Evaluational Adjectives*

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Abstract

The literature on predicates of personal taste (PPTs) has focused on a surprisingly limited range of expressions. This narrow focus has led to problematic theoretical conclusions about the syntax and semantics. I argue that PPTs are an instance of a more interesting general category of (what I call) evaluational predicates. Like other gradable adjectives, PPTs are sensitive to a relevant degree standard in the positive form. However, I show that PPTs give rise to certain distinctive phenomena which persist in the comparative — specifically, phenomena concerning discourse (dis)agreement, vagueness, and embedding under ‘find’. I show that these features of PPTs are shared by a wide range of broadly evaluational adjectives, including (e.g.) aesthetic adjectives, moral adjectives, and even epistemic adjectives, among others. To capture this I provide a degree semantics which treats evaluational adjectives as denoting context-sensitive measure functions. What distinguishes evaluational adjectives from gradable adjectives like ‘tall’ is that the adjective itself, and not simply the positive form, is context-sensitive. Contrary to what is often assumed, this sort of unified context-sensitive semantics for evaluational adjectives can be neutral on broader philosophical issues about subjectivity, attitude-dependence, realism, etc. However, I show that speakers’ substantive assumptions about these issues can lead to certain differences among evaluational adjectives in patterns of use. Finally, considering the broader range of evaluational adjectives poses problems for existing treatments of the licensing conditions of ‘find’ — a common diagnostic of putative “subjective” expressions. Instead, I tentatively suggest that what characterizes felicitous embedding under ‘find’ is a certain sort of (what I call) “context-oriented” use of context-sensitive complements.

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1 Introduction

An important function of language is to create and develop interpersonal relationships in communication. In inquiry we share and coordinate our beliefs about how the world is. But we also take a stance and socially orient ourselves toward possible acts, attitudes, and states of affairs. We evaluate possibilities as desirable, appropriate, horrible, trivial, permissible, wonderful. We emphasize commonality and breed antipathy. In communication we shape our identities as thinkers and feelers in a social world; we coordinate on how to act, what to feel, and whom to be.

Language affords a variety of evaluative resources for doing so. One class of expressions that has received much recent attention is so-called “predicates of personal taste” (PPTs). Our evaluation of (1) depends on what our tastes are like.

(1) This cake is tasty.

A common idea is that this dependence derives from a dependence of the interpretation of (1) on a contextually relevant body of tastes (experiencer, gustatory standard). Whether (1) is true or false, on these views, can vary across contexts even if everything else in the world — e.g., the facts about the cake’s microphysical properties — remains fixed.

The literature on PPTs in philosophy of language and formal semantics has focused on a surprisingly limited range of expressions — ‘tasty’, ‘fun’, and, well, that pretty much covers it. This narrow focus has led to hasty generalizations and problematic theoretical conclusions about the syntax and semantics.

First, focusing on the case of adjectival PPTs, I will argue that PPTs are context-sensitive along at least two relevant dimensions (§§2–3). The context-sensitivity of PPTs is often not clearly distinguished from the context-sensitivity of ordinary gradable adjectives such as ‘tall’. Like other gradable adjectives, PPTs are sensitive to a contextually supplied degree standard when in the positive form. However, I show that PPTs give rise to certain distinctive discourse phenomena, vague-ness phenomena, and embedding phenomena — phenomena characteristically associated with context-sensitivity — which persist in the comparative. To capture this I provide a degree semantics which treats PPTs as denoting context-sensitive measure functions. With PPTs it is the adjective itself, and not simply the positive form, which is context-sensitive. It is sensitive to a contextually supplied body of tastes — what I call a taste perspective. With certain PPTs this latter context-sensitivity can be rooted in multidimensionality. These three potential sources of context-sensitivity — standard-sensitivity, perspective-sensitivity, and dimensional-
sensitivity — have not been clearly delineated in the literature.

Second, a common thought is that PPTs are “subjective” in a manner to be reflected in the grammar and lexical semantics. Focus on this apparent subjectivity has led many theorists to eschew examining how their theories may apply to other types of broadly normative language. I will argue that this restriction of attention is misplaced. PPTs are an instance of a more interesting general category of (what I call) evaluational predicates (§4). This includes PPTs, aesthetic predicates, moral predicates, and even epistemic predicates, among others. These expressions can be given a unified type of context-sensitive semantics. Apparent differences among them in “subjectivity” can be located at the level of metasemantics (§5). These metasemantic differences can lead to various differences in patterns of use. I consider four, concerning first-person experience requirements, attitude-dependence, Yalcin-style “evaluative contradictions,” and discourse disagreements.

Considering the broader range of evaluational adjectives poses problems for certain alleged diagnostics of PPTs and “subjectivity” (§6). I focus on one such diagnostic: the felicity of embedding under ‘find’. More careful attention to context shows that we see felicitous embedding under ‘find’ with a variety of adjectives, not all of which we might intuitively classify as “subjective” or as concerning matters of taste. I offer a tentative alternative proposal about the licensing conditions of ‘find’ to help capture the broader array of embedding data provided in the paper.

An investigation of evaluational adjectives sheds light on the varieties of evaluative resources which language affords. The hope is that the preliminary discussion of evaluational adjectives in this paper may serve as a helpful corrective to the literature’s preoccupation with ‘fun’ and ‘tasty’. Examining the broader spectrum of examples can lead to more fruitful directions for the dialectic and suggest new avenues for future research.

2 Three sources of context-sensitivity

PPTs aren’t limited to a single lexical category. Though many PPTs are gradable adjectives, there are also verbs which seem intuitively similar in expressing personal tastes — e.g., ‘rocks’, as in ‘That roller coaster rocks!’ Following the literature, I will focus specifically on gradable adjectives.¹

¹Gradable adjectives are adjectives that can (inter alia) form comparatives (‘taller’, ‘tastier’) and take degree modifiers (‘very tall’, ‘quite tasty’). I will focus mostly on so-called “relative” gradable adjectives (Kennedy & McNally 2005, Kennedy 2007). For empirical and theoretical survey discussions of adjectives, see, e.g., Huddleston & Pullum 2002 and Morzycki 2013, respectively. For
It is a commonplace that gradable adjectives are interpreted with respect to a contextually supplied comparison class, or a set of paradigm/contrasting cases. In one context (2) might say that Harry is bald for a Johnsen, while in another context (2) might say that Harry is bald for a man.

(2) Harry is bald.

Yet, as has been well observed, this doesn’t exhaust gradable adjectives’ apparent context-sensitivity. Gradable adjectives are sensitive to (something like) a relevant standard or threshold when used in their positive form. Even given a specific comparison class — say, “bald for a man” — if Harry has only some small patches of hair, then (2) can seem acceptable under low standards but unacceptable if the standards are raised. What standard to accept can become the subject of negotiation. Settling that by ‘rich’ we mean “rich for an American,” and agreeing on the relevant socio-economic facts, needn’t resolve the dispute in (3).

(3) A: Rita is rich.
    B: No way, Rita isn’t rich.

A and B’s disagreement can concern what it is to count as rich. (How exactly to capture this is contentious. For now let’s just focus at the level of describing the phenomena.)

PPTs also exhibit such apparent standard-sensitivity in the positive form. Suppose we are sampling ice cream cakes for a friend’s birthday. We try one and have similar gustatory experiences. If you say (1) and I accept, this ensures that the standard of tastiness accepted in the context is no greater than the cake’s agreed-upon degree of tastiness.

(1) This cake is tasty.

Moreover, in using ‘tasty’ speakers can negotiate over what standard of tastiness to accept, much as they can negotiate over what standard of richness to accept in using ‘rich’. Even we settle that by ‘tasty’ we mean “tasty for an ice cream cake,” have the

'expository purposes I will be sloppy about distinguishing lexical items and word forms, using single quotes indiscriminately for both; context should disambiguate.


same gustatory experiences, and agree on the relevant circumstances, this needn't resolve our dispute in (4).

(4) Me: This cake is tasty.
You: No it isn't. Let's keep looking. We can find a better cake for Chip.

We disagree about about how tasty a cake needs to be for it to count as tasty.

However, this familiar standard-sensitivity associated with positive form PPTs doesn't exhaust their apparent context-sensitivity. Indeed the typical use of ‘tasty’ isn't to manage speakers' assumptions about what degree standard of tastiness to accept. It is to manage assumptions about how tasty things are in the first place. Unlike in (4) the basis of our disagreement in (5) needn't concern what standard of tastiness to accept.

(5) Me: This cake is tasty.
You: No it isn't. It's gross. It's way too sweet.

We may agree that things count as tasty only if they have such-and-such degree of tastiness. Our disagreement is about how tasty the cake even is.

One way of bringing out this point is to look at comparatives. First, the apparent context-sensitivity of a gradable adjective like (say) ‘tall’ dissipates in the comparative, as reflected in (6).

(6) [Context: A and B agree about everyone's heights — say, that Alice is 70’’ and Bert is 67’’ — and about all other relevant worldly facts.]
A: Alice is taller than Bert.
B: #No, Bert is taller than Alice.

