

1. Introduction

Discourse involving *predicates of personal taste (PPT)* such as ‘delicious,’ ‘disgusting,’ ‘fun,’ and ‘cool’ has been a focal point in a large, interdisciplinary body of research spanning the past 20 years. This research has shown that PPT are connected to numerous topics, including disagreement, meaning, context-sensitivity, subjectivity and objectivity, truth, aesthetic and gustatory taste, evaluation, speech acts, and so on. Researchers involved in the PPT debates have developed many subtle and inventive analyses of PPT, so that anyone interested in their behaviour must traverse a complex theoretical landscape.

Despite the massive amount of work on the topic, there is a crucial methodological question about PPT that remains underexplored: what sorts of *evidence* should be called upon to evaluate an analysis of PPT? So far, most researchers have operated from the armchair, using their own intuitions about various linguistic phenomena to evaluate analyses of PPT. In recent years, however, certain philosophers and linguists have found this method wanting, noting that hypotheses about PPT are *empirical*, and thus need to be evaluated empirically.¹

In this chapter, our aim will be to develop a framework for applying one of the most significant empirical tests in the PPT debates, which involves ordinary speakers’ judgments about *retraction*. The significance of retraction has been discussed at some length, and empirical data on retraction and PPT have been reported by Kneer (2021, 2022). However, we think that the most prominent account of the significance of retraction data, due to John MacFarlane, is importantly flawed and needs to be revised.

After rehearsing the major analyses of PPT, we’ll review MacFarlane’s account of how retraction data bear on the PPT debates. We’ll identify what we take to be two significant problems with MacFarlane’s account, and in resolving these problems, we will be able to develop a more satisfactory framework. We’ll then use the improved framework that we develop to re-evaluate Kneer’s (2021, 2022) data on retraction. While Kneer took his findings to disconfirm MacFarlane’s theory of the meaning of PPT, we will show using our improved framework that just the opposite is true. MacFarlane’s views about the meaning PPT, as well as several other views in the literature, are actually supported by the data that Kneer reports. Our hope is that the framework that we offer will aid empirically-minded researchers as they follow Kneer’s lead in conducting further experiments on retraction and PPT. To close, we’ll discuss a few loose ends that will need to be addressed by future experimental research on PPT.

2. Analyses of PPT

At present, there are five major analyses of PPT. Some of these analyses come in different varieties, and it may prove to be beneficial to develop hybrid analyses by combining two or more of the major ones. Since our discussion will focus mainly on frameworking, we’ll be concentrating in what follows only on the most basic versions of each of the major analyses of PPT. In light of the framework that we develop, it should be reasonably straightforward to identify the hypotheses about retraction that are generated by the other analyses of PPT that have been proposed.

¹ See e.g. Dinges and Zakkou (2020), Foushee and Srinivasan (2017), Kaiser (2015, 2021), Kaiser and Lee (2017a, 2017b), Kaiser and Rudin (2020), Klages, Holler, Kaiser, and Westcott (2020), Kneer (2021 a, b, 2022), Murray (2020), Raffman (2016, § 1), Rudin and Kaiser (2022), Smith, Castroviejo, and Mayol (2015), Solt (2016, 2018), Stojanovic (2019), Stojanovic and Kaiser (2022), and Wyatt (2018, 2021, 2022).

To distinguish the major analyses of PPT, we can consider the responses that they deliver to two central questions:²

- (i) What sort of semantic *content* does an assertion involving a PPT have?
- (ii) For what sort of *truth* (if any) are such assertions apt?

Here is an illustrative case:

Maria is visiting Australia and wants to sample some local foods. She's heard that many Australians like to eat something called 'Vegemite' by spreading it on toast. Maria buys some Vegemite, spreads it on a piece of toast, and takes a bite. She is immediately repulsed, finding Vegemite's flavour far too salty and yeasty. Expelling the toast from her mouth, Maria says:

(1) Vegemite is disgusting! (How could anyone like it?)

Maria assertively uses the sentence 'Vegemite is disgusting' at a context of use c , and we'll take '(1)' to stand for this assertive use. *Indexical contextualism* about PPT (*IC*)³ entails that (1)'s content is the *relativised proposition* \langle Vegemite's flavour is displeasing to Maria's tastes at \mathcal{o} . This proposition is relativised in the sense that it refers specifically to Maria's tastes at c . IC also entails that this proposition, and thus (1), is either *absolutely true* or *absolutely false*—i.e. simply true or false, rather than true or false, relative to something like a taste or a standard of taste. Specifically, IC entails that \langle Vegemite's flavour is displeasing to Maria's tastes at \mathcal{o} is true iff Vegemite's flavour is displeasing to Maria's tastes at c .⁴

By contrast, *non-indexical contextualism* about PPT (*NIC*)⁵ entails that (1)'s content is the *absolute proposition* \langle Vegemite is disgusting \rangle . This proposition is absolute in the sense that it doesn't refer to Maria's tastes, or indeed the tastes of any particular taster or group thereof.

NIC also entails that (1)'s content, as well as (1) itself, can be true or false only *relative* to Maria's tastes. Using terminology from David Kaplan (1989), the initial idea is that we can think of (1)'s *context of use* c as containing a parameter that encodes Maria's tastes at c (as well as other parameters encoding things like the possible world and time of the context). The non-indexical contextualist takes the *circumstance of evaluation* e for (1)—the tuple of parameters relative to which the truth-value of (1)'s content is determined—to be *the circumstance of the context*. This means that e is simply identical to c . Accordingly, the non-indexical contextualist holds that when determining the truth-value of (1)'s content, we must consider whether its content is true, relative to Maria's tastes at c/e . As a result, NIC entails that \langle Vegemite is disgusting \rangle is true, relative to Maria's tastes at c/e iff Vegemite's flavour is displeasing to Maria's tastes at c/e .

