aesthetics: the utterance of p was true in the past at t_1 . The utterance of $\neg p$ is true now at t_2 . The relativist holds that the speaker should retract at t_2 the past assertion

made at t_1 . In asserting p at t_1 , the speaker should be already committed to retract at any future time t where one's perspective changes suitably. Everyone is in a position to know that p is a claim that one will not make in the future when one's standards (or perspectives) change.

Now, a retraction is not simply a cancellation of earlier commitments.⁴ Or, at least, it cannot be *if retractions are to be governed by the Retraction Rule*. MacFarlane says that retracting an assertion (or retracting another speech act) is not tantamount to conceding that one was at fault. His comments suggest that he understands 'being at fault' as 'lacking justification'.⁵ Yet, retracting is not admitting fault-*qua*-unjustification. If the Retraction Rule is to govern it, a retraction *must require* an admission of fault, since to retract *is* to take back an assertion that is, at the moment of the retraction, *false*.

The Retraction Rule imposes an obligation to take back p when p is not true as used at c_1 and assessed at c_2 . What motivates the Retraction Rule? Surely, the presumed obligation derives from the assumption of the wrongness of inducing others in error. Only insofar as one may induce others in error by *not* retracting can one be expected to have to retract. A retraction *does* require admitting fault. By retracting, Mimi would not be *simply* signaling that she no longer has the inclination to find Pocoyo funny. If the Retraction Rule is in place, Mimi is also admitting fault. But instead of retracting, she could rather reply:

6. I used to find Pocoyo funny, and I do not anymore. Still, I was not wrong when I was 3 years old and found it funny. It was the funniest thing back then!

In uttering (6), Mimi informs the audience that indeed she no longer has an inclination she had when she was 3 *and* refuses to retract her past assertion of "Pocoyo is funny". Why should she be expected to retract?

As MacFarlane admits, those with different dispositions are not better positioned to assess a given matter than the subject who is being challenged. The context of assessment that matters is the asserter's own context when the relevant standard has changed.⁶ Yet, *mutatis mutandis*, the same is true in the individual case. If one's dispositions towards cartoons, or food, change across time, one's later responses and reactions are not more veridical than one's earlier responses and reactions. *A fortiori*, one has no obligation to retract one's earlier assertion (which was correct when made) at a later time.

⁴ Contrast MacFarlane (2014, 108).

⁵ "Suppose one's evidence strongly suggests that Uncle Jack is coming to lunch, and on the strength of that evidence you assert that Uncle Jack is coming. A bit later, Aunt Sally calls to say that Uncle Jack has broken his leg. This makes it quite unlikely that he is coming, so you retract your assertion. Nonetheless, you were perfectly reasonable in making it, and cannot be criticized for having done so. Retracting it is not admitting fault." (MacFarlane, 2014, 110)

⁶ MacFarlane (2005) admits that having to retract whenever one is challenged is "too damaging to the integrity of a single person's body of assertions. . . It demands too much of asserters to give every challenger the home stadium advantage." (MacFarlane, 2005, 320).

For there to be any obligation to retract claims of the kind discussed, we would have to perceive speakers who resist retraction as somehow irrational, or insincere. However, it seems, we have no perception of insincerity or irrationality, either in the *might* cases discussed by von Fintel and Gillies, or in the *funny* case just considered.

Finally, Ross and Schroeder (2013) argue that it would in fact be irrational for an asserter who is rational and sincere to commit to retract. They begin by noting that speakers who are rational and sincere in their assertions, and who know that in the future will rationally and sincerely assert the negation of what they had previously asserted, can still make claims like the ones we have discussed thus far (like (1) or (3)). They call this the reversibility thesis. They argue that the only invariantist position that can accommodate the reversibility thesis is relativism. This raises a dilemma for the relativist, because reversibility and disagreement (and retraction) are incompatible.

Imagine a subject, Ankita, who is writing a story for a newspaper on a local murder investigation. In the morning, it is unknown whether Axeworthy is the murderer. She knows that in the afternoon a DNA test will establish whether or not he is. In the morning, Ankita asserts m , and in the evening asserts $\neg m$, where m is:

7. m : Axeworthy might be, and might not be, the murderer.