It is hard to imagine what could be at issue between A and B in (6). By contrast, the apparent context-sensitivity of PPTs persists in the comparative. (7) is subject to the same sort of contextual negotiation as (4), as reflected in (8).

(7) Alice's cake is tastier than Bert's.
(8) Me: Alice's cake is tastier than Bert's.
You: No way. Alice's is too sweet. Bert's cake is right on the money.

The comparative uses in (8) seem to depend on context in precisely the same way as the predicative uses in (5). They depend on a relevant body of tastes — what I will
call a taste perspective.

Second, consider vagueness phenomena. Gradable adjectives’ context-sensitivity isn’t itself sufficient for vagueness; speakers could, after all, settle on perfectly precise standards, tastes, etc. However, speakers’ typically failing to do so can lead to phenomena characteristically associated with vagueness. Positive form gradable adjectives provide the paradigm of sorites-sensitivity.

(9) Sorites Paradox

(P1) Someone with one cent isn’t rich.
(P2) If you give one cent to someone who isn’t rich, she still won’t be rich.
(C) ∴ No one, no matter how much money they have, is rich.

A bit more formally, where $x_n$ is an individual with $n$ cents.

(10) (P1) $x_1$ isn’t rich.
(P2) For all $n$, if $x_n$ isn’t rich, then $x_{n+1}$ isn’t rich.
(C) ∴ For all $n$, $x_n$ isn’t rich.

The premises seem true, and the argument seems valid. But the conclusion is false. Bill Gates is rich. Hence the paradox.

It is often denied that comparatives are vague. However, a second motivation for distinguishing the apparent context-sensitivity associated with PPTs from the standard-sensitivity associated with gradable adjectives generally is that PPTs do give rise to vagueness phenomena in comparatives. Suppose the only factor that we care about in assessing how good cake tastes is sweetness. Up to a point at least, the sweeter the better. An ordinary bakery cake tastes better than a cake without any sugar at all (if such there be). Alas, however, our powers of discrimination concerning sweetness are limited. Adding one microgram of sugar to a cake won’t make it taste better. These points seem plausible enough. But they seem to entail that any cake with even a modicum of detectable sweetness is the tastiest cake. Let $x_K$ be an arbitrary cake with an ordinary amount of sugar, $x_0$ be a cake with no sugar, and $x_n$ be a cake with $n$ micrograms of sugar:

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4Some have argued that comparatives with ordinary gradable adjectives can be vague (e.g., [Williamson 1994], [Keefe 2000], [Sassoon 2013]). Even if this is right, it doesn’t speak against the present contrast between (e.g.) ‘tall’ and ‘tasty.’ The context-sensitivity of ‘tasty’ in (7) concerns what tastes to adopt. It would remain if we fixed on a relevant measure of granularity/imprecision.


6E.g., [Cooper 1995]: 246; [Kennedy 2011]: 74, 93; [Van Rooij 2011]: 65–69 (though cf. n. 4).
Comparative Sorites (A)

(P1) \( x_K \) tastes better than \( x_0 \).

(P2) For all \( n \), \( x_n \) tastes as good as \( x_{n+1} \).

(P3) For all \( a, b, c \), if \( a \) tastes better than \( b \), and \( b \) tastes as good as \( c \), then \( a \) tastes better than \( c \). \((\text{PI-transitivity})\)

(C) \( \therefore \) For all \( n \), \( x_K \) tastes better than \( x_n \).

Alternatively, we could combine premises (P2) and (P3) as follows — you can rest easy, if your cake lost in the bake-off, it still would have lost even if you had added one microgram of sugar to it.

Comparative Sorites (B)

(P1) \( x_K \) tastes better than \( x_0 \).

(P2') For all \( n \), if \( x_K \) tastes better than \( x_n \), then \( x_K \) tastes better than \( x_{n+1} \).

(C) \( \therefore \) For all \( n \), \( x_K \) tastes better than \( x_n \).

The first premise (P1) is true. (P2)/(P3) (on the A-version) and (P2') (on the B-version) seem essential in reflecting our limited capacities of distinguishability in matters of taste. Moreover the argument seems valid. And yet the conclusion (C) is false: Penchants for revisionism aside, ‘tastes better than’ isn’t symmetric: \( x_K \) doesn’t taste better than itself. Moreover our choice of \( x_K \) was arbitrary. This implies that every cake that tastes better than a cake without any sweetness is itself the tastiest cake. But not every cake can taste the best. Such is life.

My aim here isn’t to give an account of what is going on in these positive and comparative sorites arguments\(^7\). What is important for our purposes is that PPTs give rise to a distinctive kind of vagueness which persists in the comparative. Vagueness with PPTs can be associated not only with a standard of tastiness (how tasty something needs to be for it to be tasty), but with the body of tastes itself (how tasty things are).

A third motivation for distinguishing the context-sensitivity of PPTs concerns their embedding behavior under certain types of attitude verbs. Many have observed that the matrix verb ‘find’, in constructions of the form ‘find \( x \) PRED’, only licenses complements exhibiting certain kinds of context-sensitivity\(^8\). Complements with

\(^7\)For discussion and potential complications, see \cite{Silk2014}: §§6.3–6.4, 7.2.

\(^8\)See esp. \cite{Sæbø2009}, \cite{Bouchard2012}, \cite{Bylinina2014}; see also \cite{Stephenson2007}, \cite{Kennedy2013}, \cite{McNallyStojanovic2014}. The relevant sense of ‘find’ is the one which licenses small clauses and is stative. There are other senses of ‘find’ which lack the apparent restriction to certain sorts of context-sensitive complements, as in (i)–(ii).
context-insensitive predicates like ‘vegan’, as in (13) are infelicitous.

(13) #Fritz finds the cake vegan.

It is contentious precisely what types of complements are licensed under ‘find’. We will address this issue extensively in §6. For the moment I simply want to highlight the following contrast. Though some have denied that ordinary positive gradable adjectives like ‘tall’ felicitously embed under ‘find’ (Fleisher 2013, Kennedy 2013), to the extent that one finds (!) felicitous, this felicity is clearly absent in a comparative like (15).

(14) [Context: Some adolescents are talking about who has and hasn’t had a growth spurt yet. They mention Robb, who shot up four inches over the summer alone. Ed, trying to play this off like it’s nothing, says that Robb “isn’t tall” (for a boy in their grade) — he’s “only” 5’7”. Height is quite the point of pride, after all, and Robb isn’t cool enough to be in their group. Most of the other kids go along with Ed, but Sam won’t have it. He says:]

You might not find Robb tall. But I find him tall.

(15) #I find Robb taller than Ed.

Positive and comparative uses of PPTs, by contrast, are equally felicitous under ‘find’:

(16) Fritz finds the cake tasty.
(17) Fritz finds Alice’s cake tastier than Bert’s cake.

Again, we will have much more to say about the basis for this contrast, and the use to which embedding under ‘find’ has been put in the literature, in §6. What is important here is simply that the context-sensitivity of PPTs cannot be due to a feature of the positive form.

Finally, with some adjectives, perspective-sensitivity can be rooted in part in multidimensionality. Many adjectives can be used to measure items along multiple dimensions (‘clever’, ‘large’, ‘healthy’, ‘skillful’). For instance, whether a cake counts

(i) After closely examining the contents of my dish, I found my trippa alla romana to be vegetarian, and so not actually trippa alla romana at all. (Kennedy 2013: 261n.6)
(ii) A research team based at Princeton University found that physical activity reorganizes the brain so that its response to stress is reduced and anxiety is less likely to interfere with normal brain function.

(www.lifescience.net/news/60/exercise-reorganizes-the-brain-to-be-more-resilient)

as tasty can depend on various factors — sweetness, richness, texture, etc. Which dimensions are relevant, and how they compare, can depend on context and become subject to negotiation, as in (18).

(18)  
Me: Alice’s cake is tastier than Bert’s. It’s nice and sweet.  
You: No, Bert’s cake is tastier. You’re a sugar fiend. Sweetness counts for something, but texture is more important. Bert’s cake hits it right on the money.

However, this third kind of context-sensitivity — call it *dimensional-sensitivity* — is neither necessary nor sufficient for perspective-sensitivity with PPTs. It isn’t sufficient, since there are non-evaluative multidimensional adjectives. Whether something counts as ‘large’, for instance, can depend on some combination of its height or volume. Dimensional-sensitivity also isn’t necessary. The disagreements in (5) and (8) can occur even if we agree that there is a single relevant dimension of tastiness. We may simply disagree about what this dimension is; or we may agree on the dimension, but disagree about the cakes’ respective measures of it.

To recap, we have seen three potential sources of context-sensitivity in uses of adjectives: first, *standard*-sensitivity, or sensitivity to a relevant threshold or standard; second, *perspective*-sensitivity, or sensitivity to a relevant body of tastes; and third, *dimensional*-sensitivity, or sensitivity to a relevant set of dimensions and weights. This yields the following partial typology of context-sensitive uses.