² There are related questions about the contents of *sentences* containing PPT, as well as the truth-values of such sentences and their contents. To set up clean comparisons between the major analyses, though, we'll focus on the mentioned questions about assertions involving PPT.

³ See Barker (2013), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, ch. 4), Capraru (2016), Glanzberg (2007), Hîncu (2015); Huvenes (2012), Kneer (2021, 2022), López de Sa (2008, 2015), Marques (2015), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014), Moltmann (2010), Pearson (2013), Recanati (2007, pp. 91–94), Schaffer (2011), Silk (2016), Snyder (2013), Sundell (2011), and Zouhar (2018).

⁴ Of course, an indexical contextualist can take (1) and its semantic content to be true, relative to a possible world. Also, if an indexical contextualist describes (1)'s content in the way that we've indicated, then they will presumably also be a *temporalist*, in which case they will take this proposition to be true or false, relative to a time. However, as nothing in what follows will turn on issues related to tense or modality, we will set these issues aside from now on.

⁵ Kölbel (2004, 2009, § 2.1).

Like NIC, *assessment-relativism* about PPT (*AR*)⁶ takes (1)'s content to be \langle Vegemite is disgusting. Regarding this proposition's truth-value and that of (1), AR is also fairly similar to NIC. Like the non-indexical contextualist, the assessment-relativist holds that (1) and its content are apt only for relative, rather than absolute, truth. The key difference between NIC and AR has to do with how (1)'s circumstance of evaluation is determined.

According to the assessment-relativist, no possible circumstance of evaluation for (1) is privileged, over and above any other. Rather, AR entails that (1) can be evaluated from indefinitely many *contexts of assessment*, each of which includes a parameter that encodes the tastes of the agent of that context of assessment. Moreover, AR entails that each context of assessment determines a circumstance of evaluation e for (1). So, for instance, if Nathaniel likes Vegemite's flavour and he is the agent of context of assessment a , then we should say that (1) and its content are false, relative to the circumstance e_a that is determined by a . By contrast, if Maria is the agent of context of assessment a^* , then we should say that (1) and its content are true, relative to the circumstance e_{a^*} that is determined by a^* . In short, then, NIC entails that an assertion like (1) has exactly one circumstance of evaluation—the circumstance of the context—whereas AR entails that such an assertion has indefinitely many circumstances of evaluation, each of which is determined by a possible context of assessment.

The fourth major analysis of PPT is *absolutism*.⁷ Absolutism dovetails with NIC and AR concerning (1)'s content: it entails that its content is \langle Vegemite is disgusting. However, absolutism aligns with IC concerning the truth-value of (1)'s content and (1) itself, entailing that both are either absolutely true or absolutely false. Thus, if Vegemite is in fact disgusting, says the absolutist, then (1) and its content are true. On the other hand, if Vegemite is in fact not disgusting, then (1) and its content are false.

The final analysis of PPT is *expressivism*.⁸ The simplest version of expressivism has it that we use unembedded, subject-predicate indicative sentences containing PPT to express our *conative attitudes*, e.g. our preferences, desires, likes, and dislikes. Accordingly, expressivism entails that (1)'s content isn't a proposition, but is rather a conative attitude—say, Maria's preference to not experience Vegemite's flavour, rather than experiencing its flavour, other things being equal. Given that conative attitudes aren't truth-apt, the expressivist maintains that (1) isn't truth-apt, though it may be evaluable in other terms, e.g. as rational, irrational, polite, or impolite. Figure 1 summarises the major analyses of PPT.

<i>Analysis of PPT</i>	<i>Content of PPT-involving assertions</i>	<i>Truth of PPT-involving assertions</i>
IC	Relativised proposition	Absolute
NIC	Absolute proposition	Relative to circumstance of the context of use
AR	Absolute proposition	Relative to circumstances determined by contexts of assessment

⁶ MacFarlane (2014), Lasersohn (2005, 2013, 2017).

⁷ Schafer (2011). See also Belleri (2010) and Hirvonen (2016), and cf. Anthony (2016), Davies (2017), and Wyatt (2018). The absolutist analysis that Wyatt develops is rather different from Schafer's, as it incorporates features of both IC and expressivism. However, as mentioned above, we will confine our attention here to the most basic version of absolutism, which comes from Schafer.

⁸ Eriksson (2016). For nearby views, see Barker (2010), Berškýtė and Stevens (2022), Buekens (2009a, 2009b, 2011), Clapp (2015), Gutzmann (2016), Hirvonen, et. al. (2019), Huvenes (2012, 2014)), Karczewska (2021), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014, § 5), Ninan (ms), Richard (2008, ch. 5), and Zouhar (2019).

Absolutism	Absolute proposition	Absolute
Expressivism	Conative attitude	N/A

Figure 1: Major analyses of PPT

3. MacFarlane’s retraction argument

It should be clear that the major analyses of PPT are empirical in nature, insofar as they concern the semantic content and truth of assertions that we make in everyday discourse. Accordingly, one of the most pressing questions about these analyses is which empirical hypotheses about language use they generate. By identifying these hypotheses, we will be able to clearly differentiate the analyses and then empirically evaluate them.

In his thoroughgoing defence of AR, John MacFarlane offers one of the most influential arguments on this topic. Focusing on AR and NIC, MacFarlane argues that despite their similarities, these views generate different predictions about the *retraction* of assertions involving PPT. MacFarlane’s core argument turns on the following ideas:⁹

“[W]e [can] make sense of the distinction between an assessment-sensitive and an assessment-invariant theory that [agree] on the intensions of propositions only by considering norms for retraction (or commitments to retract). Retraction [is] the key to making sense of assessment sensitivity, because in retraction there are always two significant contexts: the context in which the retraction is being considered and the context in which the assertion whose retraction is being contemplated was made. This gives both the context of assessment and the context of use a job to do in a norm for retraction.”