Now, when Ankita asserts m , she is sincere and rational. Presumably she would undertake the commitment to vindicate her assertion of m at a later context, too. But in the evening she will no longer be in a position to assert m sincerely. She will assert $\neg m$, and hence be committed to vindicate *this* latter assertion. And so, Ankita will not be in a position to vindicate the earlier assertion of m as well, since it will be common knowledge by then whether Axeworthy is the murderer.

Ross and Schroeder's argument is essentially this. If Ankita is sincere when she asserts in the morning, then she must intend to vindicate or retract her assertion in the face of a challenge in the evening. And so, if she intends the disjunction, she must intend to retract. But since she knows that in the evening what she asserts will not be true, she will be unable to vindicate its truth in the evening. So she knows that she will have to retract. But if she knows her assertion will be indefensible in the face of being challenged in the evening, and if she already intends to retract her assertion in the face of any such challenge, then her present assertion would hardly seem to qualify as sincere (Ross and Schroeder, 2013, 69-70). Knowing all this, Ankita could not rationally intend to vindicate the truth of her assertion as made in the morning later in the evening. But, on MacFarlane's theory, this is the intention that Ankita must have. Hence, Ankita could not rationally and sincerely make her assertion in the morning.

These arguments severely weaken the relativist's claim. The main difference between (non-indexical) contextualism and relativism comes down to the normative difference with respect to the act of retraction. However, if retraction is not mandatory when a past asserted sentence is false at a current

context, and if it being mandatory would commit speakers to insincerity or irrationality, then assessment-relativism is not a sensible alternative semantic theory.

If the objections are right, we need an explanation of why retracting a past asserted sentence (of the disputed kind) that is false at a current context is *permissible* but *not obligatory*. I offer the outline of such an account in the last section. Before, however, I'll review recent experimental work that seems to confirm the *permissible but not obligatory* status of retraction.

3 Experimental Confirmation?

In recent experimental work, Knobe and Yalcin (2014) tested the relativist's thesis for the case of bare epistemic modals as stated in (J) below.⁷

- (J) Competent speaker/hearers tend to judge a present-tense bare epistemic possibility claim (BEP) true only if the prejacent is compatible with their information (whether or not they are the producer of that utterance); otherwise the BEP is judged false. (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 3)

Knobe and Yalcin (2014) carried out four experiments to test speaker's intuitions about intercontextual "eavesdropper" and retraction cases, which are offered as the main counterexamples to contextualist semantics. They focused only on cases that involve bare epistemic modals, and did not cover deontic modals, or the various value and taste predicates that have been discussed in the recent literature on relativism. Relativists have argued, however, that a thesis similar to (J) is also true for those remaining cases, and that competent speakers/hearers tend to judge an utterance with, say, a value predicate as true only if it is compatible with their current perspective.

Knobe and Yalcin (2014) tested two crucial cases that are brought up against the contextualist account of bare epistemic modals. The first is this:

FAT TONY

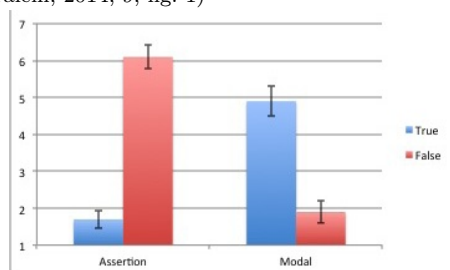
Fat Tony is a mobster who has faked his own death in order to evade the police. He secretly plants highly compelling evidence of his murder at the docks. The evidence is discovered by the authorities, and word gets out about his apparent death. The next evening, from his safehouse, Fat Tony watches a panel of experts on the news discussing the question of whether he is dead. Expert A has had a good look at the evidence found at the scene. "Fat Tony is dead," he says. Expert B has also had a good look at the evidence, but his assessment is more cautious. "Fat Tony might be dead," B says. (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 4)

⁷ I first heard from Knobe & Yalcin's experimental research at ***, where I presented an earlier version of this paper and had the chance to hear of their results in discussion, which, Knobe suggested, seem to support the claim I advance here: that retractions are permissible but not obligatory, and that this is compatible with contextualism.