(19)  
The cake is vegan.  
a.  non-PPT, non-gradable  
b.  ⇒ (no context-sensitivity)

(20)  
Alice is tall.  
a.  non-PPT, unidimensional, positive  
b.  ⇒ standard-sensitivity

(21)  
Alice is taller than Bert.  
a.  non-PPT, unidimensional, comparative  
b.  ⇒ (no context-sensitivity)

(22)  
Alice’s cake is tasty [in its sweetness].  
a.  PPT, unidimensional, positive  
b.  ⇒ standard-sensitivity, perspective-sensitivity

2013a,b for recent discussion.
(23) Alice’s cake is tastier [in its sweetness] than Bert’s is.
   a. PPT, unidimensional, comparative
   b. ⇒ perspective-sensitivity

(24) This box is large.
   a. non-PPT, multidimensional, positive
   b. ⇒ standard-sensitivity, dimensional-sensitivity

(25) This box is larger than that one.
   a. non-PPT, multidimensional, comparative
   b. ⇒ dimensional-sensitivity

These loci of context-sensitivity have not been consistently distinguished in the literature.\(^{10}\)

The aim thus far has been to delineate three potential sources of context-sensitivity in uses of adjectives, and to provide a preliminary empirical basis for these conceptual distinctions. The discussion has been neutral on details of implementation. For instance, first, our informal talk of “standards” in predicative uses, and of objects having “degrees” of certain properties, needn’t presuppose a semantics which incorporates degrees into the type system. Though in the next section I will make use of a degree semantics, our descriptive points in this section are compatible with treating gradable adjectives as ordinary predicates (type \(\langle e, t \rangle\)), perhaps referencing degrees in the metalanguage. Second, though I have spoken of the discourse role of gradable adjectives in managing speakers’ assumptions about what standards, tastes, etc. to accept, I have left open what specific mechanisms are responsible for this phenomenon and at what level it is to be explained.\(^{11}\) The relevant parameter values might or might not figure explicitly in the semantic content, and they might or might not be determined by the context of utterance.\(^{12}\) Indeed, for all I have

\(^{10}\) For instance, \textit{Barker} 2013, \textit{Bylinina} 2014, \textit{McNally} & \textit{Stojanovic} 2014 treat PPTs as essentially multidimensional and diagnose their context-sensitivity (at least partly) in these terms. For accounts which, in my view, fail to clearly distinguish standard-sensitivity and perspective-sensitivity, see, e.g., \textit{Glanzberg} 2007, \textit{Barker} 2013. For observations about the context-sensitivity of PPTs going beyond the standard-sensitivity associated with the positive form, see \textit{Ballweg} 1983, 73, \textit{Laser-sohn} 2008: 308, \textit{Bouchard} 2012: 211–212, \textit{Fleisher} 2013, \textit{Kennedy} 2013, \textit{Sassoon} 2013a: 122–123, \textit{Bylinina} 2014 ch. 2, \textit{MacFarlane} 2014: 2–3, 7n.7. However, these authors either don’t offer a specific formal semantics, or pursue different implementations from the ones developed below.


\(^{12}\) Cf. \textit{MacFarlane’s} (2007, 2009) distinctions between indexicalism/non-indexicalism and contextualism/relativism, respectively.
said, they could be determined by the world of evaluation. The apparent “context-sensitivity” could be pre-semantic (in determining what language, in the sense of Lewis 1975, is being spoken), semantic (in determining what value for a contextual parameter figures in deriving semantic content), or post-semantic (in determining what value for a contextual parameter figures in truth-evaluation).

3 PPTs in a degree semantics

Though the phenomena considered in this paper could be captured in various semantic frameworks, it will be helpful to have a specific semantics at hand. To fix ideas I will assume a contextualist version of a Kennedy-style degree semantics. The implementation in this section can serve as a model which may be adapted depending on one’s broader views on gradable adjectives’ compositional semantics.

A common approach is to treat gradable adjectives as denoting measure functions, or functions from individuals to degrees on a scale (Bartsch & Vennemann 1973, Kennedy 1999, 2007). For instance, on this view, ‘tall’ denotes a function from individuals to (positive) degrees of height, i.e. the individual’s maximal height; ‘hot’ denotes a function from individuals to (positive) degrees of temperature, i.e. the individual’s maximal temperature; and so on. Treating gradable adjectives as denoting measure functions yields a straightforward interpretation of comparatives. Roughly, (26) says that the degree to which Alice is tall is greater than the degree to which Bert is tall, as reflected in (27), where tall is a function that maps each individual to its height, a degree in the height scale.

(26) Alice is taller than Bert.
(27) (26) is true in c iff tall(Alice) > tall(Bert)

The positive form is treated as relating a degree to a contextually determined threshold, or degree standard. Following Kennedy 2007, I treat this degree standard as determined by a variable s; the value of s in a context c, s_c, is a function that maps adjective denotations — measure functions — to a degree standard associated with the adjective in c. For instance, s_c(tall) is the standard of tallness in the context c, i.e. the least height that something can have for it to count as tall. (28) is true in c iff

13Hereafter I will use terms like ‘degree’ and ‘(degree) standard’ with the more specific theory-laden senses from these frameworks. For general discussion of various degree-based analyses, see von Stechow 1984, Klein 1991, Kennedy 1999, Morzycki 2013; see also n. 14. I choose a degree-based analysis utilizing measure functions simply for concreteness. For simplicity I assume that the domain of degrees is totally ordered.
the (maximal) degree to which Alice is tall is at least as great as $s_c(tall)$, the degree standard of tallness in $c$\textsuperscript{14}.

(28) Alice is tall.

(29) is true in $c$ iff $tall(Alice) \geq s_c(tall)$

(I will typically call the function $s_c$ an overall standard, or body of standards, and call its value given an adjective denotation a degree standard for that adjective. I will use ‘standard’ sometimes in referring to an overall standard, sometimes to a particular degree standard; context will disambiguate. For simplicity I will bracket issues of intensionality from indexing measure functions and standards to worlds.)

Like other gradable adjectives, PPTs are interpreted with respect to the overall standards variable $s$ when in the positive form. The value of $s$ maps the denotation of ‘tasty’ to a degree standard of tastiness, i.e. the least tastiness something can have for it to count as tasty. This degree standard of tastiness is what is at-issue in the disagreement in (4)—what value for $s$ is supplied, given a relevantly agreed-upon denotation for ‘tasty’. In (5), by contrast, our disagreement targets, not the value of $s$ given tasty (the degree standard of tastiness), but the value of tasty given the cake (the cake’s degree of tastiness). The basis of our disagreement lies in what measure function to associate with ‘tasty’; it concerns the identity of tasty itself. One way of implementing this in the present degree-semantic framework is as follows.

The lexical semantics of ‘tall’ determines a particular measure function $tall$ as its semantic value; what heights things have isn’t up for contextual negotiation. PPTs, by contrast, can be treated as semantically associated with a context-dependent measure function. It is the adjective itself, and not simply its positive form, that is context-sensitive. Semantic competence with ‘tasty’ requires a capacity to map objects to their degree of tastiness given a certain body of tastes. No particular mapping from objects to their degree of tastiness is built into the linguistic meaning of ‘tasty’.

Call a measure function from objects to their degree of tastiness a taste perspective. Let $T$ be a taste perspective variable that represents the tastes endorsed for the purposes of conversation\textsuperscript{15}. The value of $T$ given a context $c$, $T_c$, maps objects to...
their (maximal) degree of tastiness, according to the tastes endorsed in \( c \). When \( T \) occurs free, a value must be contextually supplied for the adjective to have a specific interpretation in context. Accordingly, an utterance of (1) ‘This cake is tasty’ (\( a \)) assumes values for \( T \), \( T_c \), and \( s \), \( s_c \) — a taste perspective and degree standard for tastiness — and (\( b \)) asserts that the cake’s degree of tastiness according to \( T_c \) is at least as great as the degree of standard of tastiness given by \( s_c \), as reflected in (30), where \( k \) is the object denoted by ‘this cake’ in \( c \).

\[
(30) \quad (1) \text{ is true in } c \text{ iff } T_c(k) \geq s_c(T_c)
\]

For the comparative in (7), the standard-sensitivity associated with the positive form is absent, but the perspective-sensitivity associated with the adjective remains. (7) assumes a value for \( T \), \( T_c \), and asserts that this taste perspective maps Alice’s cake to a greater degree of tastiness than Bert’s, as reflected in (31), where \( a \) and \( b \) are Alice’s and Bert’s cakes, respectively.

\[
(31) \quad (7) \text{ is true in } c \text{ iff } T_c(a) > T_c(b)
\]

Unlike with ‘tall’, the context-sensitivity of ‘tasty’ arises from the semantics of the lexical item itself and hence is present in both positive predications and comparatives.