The kind of case that is most salient here is a *taste shift* case, which has the following trajectory:

- An individual \mathcal{A} enjoys/doesn’t enjoy the flavour of a particular (kind of) food or drink f at time t_1
- \mathcal{A} makes an assertion at t_1 that is in accord with their enjoyment/non-enjoyment of f ’s flavour
 - If \mathcal{A} enjoys f ’s flavour at t_1 , then they assertively utter the sentence ‘ F is delicious/tasty’
 - If they don’t enjoy f ’s flavour at t_1 , then they assertively utter the sentence ‘ F is not delicious/tasty’
- At a later time t_2 , \mathcal{A} ’s tastes shift: they don’t enjoy/enjoy f ’s flavour
- This shift in \mathcal{A} ’s tastes and the fact that they made the relevant assertion at t_1 are brought to their attention at t_2 .

MacFarlane puts forward a well-known conjecture about taste shift cases, which runs as follows:

(MC) When presented with a taste shift case, ordinary, competent speakers will tend to agree that \mathcal{A} is required to retract at t_2 the assertion that they made at t_1 .

He goes on to argue that the non-indexical contextualist can’t explain why (MC) is true. Consider, for instance, a taste shift case in which \mathcal{A} enjoys f ’s flavour at t_1 . NIC entails that at t_1 , \mathcal{A} asserts $\langle f \text{ is delicious} \rangle$, which is true, relative to the circumstance e that is determined by the

⁹ 2014, pp. 114-115. See also *ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

assertion's context of use c . Ordinary, competent speakers should recognise that A 's assertion has this truth-value, so they should tend to agree that A isn't required to retract their assertion at t_2 .

By contrast, MacFarlane takes the assessment-relativist to have a ready explanation for why (MC) is true. The explanation involves the Retraction Rule, which MacFarlane takes to be naturally combined with AR and operative over our discourse about taste (and any other kinds of assessment-sensitive discourse):¹⁰

Retraction Rule (RR): 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 .

Using the running taste shift case, the idea is that at t_2 , A shifts from enjoying f 's flavour to not enjoying f 's flavour. This means that $\langle f \text{ is delicious} \rangle$, which A asserted at t_1 , is false, as assessed from A 's context of assessment a at t_2 . RR thus entails that at t_2 , A is required to retract their assertion. As RR is meant to be implicitly known by ordinary, competent speakers, these speakers should be aware of these facts. This suggests that when coupled with RR, AR delivers a tidy explanation for why (MC) is true. In this way, MacFarlane's *retraction argument* seems to provide a strong reason to favour AR over its closest rival.

Despite its initial pull, we think that the retraction argument is problematic in at least two respects.¹¹ The first is that it is *incomplete*. MacFarlane's retraction argument concerns only AR and NIC. As we've seen, however, there are five major analyses of PPT, so in considering how retraction data bear on the PPT debates, we want to know what predictions about retraction each of these analyses generates. The second problem is that the retraction argument is *inaccurate*. Specifically, MacFarlane is incorrect in claiming that retraction data can, even in principle, provide a reason for favouring AR over NIC. This is because, as we will argue, AR and NIC actually generate the same prediction about the requirement to retract in taste shift cases. To spell out these problems and then develop a better framework for thinking about retraction and PPT, we'll first need a working model of what, exactly, retraction is.

4. Retraction data and PPT

4.1. What is retraction?

Retraction is a kind of speech act—namely, a speech act wherein one 'takes back' a prior speech act.¹² In particular, it is useful to treat the retraction of an assertion as cancelling the deontic updates that the assertion generated.¹³ The initial idea is that when one performs an assertion,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

¹¹ We would note that it is also problematic insofar as MacFarlane assumes that (MC) is true based solely on his own intuitions (for a nice articulation of this point, see Raffman (2016, pp. 172-173)). This methodological problem can be remedied by conducting proper empirical evaluations of (MC), for discussion of which see § 5.

¹² See Caponetto (2020, pp. 2408, 2413), Ferrari (2016, p. 521), Ferrari and Zeman (2014, §§ 2.4, 3-5), Kukla and Steinberg (2021, § 2), Knobe and Yalcin (2014, p. 17), Krabbe (2001, p. 142), MacFarlane (2011a, p. 148, 2011b, pp. 83-84, 91, 2014, p. 108), Marques (2014, p. 368, 2018, p. 3356), Rescorla (2009, p. 100), Rudolph (2020, p. 198), Santos (2017, p. 77), and Vermaire (2020, § 3).

¹³ Speech acts other than assertions—for instance, questions or commands—can also be retracted. However, since taste shift cases involve the retraction of prior assertions, we'll focus in what follows on retractions of assertions.

one makes a distinctive commitment.¹⁴ In making this commitment, one incurs a *discursive obligation* (an obligation produced by one’s speech acts) to honour it unless one cancels the commitment via retraction.

To illustrate, consider the following case:¹⁵

John is five years old and loves fish sticks. One day he says to his sister Sally: ‘Fish sticks are delicious.’ Twenty years later his taste regarding fish sticks has changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes fish sticks and John says he doesn’t anymore.

We can plausibly take five-year-old John to have made the following *justification commitment* in assertively uttering ‘Fish sticks are delicious.’^{16,17}

(JC) The commitment to provide adequate reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that the proposition that he asserted is true (that it was correct for him to express the conative attitude that he expressed).

If twenty-five-year-old John retracted, he would thereby cancel this commitment and would no longer be required to honour it. Using this working model of retraction, we can improve on the retraction argument by considering how retraction data bear on the five major analyses of PPT.

4.2. An improved framework

There are two hypotheses about retraction that we need to consider:¹⁸

¹⁴ For developments of this idea, see Brandom (1983, p. 646, 1994, ch. 3), De Brabanter and Dendale (2008), Geurts (2019a, b), Krabbe (2001, p. 142), Krifka (2019), Kukla and Steinberg (2021, p. 238), MacFarlane (2011b), Marsili (2021), and Shapiro (2020).