In their first experiment, they asked people about their intuitions concerning the truth-value of the nonmodal “Fat Tony is dead” and about the truth-value of the modal “Fat Tony might be dead”. Relativists predict that people do not judge the modal sentence to be true, and moreover that they judge it to be false. Contextualists predict extra contextual assessors judge the modal sentence to be true. Relativists predict, moreover, that in a later context where the prejacent of “Fat Tony might be dead” is false, Expert B *should retract* his earlier assertion; also, relativists predict that *it would be wrong for Expert B to stand by his original claim*. Contextualists, on the other hand, predict that Expert B *need not retract* his earlier assertion of “Fat Tony might be dead” in a later context where the prejacent is false.

The results of the first experiment are shown in figure 1 below.

Fig. 1 (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 9, fig. 1)



The second experiment put the participants in the position of extra contextual eavesdroppers. I will skip it, since the focus of this article is retraction. Finally, Knobe & Yalcin’s third and fourth experiments did, in fact, reveal interesting data about speaker’s intuitions concerning retractions. On the third experiment, participants received the FAT TONY vignette complemented with the following information:

Shortly thereafter, new evidence comes to light, and everyone now agrees that Fat Tony is actually alive.

Expert A then says, “I was wrong—Fat Tony was actually alive.”

Expert B also says, “I was wrong—Fat Tony was actually alive.”

(Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 6)

Participants, that were randomly assigned to either the modal or the nonmodal condition, were then asked to assess the following:

Expert A [B] was right to say “I was wrong.” (*idem*)

In this experiment, participants agreed that it would be right to retract in the nonmodal condition, i.e., that it would be right for expert A, who said

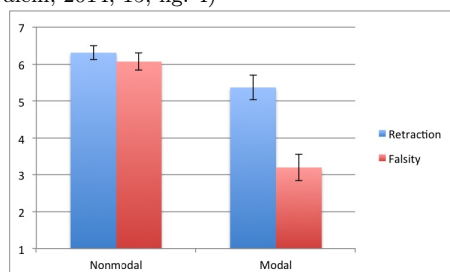
“Fat Tony is dead”, to retract. But the interesting result was the fact that participants did neither strongly agree nor strongly disagree with the claim that it would be right to retract in the modal condition, i.e., that it would be right for expert B who said “Fat Tony might be dead” to retract. Given that this experiment did not give conclusive evidence for or against the relativist thesis (J), Knobe & Yalcin carried out one further experiment that focused on a distinct kind of case. Moreover, they wanted to disentangle people’s intuitions concerning the truth or falsity of the past claim from the “appropriateness”, as they say, of the retraction of that claim.

Here, the case tested was closely modeled on one given by MacFarlane (2011) in support of assessment-relativism:

Sally and George are talking about whether Joe is in Boston. Sally carefully considers all the information she has available and concludes that there is no way to know for sure. Sally says: “Joe might be in Boston.” Just then, George gets an email from Joe. The email says that Joe is in Berkeley. So George says: “No, he isn’t in Boston. He is in Berkeley.” Participants in the nonmodal condition received a vignette that was exactly the same, except that Sally says “Joe is in Boston.” (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 14)

Participants in the fourth and final experiment were randomly assigned one of two questions. Some were asked whether (a) it would be *appropriate* for the speaker to retract, by being asked if they agreed with the statement “it would be appropriate for Sally to take back what she said”. The remaining participants were asked (b) if they agreed with the statement “what Sally said is false”. The results are represented in figure 2 below .

Fig. 2 (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 15, fig. 4)



In the nonmodal case (a), Knobe & Yalcin’s results did not show any significant difference between the appropriateness of retraction and the falsity of the claim. But, in the modal condition (b), the results show that although speakers agree that it would be appropriate to retract, there was no strong

agreement with the claim that the BEP was false. According to the results, speakers tend to agree that bare epistemic modals are *true* even when the prejacent turns out to be false. However, speakers tend to agree that retractions, in the cases under discussion, *are appropriate*.