In §2 we noted that measures of taste can sometimes depend on multiple dimensions. This feature isn’t specific to PPTs. For instance, the apparent context-sensitivity of ‘similar-looking (to Tim’s baby)’ in (32) persists in the comparative in (33), as reflected in (34).

\[
(32) \quad \text{Sheena’s baby is similar-looking to Tim’s baby.}
\]
\[
(33) \quad \text{Sheena’s baby is more similar-looking to Tim’s baby than Pat’s is.}
\]
\[
(34) \quad A: \quad \text{Sheena’s baby is more similar-looking to Tim’s baby than Pat’s is. [favoring nose/mouth shape]}
\]

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\[\text{variable’s syntactic presence. For general discussion, see Partee} \, 1989, \text{ Stanley} \, 2000, \text{ Glanzberg} \, 2009. \text{ For related discussion about whether PPTs take an experiencer/judge argument, see esp. Lasersohn} \, 2005, \text{ 2008, 2009, Glanzberg} \, 2007, \text{ 2009, Stephenson} \, 2007a, \text{ Sebo} \, 2009, \text{ Schaffer} \, 2011, \text{ Collins} \, 2013, \text{ Bylinina} \, 2014. \text{ The perspective variables utilized here could be understood as filling an argument place for an experiencer/judge in uses where no experiencer is overtly specified in the linguistic context (as by a ‘to’ or ‘for’ phrase). In the present framework a judge could serve as the locus of a taste perspective. To streamline the semantics I avoid introducing this middleman.}\]

\[\text{16It might seem from the truth conditions in (31) that the comparative has trivial descriptive content. This is merely a symptom of our bracketing intensionality. World-indexing perspectives would resolve this issue.}\]
B: No, Pat’s baby is more similar-looking to Tim’s baby. [favoring hair/eyes]

Whether $x$ counts as “similar-looking” to $y$ can depend on various factors. Which dimensions are relevant, and how they compare, can become subject to negotiation.

Examples like these suggest that multidimensional adjectives in general also have context-sensitive measure functions. This dimensional-sensitivity, as I have called it, can be captured by parameterizing the relevant dimensions and weights. There are difficult questions about how exactly to implement this in the syntax and semantics. For instance, what exactly needs to be parameterized? Just the set of dimensions (cf. Sassoon 2013b)? Or the set of dimensions and their relative weights (cf. Bylinina 2014)? Should even the operation for determining measure functions from (possibly weighted) dimension sets be parameterized (pace Sassoon and Bylinina)? Need these elements be explicitly represented in the semantics itself? Or could we leave the additional structure for an extra-semantic psychological account of how speakers settle on multidimensional adjectives’ measure functions in context?

I suspect that there may ultimately be reasons for explicitly parameterizing each of these elements in the semantics of multidimensional adjectives. On such a view, context could be treated as supplying a triple of a set of dimensions (properties) $D$, a (possibly partial) preorder $\preceq$ on $D$ representing the relative priority of these dimensions, and a function $f$ mapping this preordered set $(D, \preceq)$ to the measure function associated with the adjective. I will abstract away from this extra structure in what follows, and treat PPTs and non-evaluative multidimensional adjectives alike in having context-dependent measure functions, as determined by a relevant type of perspective variable.

So, bracketing the above issues about multidimensionality, the above semantics treats predicative uses of PPTs as interpreted with respect to two contextual variables: they are sensitive not only to a contextually relevant body of standards $s$, like other positive form gradable adjectives, but also to a contextually relevant taste perspective $T$. This correctly predicts that PPTs can be used to manage speakers’ assumptions about what tastes to accept, what standards to accept, or both, depending on the context. For space purposes I will simply work through one example — a use of (1) which targets the relevant values for both $s$ and $T$. This example can provide a model for the other kinds of use.

Suppose we haven’t settled on how tasty the cake is. For all we have said, the cake’s degree of tastiness might be 5, 8, or 9. (I will use integers to represent degrees

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17See especially Sassoon 2013b on distinguishing nominal vs. adjectival predicates with respect to gradability and dimension-sensitivity. Sassoon uses specifically Boolean operations in determining adjectives’ measure functions from dimension sets, though I am not convinced that this is necessary.
on a tastiness scale.) We also haven’t settled on a precise degree standard of tastiness. Standards between 7 and 9 are live possibilities. A simplified representation of the state of the conversation is given in (35), where CS is the prior context set (the set of live possibilities (Stalnaker 1978)), $T_n$ indicates that the cake’s degree of tastiness $T_n(k) = n$, and $s_n$ indicates that the degree standard of tastiness $s_n(T) = n$. (Assume that the cake’s physical properties are the same in each world, and that it is presupposed in the conversation that the conversation is taking place.)

(35) $CS = \{w_1, \ldots, w_9\}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value for $T$</th>
<th>Value for $s$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$w_1$: $T_cw_1 = T_5$</td>
<td>$s_cw_1 = s_7$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_2$: $T_cw_2 = T_8$</td>
<td>$s_cw_2 = s_7$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_3$: $T_cw_3 = T_9$</td>
<td>$s_cw_3 = s_7$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_4$: $T_cw_4 = T_5$</td>
<td>$s_cw_4 = s_8$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$w_5$: $T_cw_5 = T_8$</td>
<td>$s_cw_5 = s_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_6$: $T_cw_6 = T_9$</td>
<td>$s_cw_6 = s_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_7$: $T_cw_7 = T_5$</td>
<td>$s_cw_7 = s_9$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_8$: $T_cw_8 = T_8$</td>
<td>$s_cw_8 = s_9$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_9$: $T_cw_9 = T_9$</td>
<td>$s_cw_9 = s_9$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upon hearing an utterance of (1) ‘This cake is tasty’ one will try to infer values for $T$ and $s$ which render the utterance true and appropriate. For each possibly relevant world, one checks whether the cake’s degree of tastiness, given the contextually determined taste perspective in that world, is at least as great as the degree standard of tastiness determined by the context in that world. Assuming the speaker is being cooperative, one can infer that she must be assuming that the discourse context isn’t represented by $c_1$, $c_4$, $c_7$, or $c_8$, and thus that $w_1$, $w_4$, $w_7$, and $w_8$ aren’t in fact live possibilities. If no one objects, the context set will be set to $\{w_2, w_3, w_5, w_6, w_9\}$, i.e. the set of relevant worlds $w$ such that the cake’s degree of tastiness in $w$, $[T]^{c_w}(k)$, is at least as great as the degree standard for tastiness determined by $[s]^{c_w}$ given $[T]^{c_w}$.

Updating with (1) in this context settles on neither the cake’s degree of tastiness nor the relevant degree standard, though it does rule out certain combinations thereof.²

²As suggested in §8 first, my aim here isn’t to provide an account of the specific semantic/pragmatic mechanisms and reasoning process involved in this sort of update; I take up that task elsewhere (see Silk 2014b, esp. ch. 3). Second, though for expository purposes I have adopted a contextualist implementation, there may ultimately be reasons to adapt the above treatment updates with PPTs into a relativist or dynamic semantic framework.
4 Adjectives of normative and epistemic evaluation

It is common in the literature to treat the category of “predicates of personal taste” on an intuitive level. One might wonder what distinguishes PPTs from other evaluative expressions — e.g., expressions of aesthetics (‘beautiful’), desirability (‘wonderful’), value (‘bad’), humor (‘hilarious’), morality (‘wrong’), epistemic evaluation (‘likely’), etc. — and whether the intuitive category of PPTs constitutes an interesting lexical class. Many in the contextualism/relativism literature on PPTs have eschewed generalizing their accounts because of potential (meta)normative implications concerning antirealism, subjectivity, and the like. For instance, Lasersohn (2005) motivates his relativist account of PPTs on the ground that they don’t concern “matters of fact” hence he continues, “The status of predicates such as good or beautiful immediately raises fundamental issues for ethics and aesthetics… Accordingly, we will… leave open the status of more philosophically ‘charged’ predicates like good and beautiful” (644–645).

I will argue that this restriction of focus is misplaced. PPTs are an instance of a more interesting general category of (what I will call) evaluational predicates. In this section I show that non-PPT evaluational adjectives share the linguistic features of PPTs that distinguish them from gradable adjectives like ‘tall.’ In the next section I show how the proposed unified formal semantics for evaluational adjectives is itself neutral on the relevant broader (meta)normative issues. However, we will see that speakers’ substantive assumptions about these issues can lead to various differences among evaluational adjectives in patterns of use.

Start with an aesthetic adjective such as ‘beautiful. Like with other positive form gradable adjectives, ‘beautiful’ in (36) is interpreted with respect to a contextually supplied degree standard of beauty.

(36) This painting is beautiful.