¹⁵ Kneer (2021, § 2.1). See also MacFarlane (2014, pp. 109-110).

¹⁶ Compare MacFarlane (2003, p. 334-336, 2005, pp. 317-322, 2007, pp. 28-29, 2011b, § 4). Note that we take (JC) to be a *pro tanto* commitment. The parenthetical material is a construal of (JC) that can be naturally paired with expressivism.

Additionally, note that we don’t mean to suggest that John *only* makes this justification commitment in virtue of making his assertion. As MacFarlane (2005, p. 318) observes, it is plausible to regard John as also making a commitment to “[retract] the assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue,” as well as a commitment to “be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue.” We argue in § 4.2 below that assessment-relativists should endorse a use-theoretic construal of the justification commitment. While we can’t go into the issue in detail, we would suggest for similar reasons that they adopt use-theoretic construals of the other two commitments mentioned by MacFarlane. Thanks to Dan Zeman for raising this issue.

¹⁷ An anonymous referee has suggested that it may be more plausible to take a child such as five-year-old John to have merely made a commitment to *having* the relevant reasons, rather than to providing them, if appropriately asked to do so. It seems that young children, as well adults who aren’t sufficiently articulate, may have adequate reasons for believing that a proposition that they assert is true even if they can’t articulate those reasons. The referee proposes that such assertions are permissible and that the best way to capture this is to construe the justification commitment in terms of having, rather than providing, reasons.

This suggestion is reasonable, but adequately assessing it would require an additional paper. What we would reiterate is that MacFarlane construes the justification commitment along the lines indicated in (JC). As one of our main aims in this chapter is to engage with MacFarlane’s retraction argument, we adopt his construal of this commitment in what follows.

¹⁸ (Required) is of course identical to MacFarlane’s conjecture (MC).

(Permissible) When presented with a taste shift case, ordinary, competent speakers will tend to agree that it is permissible for \mathcal{A} to refrain from retracting at t_2 the assertion that they made at t_1

(Required) When presented with a taste shift case, ordinary, competent speakers will tend to agree that \mathcal{A} is required to retract at t_2 the assertion that they made at t_1 .

The central question is which of these hypotheses advocates of each of the five major analyses of PPT should endorse.¹⁹

Focusing on the fish stick case, call five-year-old John *Young John* and call twenty-five-year-old John *Old John*. Given IC, Old John knows that he asserted a true proposition at t_1 . Moreover, given IC, ordinary, competent speakers should know (implicitly) that Old John has this knowledge. For this reason, ordinary speakers should tend to agree that it is permissible for Old John to refrain from retracting his prior assertion. As a result, indexical contextualists should endorse (Permissible).

Non-indexical contextualists should endorse (Permissible) for similar reasons, as MacFarlane correctly indicates in the retraction argument.²⁰ Given NIC, Old John knows that he asserted a proposition that is true, relative to the circumstance e of the context of his prior assertion. Moreover, given NIC, ordinary, competent speakers should know (implicitly) that Old John has this knowledge. For this reason, ordinary speakers should tend to agree that it is permissible for Old John to refrain from retracting his prior assertion. As a result, non-indexical contextualists should also endorse (Permissible).²¹

Expressivists should likewise endorse (Permissible), though for somewhat different reasons. Given expressivism, Old John knows that as Young John, he expressed a pro-attitude towards the flavour of fish sticks and that it was correct for him to do so. Moreover, given expressivism, ordinary, competent speakers should know (implicitly) that Old John has this knowledge. For this reason, ordinary speakers should tend to agree that it is permissible for Old

¹⁹ As we noted in § 2, each of the major analyses comes in different varieties, and various hybrid approaches to PPT have been proposed that combine elements from at least two of these analyses. The empirical predictions, including the predictions about retraction, that each of these views generates will need to be identified on a case-by-case basis. Thanks to Will Gamester for raising this point.

It may also be possible to endorse one of the major analyses while rejecting the working model of retraction that we propose, following MacFarlane, in § 4.1. In this case, one may incur a commitment to either (Permissible) or (Required), with one's commitment hinging on the details of one's alternative model of retraction. For relevant ideas about the normativity of truth in the domain of basic taste, see Ferrari and Moruzzi (2019, 2020). Thanks to Filippo Ferrari for raising this point.

²⁰ See also 2014, p. 145.

²¹ Dinges (2022, p. 197) has recently proposed that a retraction norm which is similar to MacFarlane's Retraction Rule can be combined with NIC:

(NIC-R*) One is obligated in a context c_2 to retract an assertion of p made in a context c_1 if p is not true at c_2 .

Specifically, Dinges (ibid., §§ 4-5) argues that non-indexical contextualists can plausibly adopt this norm, provided that they deny that propositional truth is temporally or locationally relative.

Our main concern with Dinges' proposal is that it overlooks the fact that according to NIC, an assertion of a taste-related proposition p has exactly one circumstance of evaluation—namely, the circumstance e of the context of use. This suggests that whether one is obligated to retract the assertion should only depend on whether p is true, relative to e —not whether p is true, relative to the circumstance e' of some other context (see § 6.2 below for related discussion).

John to refrain from retracting his prior assertion. As a result, expressivists should endorse (Permissible).²²

Absolutists, on the other hand, should reject (Permissible) in favour of (Required). Given absolutism, Young John commits himself to providing adequate reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that \langle fish sticks are delicious \rangle is true. Moreover, given absolutism, Old John believes that \langle fish sticks are delicious \rangle is false. Accordingly, Old John (implicitly) believes that there aren't adequate reasons to believe that \langle fish sticks are delicious \rangle is true. For this reason, Old John should retract his prior assertion, thereby relinquishing his prior commitment. Additionally, given absolutism: ordinary, competent speakers should know (implicitly) these facts about Old John. Accordingly, they should tend to agree that Old John is required to retract his prior assertion. As a result, absolutists should endorse (Required).