Taken together, these four experiments tell a consistent story. What they suggest is that (J) is mistaken.” (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 17).

Recall that (J) is the thesis that competent speaker/hearers tend to judge a present-tense BEP true only if the prejacent is compatible with their information; otherwise the BEP is judged false. Recall moreover that according to MacFarlane retractions are constitutively governed by a retraction norm:

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 .*

Are the experimental results obtained by Knobe & Yalcin on their fourth test – that a retraction is appropriate – compatible with MacFarlane’s Retraction Rule? I do not think they are, because I do not think that the question asked on the last test is adequate to test the deontic strength of the Retraction Rule. Asking for the *appropriateness* of an action does not address adequately the issue of whether one *is required*, i.e., *obliged*, by the retraction rule to retract an assertion of p if p is not true as used in a context and assessed in another. For instance, “Joe might be in Boston” is not true as used by Sally and as assessed by George (or by the participants in the experiment). So, according to the Retraction Rule, Sally is required to retract her previous assertion of “Joe might be in Boston”. So, asking participants whether it is appropriate for Sally to retract does not quite match what needs to be tested.

To show why this is so, consider the following cases:

8. It is appropriate to give flowers to one’s mother.
9. It is appropriate to tell your colleagues “have a nice weekend!” on Friday night as you leave the office.
10. It is appropriate to drive on the left, if you’re driving in the UK.

Examples (8) and (9) clearly differ from (10). (8) and (9) are cases where it is permissible but not obligatory to do the appropriate action, in some cases it may even be recommendable. It would moreover be very odd if it were obligatory. One is not required, i.e. obliged, to give flowers to one’s mother or to say “have a nice weekend!” to one’s colleagues on Friday. On the other hand, it is awkward to merely say “It is appropriate to drive on the left in the UK”, since it sounds like a violation of a conversational maxim (quantity). Being appropriate is compatible with being merely permissible. Being required, however, entails that doing otherwise is not permissible, that it would be wrong to do otherwise.

The results of the final test confirm, hence, the main claim of the present paper, namely that retractions are *merely permissible* and not obligatory, and, hence, not only that (J) but also that the Retraction Rule are mistaken.

The next section addresses the second goal of the paper: outlining an explanation of permissibility that is compatible with the data and with contextualism.

4 Permissible retractions as changes in the common ground

In previous sections, three objections to the use of retraction data in contemporary semantic relativist theories were reviewed, as well as recent experimental results involving retraction data. The objections and the experimental results tell us a consistent story: that retraction data do not support assessment-relativist semantics. The normatively distinctive feature of assessment-relativism is the requirement it places on speakers to retract a past assertion when the used sentence is not true at the context of assessment concurrent with the moment of the required retraction. But the alleged obligation to retract is nonexistent. It is permissible not to retract in many cases, there is no perception of irrationality or insincerity on speaker's part when they holdfast to their past assertions, and speakers would in fact be either irrational or insincere if they were forced to follow such a requirement. Moreover, experimental results on intuitions about epistemic modals reveal that (at best) people think it may be *appropriate* for speakers to retract, but also that people informed of the relevant change in context *do not think* that what the speaker said *is* false.

Assessment-relativism has been put forward as a preferable alternative to contextualist theories. More standard contextualist theories claim that the contribution that expressions like *might* and *funny* make to the content or the truth-value of an assertion in which they occur depends by default on the context of utterance. However, if the measure by which a speech act is to be assessed is truth at the context where it was made, then we are still missing an explanation for why people often do retract, *even though what they said is true*, and why retracting may be appropriate sometimes.

The explanation needed by a contextualist, thus, is of the pair of observations: (i) it is permissible but not obligatory to retract a past assertion, and (ii) people are inclined to treat what was asserted as true as long as it was true when it was asserted. This suggests that the explanation of the pair (i), *permissible to retract*, and (ii), *nonetheless true*, is consistent with indexical and non-indexical contextualist semantic theories, because of (ii), and that the missing explanation of (i) must be a pragmatic account of the permissibility of a retraction in certain conditions.