In using (36) speakers can manage their assumptions about what degree of beauty is sufficient for something to count as beautiful. Yet, like with ‘tasty’, and unlike with ‘tall’, ‘beautiful’ can also be used in managing speakers’ assumptions about what degree of beauty things have. Our disagreement in (37) doesn’t concern how beautiful

19One exception is Silk 2013, which motivates a relativist semantics for normative language on independent grounds and denies that the putatively problematic (meta)normative implications follow from the semantics. Kolbel (2002, 2003) extends his relativist account to the case of moral language but accepts the apparent (meta)normative implications.

the painting would need to be for it to count as beautiful; it concerns how beautiful
the painting is.

(37)   Me: This painting is beautiful.
       You: No it isn't. My dog could have painted that.

Comparative judgments like (38) are no less contestable:

(38)   This painting is more beautiful than that one.

(39)   Me: This painting is more beautiful than that one.
       You: No way. The balance in this one is all off.

Uses of ‘beautiful’ can target what degree of beauty objects have. Indeed this is their
typical use.

   Analogous points hold with adjectives of epistemic evaluation such as ‘likely’. Our
disagreement in (40) needn’t target how likely Sally’s winning would need to be
for it to count as likely. More plausibly, it concerns how likely her winning is.

(40)   Me: It’s likely that Sally will win.
       You: No way. Thom is the real frontrunner.

The disagreement extends to comparative likelihood judgments.

(41)   Me: It’s more likely that Sally will win than that Thom will.
       You: No way. Thom is the real frontrunner.

Uses of epistemic adjectives can target what degree of probability propositions have.
In using evaluational adjectives speakers manage their assumptions about what aesthetic
values, epistemic norms, etc. to accept.

   Non-PPT evaluational adjectives also pattern with PPTs concerning vagueness
phenomena. Our sensitivity to normatively relevant features of objects is often lim-
ited. Even when we are sensitive to changes in the relevant features, we might not
think every degree of change matters. These features of our normative standpoints
give rise to vagueness phenomena with normative comparatives.

   Suppose you are forced to decide between saving your best friend and saving
some number of strangers. Plausibly we have some special obligations to those close
to us, so that it is morally better for you to save your friend than to save two strangers.
But there doesn’t seem to be any precise number of strangers that would tip the
balance. Now consider the following argument:
Your saving your friend is morally better than your saving 2 strangers.

For all \( n \), if your saving your friend is morally better than saving \( n \) strangers, then your saving your friend is morally better than saving \( n + 1 \) strangers.

\[ \therefore \text{For all } n > 2, \text{ your saving your friend is morally better than saving } n \text{ strangers.} \]

No one’s friends are that important.

Or suppose classical utilitarianism is correct, and the only factor relevant to an act’s moral value is how much pleasure or pain it produces. Morally speaking, other things equal, the more pleasure an act leads to, the better it is, and the more pain it leads to, the worse it is. Giving an innocent person electric shocks is no doubt morally reprehensible. But not all acts of shock-giving are equally bad. Giving 100 volts of shock is morally worse than giving someone 10 volts of shock. Yet our sensitivities to pleasure and pain are limited. Shocking someone with \( n \) nanovolts of shock produces no more pain (let’s suppose) than shocking them with \( n - 1 \) nanovolts of shock; the acts are morally indistinguishable. But now consider:

\[ \text{Giving 1 nanovolt of shock is morally better than giving 100 volts of shock.} \]

For all \( n \), if giving \( n \) nanovolts of shock is morally better than giving 100 volts of shock, then giving \( n + 1 \) nanovolts of shock is morally better than giving 100 volts of shock.

\[ \therefore \text{For all } n, \text{ giving } n \text{ nanovolts of shock is morally better than giving } 100 \text{ volts of shock.} \]

Milgram’s subjects couldn’t get off the hook so easily.

Comparative sorites arguments get their force from apparent intransitive indifferences. Other things equal, a cake with \( n \) micrograms of sugar seems just as tasty as a cake with \( n + 1 \) micrograms of sugar; giving someone \( n \) nanovolts of shock seems morally indistinguishable from giving someone \( n + 1 \) nanovolts of shock (given classical utilitarianism); and so on. This might seem to predict that comparative sorites arguments with epistemic comparatives won’t be as compelling. The underlying epistemic scale, a scale of probability, is rich enough in structure to make even the most fine-grained distinctions. Any such distinctions would seem to matter in making comparative likelihood judgments. Though I agree that, for this reason, it is harder to generate comparative sorites arguments with epistemic evaluational adjectives, I don’t think it is impossible.

Suppose you are in a weightlifting competition. The competition is fierce: within
your weight class, every weight within one microgram of the next is represented. Moreover the only relevant difference among your competitors concerns how much total muscle mass they have. You look around the gym, assessing your prospects, when you spot Thom. Thom seems pretty scrawny. You think you are more likely to win than he is. Scoping out Thom+1 — the competitor who in fact has one more microgram of muscle than Thom but is otherwise relevantly indistinguishable from him — you think he seems just as scrawny as Thom. So you think you are also more likely to win than he is. You continue this process for some time until you find yourself accepting a most wonderfully optimistic conclusion. And yet you lose.

Intuitively, you just “forced march” (Horgan 1994) yourself. There was an underlying property — muscle mass — which you took to be relevant for assessing an individual’s probability of winning. Your judgments about this property formed the basis for your epistemic comparative judgments. The insensitivities to small differences in muscle mass led to corresponding indifferences in comparative likelihood.

In §2 we appealed to embedding behavior under ‘find’ as a third motivation for distinguishing the perspective-sensitivity of PPTs. As noted there, discussions of the broader embedding data are fraught; we will return to this in §8. For now simply observe that a variety of evaluational adjectives pattern with PPTs in felicitously embedding under ‘find’ in both positive and comparative uses:

\[(44) \text{[Context: We are on a class field trip to the art museum. We have to find five paintings and evaluate them in their beauty.]} \]
\[A: \text{I find this painting beautiful.} \]
\[A': \text{I find this painting more beautiful than the last one.} \]

\[(45) \text{[Context: A and B are both welfare monists. A takes the only basic factor affecting well-being to be pleasure, whereas B takes it to be desire-satisfaction.]} \]

We might represent the (static) contents of what you ended up accepting as follows (even if you might not have put it in these terms):

\[(i) \text{ (P1) I am more likely to win than Thom}_n (=\text{Thom}). \]
\[(P2) \text{ For all } n, \text{ if I am more likely to win than Thom}_n, \text{ then I am more likely to win than Thom}_{n+1}. \]
\[(C) \therefore \text{ For all } n, \text{ I am more likely to win than Thom}_n. \]

One might object that you don’t in fact accept the inductive premise (P2). After all, small changes in muscle mass make some difference in an individual’s chances of winning. So, for any adjacent pair in the series, Thom$_n$, Thom$_{n+1}$, you would plausibly accept that it’s more likely that Thom$_{n+1}$ will win, even if only by a bit. However, it is important to keep in mind that the individuals are considered de re. You are looking at your competitors and forming likelihood judgments on the basis of your perceptions. (This is why I presented the case dynamically.) It is only from your subjective epistemic point of view that the comparative sorites need have its force.
They consider the cases of Pat, who is very happy, thinking his family loves him, though they in fact hate him, and Sal, who is less happy but not so deluded. B appeals to Pat as an apparent problem case for A’s hedonism. A disagrees and says:

A: I find Pat well-off.
A': I find Pat more well-off than Sal.

(46) [Context: We are discussing what is likely to result from the recent political protests.]
A: I find peace likely.
A': I find peace more likely than war.

In these ways, the apparent context-sensitivity of non-PPT evaluational adjectives patterns in certain distinctive ways with that of PPTs. Giving them a unified kind of context-sensitive semantics helps capture this. The semantics for ‘tasty’ from §3 can be naturally extended to other evaluational adjectives. Consider ‘beautiful’. On the proposed view, not only is the degree standard of beauty associated with the positive form dependent on context; so is the measure function associated with the adjective itself. Let B be an aesthetic perspective variable. The value of B in c, Bc, is a measure function that maps objects to their degree of beauty, according to the aesthetic values endorsed in c. Truth conditions for (36) and (38) can be given as in (47) and (48), respectively.

(47) (36) is true in c iff Bc(p) ≥ sc(Bc)
(48) (38) is true in c iff Bc(p) > Bc(q)

The positive predication in (36) says that the given aesthetic perspective Bc maps the designated painting p to a degree of beauty at least as great as the degree standard of beauty operative in the context. The comparative in (38) says that the given Bc maps p to a degree of beauty greater than the degree of beauty to which it maps the non-proximal painting q. The context-sensitivity of ‘beautiful’ is thus present in both positive predications and comparatives. It is this context-sensitive element B which is targeted in the uses of ‘beautiful’ in (37) and (39).

Similarly, let E be an epistemic perspective variable, the value of which in context is a probability measure mapping propositions to a degree of probability. Truth conditions for (49) and (51) follow accordingly, where s is the proposition that Sally will win and t is the proposition that Thom will win:

(49) It’s likely that Sally will win.
is true in $c$ iff $E_c(s) \geq s_c(E_c)$

It's more likely that Sally will win than it is that Thom will win.

is true in $c$ iff $E_c(s) > E_c(t)$

says that the contextually supplied probability measure $E_c$ maps Sally’s winning to a degree of probability at least as great as the operative probability threshold. And says that $E_c$ maps Sally’s winning to a greater degree of probability than it maps Thom's winning. The truth conditions of the positive predication and comparative thus both depend on contextually supplied value for $E$. It is this assumed value which is targeted in – .