What about assessment-relativists? In light of MacFarlane's retraction argument, this is certainly the trickiest case. As we've noted (§ 3), MacFarlane holds that assessment-relativists should endorse (Required). However, our view is precisely the contrary: the assessment-relativist should endorse (Permissible). To see this, we need to consider how the assessment-relativist should understand the justification commitment (JC).

(JC) invokes the notion of truth while leaving it open how, exactly, that notion should be understood. The assessment-relativist can construe this notion of truth in either of two basic ways (let p be a taste-related proposition like \langle fish sticks are delicious \rangle):²³

- *Use-centric justification commitment (UC)*: In asserting p at context of use c , A makes a commitment to provide adequate reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that p is true, as assessed from c
- *Assessment-centric justification commitment (AC)*: In asserting p at context of use c , A makes a commitment to provide adequate reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that p is true, as assessed from any present or future context of assessment a whose agent is A .

²² MacFarlane (2014, p. 17) worries that expressivists cannot even make sense of retraction, suggesting that “[a]n assertion can be retracted, but it doesn't make much sense to “take back” or retract the expression of an attitude.” We think, though, that this worry is ill-founded.

Suppose, for instance, that Sue overhears her friends Ulrich and Sarah talking. She seems to hear Sarah say to Ulrich ‘You got the job!’ Sue interjects with ‘Congratulations!’ Sarah gives Sue a puzzled look and responds, ‘You’re congratulating him on robbing a shop?’ Sue quickly realises her mistake and say ‘Oops, I take that back; no congratulations are in order, then.’

A natural way to understand this case is that Sue has retracted her congratulation of Ulrich. In doing so, she relinquishes her prior commitment to provide reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that it was correct for her to express the non-doxastic attitude that she expressed. This suffices to show that it can make sense to retract the expression of a non-doxastic attitude.

²³ MacFarlane (2003, p. 334, 2005, p. 321) endorses a view that is nearly identical to (AC).

By contrast, note that (AC) is distinct from another view which MacFarlane (2005, p. 320) rejects. This view has it that in asserting p in c , A makes a commitment to withdraw A 's assertion if another speaker B shows that p is false, as assessed from B 's context of assessment a . (AC) is also distinct from another view along the same lines: that in asserting p in c , A makes a commitment to provide reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that p is true, as assessed from any context of assessment c' , whose agent may be either A or some other person B .

Lastly, note that in evaluating (AC), we can set aside cases in which A retains the same tastes but the flavour of the relevant (kind of) food or drink changes radically between c and a . It is obvious e.g. that in asserting \langle fish sticks are delicious \rangle , A doesn't make a commitment to provide adequate reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that this proposition is true, as assessed from a later context of assessment a in which all of the fish sticks in the world have spoiled (compare MacFarlane (2014, p. 145)).

Perhaps surprisingly, the assessment-relativist has a strong reason to endorse (UC), rather than (AC). The reason is that given a plausible background assertoric norm, (AC) generates a counterintuitive entailment that (UC) avoids. The background assertoric norm is this:

Commitment norm (CN): If at time t , A (implicitly) knows that A probably cannot fulfil the commitment that A would make were A to assert p at t , then it is impermissible for A to assert p at t .

To see the plausibility of (CN), first consider a case in which A knows that they probably can't provide adequate reasons to believe that p is true, as they lack requisite background knowledge and can't easily acquire it. For instance, suppose that $p = \langle \text{parthood is more fundamental than proper parthood} \rangle$, A has never studied mereology, and none of A 's contacts have done so either. Consider also a case in which A knows that p is false. For instance, suppose that $p = \langle \text{the Moon's surface contains many active volcanoes} \rangle$. In both of these cases, it would be impermissible for A to assert p , and (CN) neatly explains why this is so. The explanation is that in both cases, A knows that if they asserted p and were then appropriately asked to provide reasons for believing that p is true, then they probably would be unable to do so.

It is easy to see that when combined with (CN), (AC) entails that certain ordinary taste-related assertions which seem permissible are in fact impermissible.²⁴ A familiar phenomenon that is relevant here is *age-related taste loss*. That we experience age-related taste loss is well-known to anyone who has dined with, or prepared food for, an elderly friend or relative. Age-related taste loss has also been extensively studied by scientists working on taste, with a recent meta-analysis by Methven, et. al. (2012, p. 557) indicating that "[age-related] thresholds for salt and sour tastants increase in more than 80% of studies."

With age-related taste loss in mind, consider the following case:²⁵

Paul is 20 years old. Early one morning, Paul baked some bagels. He brought them to his 80-year-old grandfather Harold, who lives in an assisted living facility, so that Harold and his friends could enjoy them. Paul made sure to add extra salt on top of the bagels, as he knew that Harold and his friends, like many elderly people, have trouble detecting salt in food. Paul then went to lunch with his girlfriend Tanya. Paul and Tanya enjoy fast food, so they talked about whether to have lunch at Burger King or McDonald's. Paul said to Tanya, 'I think we should eat at Burger King. McDonald's fries are disgusting because they're way too salty!' When he said this, Paul found McDonald's fries disgusting because he found them too salty.

It seems clear that given his tastes at the time of assertion, it was permissible for Paul to make the assertion that he did. However, (CN) and (AC) jointly entail that Paul's assertion was impermissible. (AC) entails that in assertively using 'McDonald's fries are disgusting because they're way too salty,' Paul made a commitment to provide reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that $\langle \text{McDonald's fries are disgusting because they're way too salty} \rangle$ is true, as assessed from any present or future context of assessment a whose agent is Paul. Since Paul knew that at some point, he will probably have trouble detecting salt in food, he knew (implicitly) that he probably could not fulfil this commitment. For this reason, (CN) entails that Paul's assertion was impermissible.