Recently, contextualists like López de Sa (2008), García-Carpintero (2008), Sundell (2011), Huvenes (2012), and XXXX offered alternative explanations of how contextualists can appeal to a combination of pragmatic mechanisms to account for disagreements expressed with sentences of the disputed categories

under consideration. The mechanisms include presuppositions of commonality, as López de Sa (2008) does, and they can appeal to further metalinguistic considerations about the choice of salient standards, like García-Carpintero (2008) and Sundell (2011) do. Contextualists may also add a more thorough explanation of the practical dimension of the disagreements at stake, for instance by an appeal to conflicts of non-doxastic attitudes, as Sundell (2011), Huvenes (2012) and XXXX propose. I am here interested in offering a similar strategy to the case of retractions.

López de Sa (López de Sa, 2008, 304-305) appeals to an explanation of disagreement data in terms of presuppositions of commonality. The use of the relevant predicate ('funny', for instance) triggers the presupposition that the participants in the conversation are similar with respect to the relevant standard. López de Sa assumes what he takes to be a Stalnakerian account of presuppositions (Stalnaker (2002)). On this account, these are requirements on the common ground (the class of propositions that participants in the conversation take to be known by all, known to be known by all, and so on) that may be triggered by specific expressions or constructions. Utterances carrying the presuppositions are not felicitous unless the common ground does indeed include them, or, if it does not, they are accommodated by the conversational participants, i.e., included in the common ground as a result of the utterance. Impressions of disagreement are then explained because in any non-defective conversation it would indeed be common ground that the participants are relevantly alike. In such a conversation, one would be right and the other wrong.

Sundell (2011) advances a well-argued defense of contextualism for aesthetic and personal taste predicates that makes some further progress with respect to the position held by López de Sa. Sundell argues that, on the one hand, impressions of disagreement or conflict also exist in the cases where it is clear that the asserted sentences not only do not contradict each other, but are in fact both true. On the other hand, he argues that many of the disputes of this kind should be analyzed as disputes over the selection or appropriateness of a *contextually salient standard*. What is particularly interesting about Sundell's proposal is the parallelism between the case of a possible disagreement in spite of the truth of all the claims made, and the present case, a permissible retraction of a true claim. This parallelism suggests that a similar defense of the permissibility of retraction in spite of asserted truth ought to be available to a contextualist.

On the present account, a retraction of an assertion, or another so-called *constative* speech act, made by a rational and sincere speaker, falls within the same sort of metalinguistic and pragmatic processes as disputes over the selection of a salient standard of taste, as defended by Sundell (2011) and XXXX. I will continue to talk of assertions for simplicity of exposition. I advance that a retraction may be recommendable when it is possible that it will lead participants in a conversation in error. *PR* below stands for '[P]ermissible [R]etractions'.

PR It is recommended that a speaker retracts an assertion only when not taking it back is likely to lead interlocutors in error:

1. either by leading interlocutors to accept a false asserted sentence as true,
2. or by leading interlocutors to accept false information otherwise conveyed with the assertion.

The principle is purposefully weak. There may be many extraneous reasons why hearers may be led in error, due to their own fault, and where it would *not* be recommendable that the speaker retract. It may also be the case that a retraction would *not* be recommendable because the speaker used metaphor, hyperbole or irony.⁸ But the weak principle fits into an explanation of how a contextualist can accommodate the permissibility of a retraction.

Recently, Jennifer Saul made a useful application of the difference between *saying something false* and otherwise *conveying false information* to the notions of lying and misleading Saul (2012b,a).⁹ Now, retractions may be recommendable in cases that go beyond lying and misleading. It may be that the speaker herself is the only interlocutor in a conversation that inadvertently errs. At the same time, an audience can refuse to accept the speaker's utterance because the uttered sentence is false, because it conveys false information, or because it is otherwise formally incorrect. By not being requested to retract, the inadvertent speaker may wrongly assume that the content of the assertion, the otherwise conveyed information, and even the way the assertion was made, are in standing order.

Let us assume, with the contextualist (indexical or non-indexical), that if an assertion of a sentence like "Pocoyo is funny", or "the ice cream might be in the fridge", is made in a context where the relevant standard of what is funny, or the available epistemic evidence, is such that the asserted proposition is true when the assertion is made, then the assertion is correct. Let us further assume that such a standard, or epistemic evidence, is part of the common ground or context where the assertion is made.