5 Taste and evaluation

The linguistic commonalities between PPTs and evaluational adjectives more generally motivate a uniform semantic treatment. However, contrary to what is often assumed in the literature, providing such a semantics needn't imply that broadly evaluational discourse is, in general, merely a “matter of taste.”

Compositional semantics takes as given an abstract representation of context that assigns values to variables and other context-sensitive expressions. Compositional semantics with evaluational adjectives thus takes as given specific evaluational perspectives — values for the various evaluational perspective variables — which figure in calculating the conventional contents of complex expressions. Just as semantic competence with ‘tasty’ requires a capacity to deliver truth-value judgments given a relevant body of tastes (i.e., a value for $T$), so too does semantic competence with (e.g.) ‘beautiful’ require a capacity to deliver truth-value judgments given a relevant view on aesthetics (i.e., a value for $B$). Our representation of the conventional meanings of evaluational adjectives thus leaves open the question of what determines the values of perspective variables in concrete discourse contexts; it leaves open what makes it the case that such-and-such evaluational perspectives characterize a given concrete context. This broadly metasemantic question locates a place for theorizing about the nature of, and relations among, evaluational perspectives supplied across contexts. For instance: What, if anything, makes it the case that something has such-and-such degree of tastiness, beauty, moral value, etc.? Do any evaluative facts hold independently of the evaluative attitudes of the creatures to whom they apply? For such-and-such type of evaluational perspective (taste, aesthetic, moral, etc.), is a single value determined by all contexts? Or can the relevant tastes, values, norms, etc. vary across contexts?
To take one example, consider the questions about universality. To capture common “relativist” claims about matters of taste, one could say that different concrete contexts can determine different taste perspectives. Conflicting taste judgments about a certain object could thus both be true. However, whereas it isn’t implausible that different contexts determine difference taste perspectives, the same might not hold for every type of evaluative perspective. Take morality. Defenders of the objectivity of morality might identify the relevant moral perspective as the correct moral view, determined independently of particular speaker intentions. If a universal moral view was correct, the same moral perspective would be supplied in all contexts. The correct metasemantic-cum-metaethical story might thus entail that every context determines the same moral perspective. Importantly, however, this would be a substantive metaethical matter rather than something built into the conventional meaning of moral language. As far as the conventions of the language go, every context might determine the same evaluational perspective, but perhaps not.

In this way, questions about “subjectivity,” “realism,” etc. with evaluational adjectives can be located in the metasemantics of what determines the values of perspective variables in concrete discourse contexts. Potential (meta)normative differences concerning matters of taste, aesthetics, morality, etc. needn’t be reflected in the formal semantics itself — our representation of the expressions’ conventional meaning and use. Investigation of such differences can be left for broader philosophical theorizing. Giving evaluational adjectives the same kind of context-sensitive semantics needn’t imply that evaluative matters are all merely “matters of taste.”

Treating evaluational adjectives as having a unified formal semantics (at the relevant level of generality) doesn’t imply that there are no linguistic differences among them. Speakers’ substantive assumptions about what determines the relevant perspectives in particular contexts, and about relations among the perspectives determined across contexts, can lead to differences in patterns of use among evaluational adjectives. In the remainder of this section I consider four examples, concerning (a) first-person experiences, (b) attitude-dependence, (c) felicity in Yalcin-style “evaluative contradictions,” and (d) discourse disagreements. I will focus on PPTs, aesthetic adjectives, and moral adjectives.

First, there is apparent variation among evaluational adjectives concerning the extent to which they are associated with certain subjective experiences. It is hard to hear an ascription ‘x is tasty’ as felicitous unless the speaker has had a relevant

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22 For more extensive discussion of these points, see Silk 2014b (esp. §§3.6, 5.4, 7.4), 2015.
23 For discussion of the alleged “direct experience requirement” with PPTs, see Stephenson 2007b, Pearson 2013, Bylinina 2014, MacFarlane 2014.
kind of first-personal experience with $x$, as reflected in (53).

(53) ??This cake is tasty, but I haven’t tried it.

Such examples improve with aesthetic adjectives, like ‘beautiful’. Suppose Highbrow hears Philistine dissing the new Botticelli exhibit at the art museum. Philistine isn’t one for art criticism, but he knows what he doesn’t like. Highbrow hasn’t seen the Botticelli paintings, but he has heard the experts praising them, and he is apt to defer. A dialogue ensues:

(54)    Philistine: I’m never getting dragged to the art museum again. All that supposedly famous Botticelli stuff was trash.
          Highbrow: You’re wrong. The Botticellis are beautiful. I haven’t seen them myself, but I’ve heard enough about them to know that you don’t know what you’re talking about.
          Philistine: Yeah right. My kid could have done that.
          Highbrow: Not a chance. The mastery with symmetries, color, balance, classical themes that I read about — that’s enough for me to know they’re beautiful.

I find it harder to construct an analogous context to improve the judgment with ‘tasty’ in (53). For moral adjectives it is hard to know what the relevant kind of experience would need to be. Regardless, (55) is felicitous.

(55)    God: Coveting thy neighbor’s wife is wrong.

A second variation concerns the extent to which speakers can consistently allow for the possibility that the evaluational adjective applies while denying that they have the associated taste, value, attitude, etc. Examples with ‘tasty’ are marked, whereas examples with the moral adjective ‘permissible’ are perfectly coherent:

(56) ??We don’t care for the cake, but maybe it’s actually tasty.
(57)    Like you, I’m repulsed at the idea of killing an infant, but maybe infanticide is actually permissible.

Aesthetic adjectives appear to be somewhere in the middle, but felicitous examples seem possible. Imagine Philistine on the cusp of a cultural transformation saying:

(58)    I still can’t see what’s so great about those paintings, but maybe they’re actually beautiful.
A third difference concerns the extent to which Yalcin-style “evaluative con- 
tradictions” with evaluational adjectives can felicitously embed in suppositional 
environments. Seth Yalcin (2007) makes a striking observation about “epistemic con- 
tradictions” like (60a) and (61a): unlike familiar Moore-paradoxical sentences, such as 
(59a), their incoherence persists in suppositional environments:

(59)  
   a. #The butler is the killer, but I don’t think that he is.  
   b. ok Suppose that the butler is the killer but I (/you) don’t think he is.

(60)  
   a. #The butler is the killer, but he might not be.  
   b. #Suppose that [the butler is the killer but he might not be].

(61)  
   a. #The butler is the killer, but he probably isn’t.  
   b. #Suppose that [the butler is the killer but he probably isn’t].

We can observe analogous phenomena with other types of broadly evaluational lan-
guage. It is hard to hear (62) with ‘tasty’ as consistent.

(62) ??Suppose the cake is tasty but we all hate it.

However, there is variation among evaluational adjectives in this respect. The ex-
ample in (63) with ‘wrong’ is perfectly natural.

(63) Suppose infanticide is wrong but we’re all for it.

Consistent examples with ‘beautiful’ also seem possible, as reflected in the continu-
ation in (64).

(64) Suppose the Botticelli’s are beautiful but we don’t like them. Then we should 
take an art appreciation class.

Finally, a fourth difference among evaluational adjectives concerns the extent 
to which speakers tend to weaken their assertions in the face of disagreement. In 
discourse disagreements with ‘tasty’, it isn’t uncommon for speakers to fall back on 
explicitly relativized claims as a point of agreement. The disagreement with ‘tasty’ 
in (5) might plausibly continue as in (65).

(65) Me: This cake is tasty.  
   You: No it isn’t. It’s gross. It’s way too sweet.  
   Me: No way. What do you know about sweet?  
   You: Well, it doesn’t taste good to me.  
   Me: Fine. I think it tastes great.
Though we disagree about how tasty the cake is, settling the question isn’t a matter of grave concern. Better to put the question aside and fall back on related claims on which we agree. I can agree that the cake doesn’t taste good to you, and you can agree that the cake tastes good to me.

By contrast, speakers may be more inclined to persist in disagreements about certain moral matters. Consider [66].

(66) Me: It's always morally worse to abort a fetus than to let it live.
You: No, you're wrong. Sometimes it's better to have an abortion.
Me: Absolutely not. Abortion is murder.
You: Sorry, I disagree. I'm not backing down on this one.
Me: Neither am I.
You: This is going nowhere...

Here we refuse to fall back on related claims about our own respective moral views. We may regard questions about the moral status of abortion as deeply important and hence prefer to leave the issue unresolved. Registering our views may be more significant to us than finding common ground. (I suspect that the frequency of persisting disagreement with aesthetic adjectives is also somewhere between that with PPTs and moral adjectives.)