²⁴ MacFarlane (2014, p. 104) develops a similar concern, though he offers it against a stronger view, which results from the strongest possible reading of what he calls the 'Quantified Truth Rule.'

²⁵ Thanks to Justin Sytsma for discussion about this case.

We could construct many other cases like this one, which indicates that the assessment-relativist should reject (AC).²⁶ By contrast, when it is combined with (CN), (UC) clearly doesn't entail that Paul's assertion was impermissible. This constitutes a strong reason for the assessment-relativist to endorse (UC), rather than (AC).²⁷

How, then, do these considerations bear on the assessment-relativist's choice of (Permissible) or (Required)? Return to the fish stick case. An assessment-relativist who endorses (UC) will take Young John, who is the agent of the context of use c , to make the following commitment: the commitment to provide reasons, if appropriately asked to do so, for believing that 'fish sticks are delicious' is true, as assessed from c . In his later context c' , Old John knows that he made this commitment and that he no longer enjoys fish sticks' flavour. However, given (UC), Old John isn't *ipso facto* required to retract his earlier assertion. Rather, it is perfectly acceptable for Old John to retain his earlier assertoric commitment, given that it pertains to his tastes in c , not to his tastes in c' . This shows that contra MacFarlane, the assessment-relativist should endorse (Permissible), rather than (Required).²⁸

Let's take stock. We've argued in this section that contrary to what MacFarlane maintains, retraction data cannot provide a reason for favouring AR over NIC. An assessment-relativist should endorse the use-centric account (UC) of the justification commitment, and thus (Permissible). Non-indexical contextualists should also endorse (Permissible). This means that when it comes to hypotheses about the requirement to retract in taste shift cases, AR and NIC are on an equal footing.

More generally, we've argued that our findings concerning retraction and PPT should push us in either of two directions. If they confirm (Required), then they should push us towards absolutism. If they confirm (Permissible), then they should push us towards IC, NIC, AR, or expressivism. Figure 2 graphically represents our improved framework for thinking about the significance of retraction data in the PPT debates.²⁹

²⁶ On this point, see Marques (2014, pp. 370-373).

²⁷ A concern that could be raised here is that since (UC) is a use-centric conception of the justification commitment (JC), it is simply unavailable to assessment-relativists. However, (UC) is fully compatible with AR, as it invokes the notion of assessment-relative truth, which is a signature notion of AR. The wrinkle in (UC), of course, is that the relevant context of assessment is the context of use. This is unproblematic, given that the context of use of an assertion is in fact a possible context of assessment for that assertion (see MacFarlane (2014, p. 103)).

An additional point to note is that in adopting (UC), MacFarlane's views about the justification commitment will align neatly with his preferred norm of assertion. MacFarlane (*ibid.*, pp. 103-108) calls this norm the Reflexive Truth Rule:

(RTR) \mathcal{A} is permitted to assert p at context c_t only if p is true as used at c_t and assessed from c_t .

It seems clear that this sort of alignment is desirable, which constitutes a further reason for MacFarlane to endorse (UC).

²⁸ We don't mean to suggest that assessment-relativists should *never* take retraction to be obligatory. For instance, suppose that (i) \mathcal{A} asserts a taste-related proposition p in c and (ii) in a later context c' , \mathcal{A} has adequate reasons to believe that they are unable to provide adequate reasons for believing that p is true, as assessed from c . Given that they endorse (UC), the assessment-relativist should presumably hold that \mathcal{A} is required to retract in this case. Whether this verdict accords with the judgments of competent speakers will need to be investigated experimentally. Thanks to Dan Zeman for raising this issue.

Also, an anonymous referee pointed out that if an assessment-relativist endorses an account of assertion that doesn't turn on (JC), then it might be the case that they should endorse (Required). We leave this as an open possibility to be explored in future work.

²⁹ The arrows in Figure 2 represent confirmation; the disconfirmation relations are implicit.

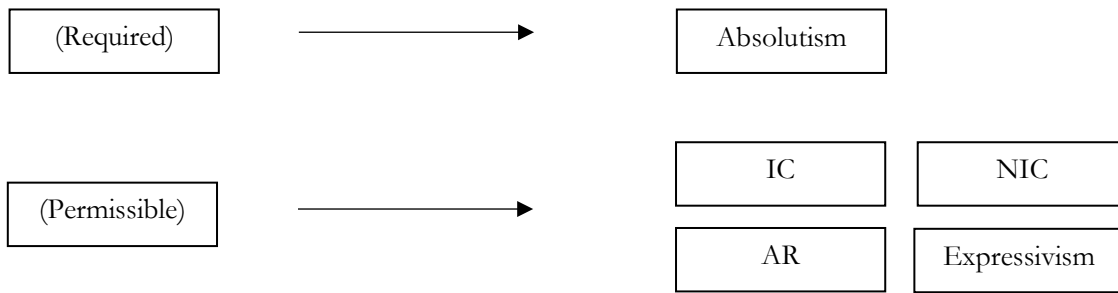


Figure 2: Implications of retraction data for the major analyses of PPT

5. Rethinking extant retraction data

Using this improved framework, we can re-evaluate the extant data on retraction and PPT, which are due to Markus Kneer (2021, 2022). Kneer aimed to test MacFarlane’s conjecture (MC), i.e. (Required). He used vignettes such as the following, with each participant seeing only one of [A] and [B]:

Fish sticks

John is five years old and loves fish sticks. One day he says to his sister Sally: ‘Fish sticks are delicious.’ Twenty years later his taste regarding fish sticks has changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes fish sticks and John says he doesn’t anymore.

[A] Sally says: ‘So what you said back when you were five was false.’

[B] Sally says: ‘So you are required to take back what you said about fish sticks when you were five.’