There is some analogy between making an assertion that is true on the assumption that such and such standards are in place, and making a conditional assertion. Consider:

11. There might be ice cream in the fridge. [I'm assuming that we went shopping yesterday, that we have put all the food in the fridge and that the kids haven't had the time to find the ice cream, that you are assuming the same, and that you are assuming that I'm assuming this].
12. If the kids haven't found it, there might be ice cream in the fridge.

If it turns out that the kids found the ice cream and there is nothing left, and you are very disappointed that there is no ice cream left, I can at least apologize for there being no ice cream left. If a conditional assertion of 'if *A*, *B*' is an unconditional assertion of *B*, on the condition that *A* is true, and I have

⁸ See (Saul, 2012b, 62)

⁹ See also Stokke (2013a,b)

a high degree of belief that A will be the case, then, if it turns out that A is not the case, I may feel pressured to retract, since, if I do not, I *could* be perceived as conveying or anyway assuming that A still deserves a fairly high degree of belief too, and that B might deserve some degree of belief given A . By retracting the conditional assertion, expressed by uttering ‘if A, B ’, what one does *is not* to retract B , since one did not unconditionally assert B (nor did one unconditionally assert ‘if A, B ’). What one effects is communicating to one’s audience that A deserves low credibility.

However, as von Fintel and Gillies point out, trouble starts with simple unmodified *might* claims (and not with those embedded under *if*, or *as far as I know* clauses). I.e., the problematic *might* claims, as the problematic *funny* claims, are those that are not explicitly solipsistic claims about one’s current evidence (or about one’s standard of what is funny). As they suggest, this allows one’s claim to be interpreted in a variety of ways, as depending on evidence that one’s group has, or evidence that the speaker has (von Fintel and Gillies, 2008, 96).

Nevertheless, speakers that have uttered a bare epistemic modal may want to signal either (a) that their evidence was inadequate, (b) that their interlocutors should not assume that *previous* evidence was adequate, or (c) that speakers should not assume that the speaker still regards past evidence as adequate. Speakers may want to explicitly signal any of the three alternatives if and when there is a risk of inducing one’s potential audience in error.

On this account, retractions of past assertions of true epistemic modals are means to signal clear changes in the common ground, leaving room for a speaker to deny or accept a variety of related information beyond the strict truth-conditional content of the modal. This is, moreover, in line with the proposals of García-Carpintero (2008), Sundell (2011) and von Fintel and Gillies (2008). In particular, just as one may deny via metalinguistic negation¹⁰ content that was not literally asserted, but presupposed, so can one cancel presuppositions, thereby correcting the common ground, by taking back an assertion of an epistemic modal claim when it becomes clear that one’s assumptions are unreliable.

As an illustration, consider (11). Imagine that our common ground includes the information that is there assumed, and that in the meanwhile I discover that there is no ice cream left because the kids finished all of it. As a result I cannot offer you any ice cream, although you were expecting ice cream. It would seem that, in this case, it is appropriate that I say, for instance,

13. I’m sorry, there’s no ice cream left.

If (13) is a retraction, what is it that I’m taking back? Is it my assertion, which is true given the context where it was made, or do I utter (13) as a way of indicating that we (actually, you) should drop what we were previously assuming? We could be dropping the assumption of (a) that the kids have not found and finished the ice cream, my assumption of (b) that you are assuming (a), or (c) your assumption that I am assuming (a) and (b).

¹⁰ See for instance Horn (1989) or Carston (1998).

A similar explanation could extend to claims with predicates of personal taste, humor or value. In these cases, it may sound more natural to hear the speaker saying “I take that back”. Mimi *may* retract an assertion of “Pocoyo is funny!” when she is 9, because she wants it to be clear to everybody that she is not a little girl anymore and no longer likes baby stuff. But she *may* refuse to retract when she is 63, because she has such endearing memories from childhood.