To be clear, I am not claiming that these patterns of judgments hold without exception across contexts. They are tendencies. These tendencies do reflect non-trivial differences in use among evaluational adjectives. Yet we shouldn’t assume, absent much further investigation, that these differences are reflected in the syntax or semantics. Classifying predicates as ‘predicates of personal taste’, ‘aesthetic predicates’, ‘moral predicates’, etc. may be harmless for some purposes, but it has the potential to mislead. Such intuitive classifications may or may not be conventionalized in distinct lexical classes. (It is interesting that merely replacing ‘tasty’ with ‘taste good’ in [53] [56] [62] seems to improve judgments.)

For instance, it isn’t implausible that certain of the discourse differences described above reflect differences in interlocutors’ assumptions about whether the relevant perspective may be determined by factors external to the individual’s or group’s attitudes. Judgments about [53] [64] improve to the extent that one allows that what values (tastes, norms) to endorse may come apart from one’s own subjective experiences or attitudes. This needn’t imply that substantive assumptions about attitude-(in)dependence are built into the lexical semantics. In the case of discourse disagreement, we may be less willing in persisting moral disputes to take the question off the conversational table and conclude on a point of agreement. Settling
whether something is morally wrong is typically more important to us than settling whether something is tasty. This needn't imply that it is built into the conventions of the language that a single, invariant moral perspective is determined by every context. Sometimes it is the moribus, not the gustibus, which non est disputandum. Disagreements about taste might persist, and disagreements about morality might not. This is no different from the case of ordinary factual disagreements. Sometimes it just depends on what we care about.

In this way, there may be interesting generalizations concerning features of conversations which give rise to various discourse differences among evaluational adjectives—e.g., concerning speakers' substantive normative views and (non-)discourse-related goals. Not all discourse differences need be reflected in our accounts of the conventional meaning and use of evaluational adjectives. This, of course, isn't to deny that there may be further data supporting grammatical differences among them (see, e.g., Pearson, Bylinina, McNally & Stojanovic).

6 ‘Find’ and “subjectivity”

In §§2 and 4 I appealed to various linguistic phenomena involving comparatives to motivate distinguishing the context-sensitivity associated with evaluational adjectives from the context-sensitivity associated with gradable adjectives generally. In this section I want to return to the data concerning embedding under ‘find’, as this has been used extensively in the recent literature as a “diagnostic” (Fleisher, Kennedy) for PPTs and other putatively “subjective” expressions (see n. 8). I find much of the reported data to be problematic. (Even the previous sentence is a counterexample to several accounts.) Given the theoretical implications that have been drawn, it may be worthwhile to detail some of these concerns. Doing so will help further clarify the various sources of context-sensitivity in adjectives, and shed light on the ways in which context-sensitivity can affect the interpretation of complex constructions.

In §2 we noted that the matrix verb ‘find’ only licenses complements exhibiting certain kinds of context-sensitivity. All parties in the literature agree that ‘find’ licenses (positive and comparative) PPTs, as in (67), but is infelicitous with ordinary context-insensitive predicates, like ‘vegan’ in (68) (though see below).

(67) a. Fritz finds the cake tasty.
    b. Fritz finds Alice’s cake tastier than Bert’s cake.

(68) #Fritz finds the cake vegan.
In light of this contrast, felicitous embedding under ‘find’ has been used as diagnostic of a distinctive kind of “subjectivity” (“judge dependence,” etc.) in natural language. However, there is little agreement either about precisely what this putative “subjectivity” amounts to, or about what the broader embedding data with ‘find’ even is. Some have claimed that ‘find’ disallows ordinary positive form gradable adjectives, like ‘tall’, and only licenses PPTs (Fleisher 2013, Kennedy 2013); others that ‘find’ allows ordinary positive form gradable adjectives and PPTs (Sæbø 2009, Bouchard 2012) but disallows non-PPT evaluational adjectives (McNally & Stoianovic 2014); still others that ‘find’ allows ordinary positive form gradable adjectives, PPTs, and multidimensional non-PPT evaluational adjectives (Bylinina 2014). The alleged embedding data have been used to support a wide range of syntactic and semantic conclusions — e.g., concerning argument structure (in both positive and non-positive forms), thematic experiencer arguments, contextualism vs. relativism, and multidimensionality in evaluative predicates.

These reactions have been premature. More careful attention to context shows that we can see felicitous embedding under ‘find’ with various types of evaluational and non-evaluational adjectives (§§2, 4): with ordinary unidimensional positive gradable adjectives (even given a fixed comparison class), as in (69) with positive/comparative non-evaluational multidimensional adjectives, as in (70); with positive/comparative PPTs (even given a particular dimension), as in (71); and with positive/comparative non-PPT evaluational adjectives (even given a particular dimension), as in (72)–(75).

(69) [Context: Some adolescents are talking about who has and hasn’t had a growth spurt yet. They mention Robb, who shot up four inches over the summer alone. Ed, trying to play this off like it’s nothing, says that Robb “isn’t tall” (for a boy in their grade) — he’s “only” 5’7″. Height is quite the point of pride, after all, and Robb isn’t cool enough to be in their group. Most of the other kids go along with Ed, but Sam won’t have it. He says:]
You might not find Robb tall. But I find him tall.
(70)  A: I find Sheena’s baby similar-looking to Tim’s baby.
    B: I find Sheena’s baby more similar-looking to Tim’s baby than Pat’s is.

(71)  [Context: We are sampling cakes at the bake-off. We agree in making sweetness the only relevant factor.]
    A: I find this cake tasty [with respect to sweetness].
    A’: I find this cake tastier [with respect to sweetness] than that one.

(72)  [Context: We are on a class field trip to the art museum. We have to find five paintings and evaluate them in their beauty with respect to a number of dimensions — symmetry, balance, fineness of detail, etc.]
    A: I find this painting beautiful [in its use of symmetries].
    A’: I find this painting more beautiful than that one [in its use of symmetries].

(73)  [Context: We are discussing the university’s new sexual harassment policy. We turn to the morality of its attitudes toward women.]
    A: I find the new policy morally reprehensible [in its attitudes toward women].
    A’: I find the new policy morally reprehensible [in its attitudes toward women] — even more reprehensible than the previous policy.

(74)  [Context: A and B are both welfare monists. A takes the only basic factor affecting well-being to be pleasure, whereas B takes it to be desire-satisfaction. They consider the cases of Pat, who is very happy, thinking his family loves him, though they in fact hate him, and Sal, who is less happy but not so deluded. B appeals to Pat as an apparent problem case for A’s hedonism. A disagrees and says:]
    A: I find Pat well-off.
    A’: I find Pat more well-off than Sal.

(75)  [Context: We are discussing what is likely to result from the recent political protests.]
    A: I find peace likely.
    A’: I find peace more likely than war.

These examples are problematic for existing accounts of ‘find’. Felicitous embedding under ‘find’ cannot be used as diagnostic of PPTs, and it fails to distinguish a class of intuitively "subjective" predicates more generally. Perhaps at the end of the theoretical day we might recover a notion of “subjectivity” which our use of ‘find’ is tracking. But we shouldn’t expect a pretheoretic notion of subjectivity to play a
genuine explanatory role in explicating the lexical semantics of ‘find’.

My primary aim in this section is simply to establish this negative conclusion, in the hope of serving as a corrective to the previous literature. However, the above body of examples lends interesting additional support to our typology of relevant forms of context-sensitivity from §2. In the remainder of this section I will offer several preliminary speculations about how this typology may provide the basis for a more adequate account of the licensing conditions of ‘find’.

I said above that ‘tall’ can felicitously embed under ‘find’. There are several illuminating exceptions. First, as we saw in §2, although ordinary unidimensional gradable adjectives can be felicitous under ‘find’ in the positive form, as in

\[(69)\]

\[\text{I find Robb taller than Ed.}\]

they are marked in the comparative:

\[(76)\] 
\[\#\text{I find Robb taller than Ed.}\]

Our accounts from §§2–4 locate a salient contrast between

\[(76)\]

and

\[(69)\]–\[(75)\].

\[(76)\]

isn’t sensitive to a contextual parameter. By contrast, in

\[(69)\]–\[(75)\] the positive form adjectives are sensitive to a contextual degree standard, and the comparative adjectives are sensitive to a contextual perspective (and possibly an independently represented dimensional element (§3)).

This might seem to suggest that sensitivity to a contextual parameter is what characterizes complements felicitously embedding under ‘find’. Simply saying this, however, would fail to exclude ordinary uses of paradigm context-sensitive expressions:

\[(68)\]

is infelicitous even though the complement includes the definite description ‘the cake’ and is sensitive to (something like) a contextual salience ordering on cakes. Further, importantly, not all uses of ‘tall’, even in the positive form, are felicitous under ‘find’. Purely descriptive uses — roughly, uses which distinguish among worlds solely with respect to their extra-contextual features, rather than among live degree standards — are infelicitous:

\[(77)\]

[Context: It’s common ground that the standard for tallness is 6’. We are talking about how much Robb grew over the summer and how tall he is.]

\[A:\] Robb is’t tall. He’s only 5’7”.

\[B:\] \#You might not find Robb tall. But I find him tall.