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Sally’s claim?

Kneer’s contention was that if (Required) is true, then mean agreement with the statement in [B] should be significantly above the midpoint of his 7-point scale. However, mean agreement with the statement in [B] was well below this midpoint ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 2.10$), which seems to disconfirm (Required). Kneer obtained similar results in connection with the Sandcastle vignette, which is like the Fish sticks vignette, except that it involves the PPT ‘fun’ ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.92$). He also obtained similar results in connection with the Salmon vignette, which involves two protagonists of unspecified ages and a shorter time lag between the two relevant contexts ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.94$).³⁰ These findings are represented by the grey bars in Figure 3.

³⁰ See Kneer (2021, §§ 2-3, 2022, § 2.1) for discussion. The Sandcastle and Salmon vignettes run as follows:

Sandcastle

John is five years old and loves building sandcastles. One day he says to his sister Sally: ‘Building sandcastles is great fun.’ Twenty years later his opinion regarding sandcastles has changed. Sally asks him whether he still thinks building sandcastles is fun, and John says he doesn’t.

[A] Sally says: ‘So what you said back when you were five was false.’

[B] Sally says: ‘So you are required to take back what you said about building sandcastles when you were five.’

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Sally’s claim?

Salmon

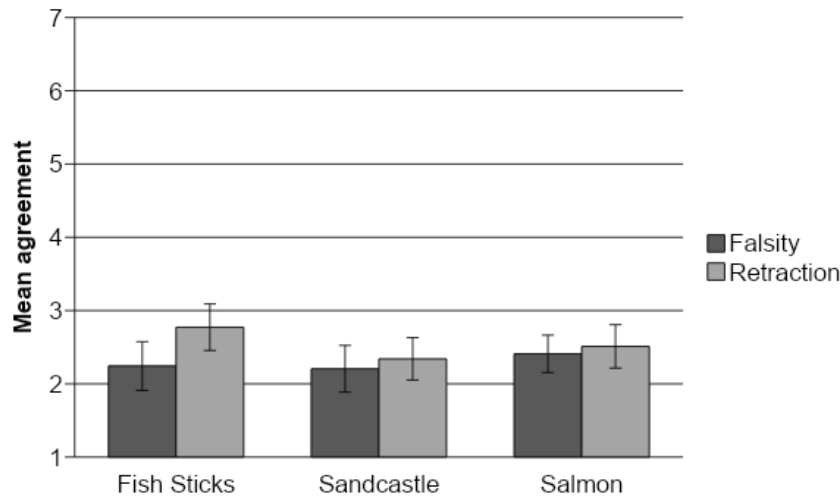


Figure 3: Kneer’s findings on retraction and PPT (reproduced from Kneer (2022, p. 113))

Given that MacFarlane endorses (Required), Kneer took his findings to cast doubt on AR. However, in light of our arguments in § 4, we can now see that what assessment-relativists should say about retraction differs from what MacFarlane claims. Applying the improved framework in Figure 2, it becomes clear that insofar as they disconfirm (Required), Kneer’s findings actually disconfirm a prediction of *absolutism*, not a prediction of AR.

Moreover, insofar as Kneer’s participants tended to disagree with Sally’s claim in [B], it is likely that they would tend to agree with the following claim by Sally:

[C] Sally says, ‘Even so, you aren’t required to take back what you said about fish sticks when you were five.’

If John isn’t required to retract what he said, then it is permissible for him to refrain from retracting what he said. As a result, Kneer’s findings lend support to (Permissible), which is a prediction of AR, IC, NIC, and expressivism. This means that far from undermining AR, Kneer’s findings actually *support* AR, as well as IC, NIC, and expressivism.³¹ Going forward, we encourage empirically-minded researchers working on PPT to work with the more accurate and comprehensive framework that we’ve developed, rather than relying on the entrenched understanding of how retraction data bear on the PPT debates.

6. A few loose ends

It’s Ben’s birthday. To celebrate the occasion, Mary takes him out to her favourite restaurant. Ben loves salmon, and says to Mary: ‘Salmon is delicious.’ A few weeks later, Ben’s tastes regarding salmon have changed. Sally asks him whether he still likes salmon and Ben says he doesn’t anymore.

[A] Mary says: ‘So what you said in the restaurant a few weeks ago was false.’

[B] Mary says: ‘So you are required to take back what you said about salmon a few weeks ago in the restaurant.’

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Mary’s claim?

³¹ In an additional study, Kneer (2022, § 6)’s findings disconfirmed a variant of (Required) that pertains to the use of epistemic modals (see also Marques (ms)). In light of our improved framework, we conjecture that this is bad news for absolutism about epistemic modals and good news for absolutism’s competitors.

6.1. Cross-linguistic diversity?

To close this discussion, we want to briefly discuss a few loose ends that will need to be addressed in future research on PPT. One loose end involves the potential for *cross-linguistic diversity*. Kneer's pioneering studies are highly valuable, insofar as they represent the first effort to conduct empirical research on retraction and PPT. A limitation of these studies, however, is that they only tell us about the judgments of English speakers.

Going forward, it will be essential to conduct retraction studies in other languages so that we can determine whether participants' judgments vary across languages. This issue has been mostly neglected, which isn't surprising, given that the dominant methodology in the PPT debates has been for researchers to report their own intuitions about English in English. It is, however, one of the most critical issues in these debates, as it will help us to determine whether different analyses of PPT are called for, depending on the language at issue.³²

6.2. Empirical differences between NIC and AR?

A second loose end pertains to the fallout from our argument in § 4.2 concerning NIC and AR. MacFarlane attempts to motivate AR over NIC using the retraction argument. We have shown, however, that the retraction argument comes up short, since both assessment-relativists and non-indexical contextualists should endorse (Permissible). This result raises a question: do the empirical predictions of NIC and AR differ along any other dimensions? If the answer is 'no,' then as MacFarlane has put the worry, "[t]he relativity of truth to contexts of assessment threatens to be an idle wheel."³³

Fortunately, we think that the answer to this question is 'yes.' While we can't go into great detail on this point, we take NIC and AR to be empirically distinct in virtue of the predictions that they make concerning *truth-value assessments*. In a recent paper, Berškýtė and Stevens (2022, p. 8) nicely articulate this point, observing that "[t]ruth is not assessment sensitive for the non-indexical contextualist because there is only ever one correct way to assess a sentence, namely by relativising it to the context in which it is uttered."