This rough account explains the permissibility-without-obligation of the retraction of allegedly problematic cases for contextualism. Retractions are not, on the present account, obligatory. It may not be necessary that speakers signal changes in the common ground since these changes may be already evident. Speakers may have other ways of showing that the common ground has changed, ways that do not require retracting – i.e., admitting fault for inducing others in error by holding to inappropriate evidence given what else is known. Moreover, speakers may want to *resist* retracting a past assertion whenever they feel the need to resist an accusation of inducing others in error by means of upholding a falsehood. They may have good reasons to believe that they, or the current context, have made it sufficiently clear that the common ground has changed, and that it is the audience’s responsibility to catch up. Hence, speakers may want to resist retracting the assertion of a bare epistemic modal, as in “Look, I didn’t say *there is* ice cream in the fridge; I said *there might be*”, or want to resist retracting a past personal taste claim, as in “I used to find Pocoyo funny, and I do not anymore. Still, I was not wrong when I was 3 years old and found it funny.”

Interestingly, Knobe and Yalcin (2014) offer a very similar hypothesis to the present account in order to explain their experimental results. They say

This surprising fact [that retraction judgments and falsity judgements can come apart] suggests that retraction is not—or not generally—a way of manifesting a view about the truth value of a claim. We might therefore seek some other kind of theoretical understanding of retraction. One possible approach would be to view retraction as a phenomenon whereby speakers are primarily indicating that they no longer want a conversational common ground incorporating the update associated with a sentence that they previously uttered. On this approach, what is retracted is a certain conversational update; retraction is in part a means of undoing or disowning the context change or update performed by a speech act. (Knobe and Yalcin, 2014, 16)

Knobe & Yalcin suggest that the experimental data on bare epistemic modals could be explained by their conversational dynamics and not by their truth-conditions. They further suggest that retraction would be required when speakers should signal that they no longer want to be in a given context.

Although my conclusion and theirs is largely overlapping, I think that we should be careful in framing the strength of the ‘should’ in ‘should signal that they no longer want to be in a given context’. On one understanding, MacFar-

lane's Retraction Rule could be taken to be compatible with this interpretation of the data and understanding of how retraction works. His Retraction Rule says that a speaker in a 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 . It would seem to be open to the assessment-relativist to say that the obligation to retract exists in these conditions, not because of the untruth of p at c_1 and c_2 , but because there's been a context change between c_1 and c_2 , which the speaker has an obligation to signal.

However, this understanding of the Rule creates problems for the motivation for assessment-relativism *and* for the idea that 'should' conveys an obligation to retract. First, the suggestion creates a problem for the motivation for assessment-relativism: recall that the reason to add a new tier to the semantics – contexts of assessment – was to account for data: related to disagreement, eavesdropper cases, and retraction. The arguments above in §2, and the experimental results reviewed in §3, indicate that assessment-relativism does not have the evidential support its defenders claim. Given this, the fact that it is sometimes appropriate for speakers to retract an assertion, even when it is true, and that in so doing speakers signal a change in the context or common ground, shows that we in fact *do not need* contexts of assessment to explain the evidential data available.

Secondly, the 'should' in 'should signal that they no longer want to be in a given context' is compatible with (a) the past assertion being true in the present context, and (b) the asserter is able to convey by diverse means that the context has changed, or even (c) it is obvious to all interlocutors that the context has definitely changed. This is confirmed not just by Knobe & Yalcin's results, but also by the two examples discussed in §2, where it is legitimate to resist taking back a past speech act. One may signal a change in context while refusing to retract, as in e.g. "I used to find Pocoyo funny, and I do not anymore. Still, I was not wrong when I was 3 years old and found it funny.", and one may not even need to signal a change in context.

Either way, there is no obligation to retract true past epistemic modal or personal taste claims. A contextualist has enough resources to offer an explanation of the *permissibility* of retractions in these central cases without the need of introducing contexts of assessment. We know, moreover, that a constitutive rule for retractions that imposed obligations on speakers would commit them to either insincerity or irrationality. This undermines the distinct normative character of assessment-relativism. We are left with contexts of assessment *qua* mere formal sets of parameters; but these are, as argued in the beginning, idle wheels in the semantics of epistemic modals, and of evaluative and personal taste claims.

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