This suggests that what is relevant for licensing under ‘find’ isn’t simply semantic context-sensitivity but a certain sort of use of context-sensitive expressions: It must be the case that updating with the complement would (non-trivially) distinguish among worlds in the context set based on the representation of context in those worlds; it must be that updating with the complement would adjust the live values
for the relevant contextual variable (cf. §3). Call such uses context-oriented uses.

Note that the relevant representation of context targeted in felicitous uses of ‘find’ needn’t be that of the global discourse context. Using ‘find’ can be felicitous if the use distinguishes among values for the relevant contextual variable within a relevant local context (Stalnaker 1974, 1988, Heim 1990, 1992), as in (78).

(78) Me: We all agree that the painting is beautiful. What does Katie think?
You: Katie finds it beautiful too.

Here it is common ground that the painting is beautiful, i.e. that \([B]c\)\((\text{the-painting})\) is at least as great as the degree standard for beauty. What is at issue is what value for B is determined by the local context characterizing Katie’s state of mind. Your utterance in (78) is felicitous insofar as it distinguishes among live values for B determined by the local context of the attitude.

In light of these examples, I offer (79) as a tentative account of the felicity conditions for the relevant sense of ‘find’ (n. 8) — where, for a world w in the context set CS, \(W_w\) is an equivalence class of worlds in CS with the same relevant extracontextual features as w; \(c_w\) represents the conversational situation in w; and \(c_{S_w}\) represents the subject S’s state of mind in w. (Note that, in (ii), the relevant contextual features determining the set \(W_w\) will include features that help determine how the local context \(c_S\) representing the subject’s state of mind is characterized. CS is the context set before the acceptance or rejection of the utterance’s asserted content.)

(79) An utterance of ‘S finds \(\phi\)’ is felicitous only if
   (i) for some \(u \in CS\), \([\phi]_{c_{S,u}} = 0\), and
   for some \(v \in W_u, [\phi]_{c_{S,v}} = 1\),
   or
   (ii) for some \(u \in CS, Dox_{S,u} \notin \[\phi\]_{c_S}\), and
   for some \(v \in W_u, Dox_{S,v} \subseteq \[\phi\]_{c_S}\).

This says that ‘find’ is felicitous only if the use distinguishes among live representations of context, local or global.

We began this section with an apparent contrast between ‘tasty’ and ‘vegan’ under ‘find’. The condition in (79) suggests that examples with context-insensitive predicates should improve to the extent that the predicate’s conventional meaning can be readily associated with some kind of scale, such that the predicate can be coerced into having a context-oriented use. This prediction seems to be borne out:

(80) [Context: We have been discussing the rights of animals and the ethics of
food. Neither of us eats meat, but you are much stricter in your dietary habits, and vocally so. For something to count as properly “vegan,” by your lights, it can't even be produced by a company that makes animal products. We agree that the cake doesn't itself contain any animal products, though the company that makes it also sells meat. I take a slice of the cake.

You: How can you eat that cake? It isn't vegan.

Me: Well, I find it vegan. Just relax.

Plausibly what is happening in [80] is that ‘vegan’ is being coerced into a gradable adjective, with a denotation in the domain of s. Other things equal, food produced by companies that make animal products is treated as “less vegan” than food produced by companies that don't. We agree about the ingredients in the cake, but we disagree about “how vegan” something needs to be for it to count as vegan.

Let’s recap. Many theorists have appealed to felicitous embedding under ‘find’ as a “diagnostic” for PPTs and other “subjective” expressions. However, much of the assumed data, and subsequent theoretical conclusions drawn from them, are problematic. Embedding under ‘find’ is tracking something, just not what has been claimed. My aims in this section have been twofold: first, to provide a more adequate body of data concerning embedding under ‘find’; and, second, to illustrate how our previous treatments of context-sensitivity in uses of adjectives may help illuminate the broader array of data. I offered a preliminary proposal about the licensing conditions for embedding under ‘find’ in terms of “context-oriented” uses of context-sensitive complements. Yet there is still much to be explained. For instance, although the full range of gradable, evaluational, and multidimensional adjectives can occur in complements under ‘find’, not all embeddings seem equally well attested (see McNally & Stojanovic 2014 for preliminary corpus searches). Detailed investigation of distributional differences among context-sensitive expressions under ‘find’ is called for. A complete account would need to explain how to derive these distributional differences from the licensing conditions of ‘find’, the expressions’ specific semantic contents, and features of concrete contexts of use. I hope the preliminary discussion here may provide a richer body of data to be incorporated in future accounts, as well as a fruitful framework for theorizing about these data.

7 Conclusion

This paper has examined several sources of context-sensitivity in adjectives, focusing on what I have called broadly evaluational adjectives. This category includes
not only predicates of personal taste but also predicates expressing various kinds of normative and epistemic evaluation— aesthetic, moral, probabilistic, etc. Like ‘tall’, positive form adjectives such as ‘tasty’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘likely’ are interpreted with respect to a contextually supplied degree standard—a threshold relative to which things count as tasty, beautiful, likely, etc. What distinguishes evaluational adjectives is that the adjective itself, and not simply the positive form, is context-sensitive. This captures how even in comparative constructions these adjectives continue to give rise to various distinctive linguistic phenomena often associated with context-sensitive gradable adjectives. Such phenomena include context-oriented use, felicitous embedding under ‘find’, and, surprisingly, vagueness phenomena like sorites-sensitivity.

In light of these phenomena I delineated three potential sources of context-sensitivity in uses of adjectives: standard-sensitivity (sensitivity to a threshold or degree standard), perspective-sensitivity (sensitivity to a body of tastes, values, norms, probabilities, etc.), and dimensional-sensitivity (sensitivity to a weighted dimension set). On the particular degree-based implementation adopted here, standard-sensitivity is captured in terms of a variable, associated with the positive form, which maps adjective denotations to degree standards. What distinguishes evaluational adjectives from adjectives such as ‘tall’ is that they denote context-sensitive measure functions—what I have called evaluational perspectives—which map items to their degree of taste, beauty, likelihood, etc. The lexical semantics of evaluational adjectives fails to associate them with a specific context-independent scale or measure function. Multidimensional adjectives can also be treated as denoting context-sensitive measure functions (though not all evaluational adjectives are multidimensional, and not all multidimensional adjectives are intuitively evaluative).

Our discussion of various sources of context-sensitivity in uses of adjectives can inform recent accounts of the licensing conditions of ‘find’. More careful attention to context shows that we can observe felicitous embedding under ‘find’ with the full range of gradable adjectives examined in this paper. To help capture the broader array of examples, I suggested that what licenses embedding under ‘find’ is a certain sort of “context-oriented” use of a context-sensitive complement.

I have suggested that we can maintain a common core formal semantics among evaluational adjectives: they denote context-sensitive measure functions. Contrary to what is often assumed in the literature on predicates of personal taste, providing such a context-sensitive semantics needn’t imply that broadly evaluational issues are merely “matters of taste.” Apparent differences among evaluational adjectives in “subjectivity”—universality, realism, attitude-dependence, etc.—needn’t be encoded in the conventional meaning and use of the expressions themselves. The for-
mal semantics provides a basis for broader philosophical theorizing about matters of taste and normative and epistemic evaluation (cf. Silk 2013, 2014b, 2015).

Our discussion in this paper has raised a number of questions for future research. For instance, first, it is a non-trivial question how familiar accounts of vagueness with positive gradable adjectives may be extended to the comparative cases provided in §§2 and 4 (for discussion, see Silk 2014b: §§6.3–6.4, 7.2). Second, I have left open precisely how multidimensionality is to be reflected in the semantics. There may ultimately be reasons to treat the measure functions as derived from explicitly represented, contextually supplied prioritized dimension sets. The issue calls for thorough empirical investigation (e.g., of unidimensional vs. multidimensional adjectives, and apparent multidimensionality in gradable vs. non-gradable predicates) and careful theoretical reflection (e.g., concerning what exactly is meant by ‘multidimensionality’, and the nature of semantic competence). (See Sassoon 2013a,b for extensive recent discussion.) Third, though I have treated evaluational adjectives as semantically unified in denoting context-sensitive measure functions, there may of course be other grammatical and lexical differences among them. I briefly outlined conversational explanations for certain discourse differences, but more comprehensive examination is needed. Fourth, I have offered an array of further data concerning embedding under ‘find’, and a tentative proposal about how to capture it. I hope that this preliminary treatment, or at least the additional data, may provide the basis for a more adequate overall account, not only of the licensing conditions of ‘find’, but also of embedding data with other related verbs, like ‘consider’ and ‘look’ (see esp. McNally & Stojanovic 2014), and of the varieties of context-sensitive uses of language (cf. Silk 2014a,b).

References


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