To see this, consider a variant on the case that we used in § 4.2:

Paul is 20 years old. One afternoon, Paul went lunch with his girlfriend Tanya. Paul and Tanya enjoy fast food, so they talked about whether to have lunch at Burger King or McDonald's.

Paul said to Tanya, 'I think we should eat at Burger King. McDonald's fries are disgusting because they're way too salty!' For the next 40 years, whenever McDonald's fries were brought up, Paul voiced the same opinion. However, around age 60, Paul experienced age-related taste loss and as a result, his ability to taste salt in food decreased significantly. While driving past a McDonald's, Paul thought back to what he used to say about McDonald's fries.

Suppose that participants in an experiment were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

³² For empirical work on US English speakers' and Spanish Castilian speakers' judgments about retraction and epistemic modals, see Marques (ms). For additional cross-linguistic work, see e.g. Balusu (2018), Bylinina (2017), Martin, Carvalho, and Alexiadou (2020), Klages, Holler, Kaiser, and Westcott (2020), Smith, Castroviejo, and Mayol (2015), Pearson (2022), and Umbach (2020, § 2.2).

³³ 2014, p. 105.

[F] It would be correct for Paul to say ‘What I used to say about McDonald’s fries—that they are disgusting because they are too salty—was false.’

The crucial detail here is that NIC predicts that agreement with [F] will be significantly below the relevant midpoint, while AR predicts that it will be significantly above this midpoint.

NIC generates this prediction for the reason that is indicated by Berškýtė and Stevens. According to NIC, when Paul specifies the truth-value of the taste-related proposition that he used to assert—‘McDonald’s fries are disgusting because they’re way too salty’—he should consider whether this proposition is true, relative to the circumstances of the prior contexts of use. Since he used to find McDonald’s fries disgusting because he found them too salty, this proposition is *true*, relative to those circumstances. Given AR, competent English speakers should (implicitly) know this, so they should tend to disagree with [F].

By contrast, AR predicts that competent English speakers will tend to agree with [F]. Briefly, this is because according to AR, when 60-year-old Paul evaluates the assertion mentioned in [F] as true or false, he should do so by considering whether the asserted proposition is true, relative to his *60-year-old* tastes, not the tastes that he had in the prior contexts of use.³⁴ Given AR, competent English speakers should (implicitly) know this, so they should tend to agree with [F].

In light of these considerations, we suggest that even though retraction can’t do the sort of work that MacFarlane takes it to do, it is nevertheless possible to decide between NIC and AR on empirical grounds. Extant data on PPT and truth-value assessments are mixed, which means that additional research on this topic is needed.³⁵

6.3. A potential problem for AR

Lastly, we want to flag a potential problem that arises for AR, in light of our arguments in §§ 4.2 and 6.2. We argued in § 4.2 that the assessment-relativist should endorse the use-centric construal (UC) of the justification commitment. Moreover, we explained in § 6.2 why AR predicts that competent English speakers will tend to agree with [F]. This means, in effect, that assessment-relativists should adopt a use-centric account of the justification commitment and an *assessment-centric* account of truth-value assessments.

The combination of these two views generates a further prediction which may prove to be problematic for AR. The prediction is that when they are presented with a taste shift case, competent English speakers will tend to agree that it is correct for the protagonist to make the following statement after their tastes have shifted:

(2) What I said was false, but I don’t need to take it back.

To our ears, (2) sounds like a strange thing for someone to say. We conjecture, then, that competent English speakers will tend to disagree that it is correct for the relevant protagonist to make this statement following a shift in their tastes. If this conjecture is borne out, then that would seem to constitute evidence that our discourse using PPT is not assessment-sensitive, which would be an unwelcome result for AR. Our conjecture will need to be evaluated

³⁴ For a lucid and detailed articulation of this point, see Dinges and Zakkou (2020, § 2).

A *flexible* version of AR may generate a different prediction here, but the standard version of AR predicts that English speakers will tend to agree with [F]. For discussion of flexible relativism about PPT, see Zeman (this volume). Thanks to Dan Zeman for raising this point.

³⁵ For discussion of the current data, see Dinges and Zakkou (2020) and Kneer (2022). For related work on epistemic modals, see Knobe and Yalcin (2014) and Marques (ms).

experimentally, of course, so we will have to wait for further experimental work before making any firm judgments about this potential problem for AR.

7. Conclusion

Summing up, we think that retraction studies should undoubtedly be part of the battery of empirical studies that we conduct in trying to understand the meaning of PPT. In conducting retraction studies, we need to be clear about why retraction data matter in the PPT debates. Our proposal is that they matter because they should push us towards either absolutism or the other major analyses of PPT. Current data speak against absolutism, thereby favouring IC, NIC, AR, and expressivism. Going forward, we should conduct retraction studies in languages other than English, and we will need to consider how the results of retraction studies square with those of studies using other instruments, including questionnaires on truth-value assessments.³⁶

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³⁶ This chapter has benefited from feedback offered by audiences at the Truth in Evaluation conference (2022 Mid-Term Conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy), Victoria University of Wellington, and the Theoretical and Empirical Challenges to Retraction workshop. Thanks especially to Filippo Ferrari, Will Gamester, Markus Kneer, Teresa Marques, Justin Sytsma, Dan Zeman, and an anonymous referee.

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