Abstract: Semantic relativists hold that disagreements of taste are “faultless disagreements”, i.e. the speakers are expressing contradictory contents while neither of them is at fault. This paper argues that we should distinguish between subjectivist and objectivist uses of predicates of taste and only the former fits the pattern of faultless disagreements. Objectivist uses are made on the basis of an objectivist “folk” theory of taste which holds that there is an objective truth of the matter and hence, only one of the disagreeing parties can be right. Moreover, they constitute the majority of uses and hence the semantic theory should primarily be concerned with them. The problem is that objectivism as a metaphysical theory of taste is quite plausibly false. I argue that if one accepts the so-called “Principle of Semantic Competence” (Stojanovic, 2007) as the recent theorists systematically do, the semantics of predicates of taste should be objectivist (i.e. non-judge-dependent). Objectivist semantics coupled with the falsity of metaphysical objectivism about taste leads to an error theory of taste discourses.

1 Introduction

The problems behind giving a semantic analysis of predicates of taste are due to the following conflict. Most theorists take taste to be subjective, and hence they agree with the dictum of the ancient Romans: De gustibus non est disputandum. However, looking at the actual uses of taste predicates shows that disagreement is perfectly commonplace. The challenge is thus considered to be that we must give an analysis of taste predicates which makes them subjective—or “judge-dependent” in the recent terminology—but which can also explain how disagreement is possible. However, the problem with many recent semantic analyses of taste predicates is the assumption that there is just one kind of use of taste predicates, and those uses are both subjective and allow for the possibility of disagreements.

This paper has two aims. First, I argue that there are two distinct uses of predicates of taste, subjectivist and objectivist uses, and only the former can be explained by accounts that posit judge dependence. Subjectivist uses only express the speaker’s own taste, and there can be no genuine disagreements when the
predicates are used in the subjective way. In contrast, objectivist uses allow for genuine disagreements, and they are made on the basis of a belief that there exists a unique standard of taste that holds for all persons. Moreover, objectivist uses constitute the majority of uses and hence they should be the data that forms the basis for the semantics of predicates of taste.

Second, I discuss what happens if we accept that the objectivist uses are the default uses but there are no objective taste properties which could make the judgments true. I argue that if one accepts the so-called “Principle of Semantic Competence” which holds that speakers know the truth-conditions of their utterances, then one should accept an error theory of taste discourse. In other words, objectivist judgments of taste aim to attribute objective properties but since those properties don’t exist, the judgments are systematically false.

The plan of the paper is as follows. The first section argues that there are the two uses of predicates of taste which can be distinguished on the basis of the different behavioural dispositions they give rise to. The subjectivist uses give the impression that the speaker is really talking about their own taste, and they underlie the intuition that disagreements of taste are faultless. Relativists like Kölbel (2003) and Lasersohn (2005) have exclusively focused on the subjectivist uses. But there are uses which do not fit the subjectivist model, and which I call “objectivist” because I argue that they are made on the basis of an underlying, objectivist folk theory of taste (Section 3).

Objectivist uses lead to very different behaviours than subjectivist uses. For example, if two speakers are making objectivist judgments and they disagree, they don’t take the disagreement to be faultless. On the contrary, they believe there is a judge-independent truth about the matter and hence one of them has to be wrong. They may provide arguments and reasons for their judgment, aim to convince the other, be prepared to give up their view if they are shown to be wrong, and retract their past judgments as false if they now hold a different opinion. Moreover, I will argue that the objectivist uses constitute the majority of uses of predicates of taste, and hence the semantic account must build on those uses, not on the more marginal subjectivist ones.

Section 3.2 argues that objectivist uses cannot be explained by subjectivist theories which posit judge dependence. Section 3.3 discusses the claim that objectivism is false, and moreover, it is so evidently false that speakers couldn’t possibly be making objectivist judgments. I argue that the latter claim is without grounds. The last part (Section 4) discusses the consequences of supposing both that objectivism as a metaphysical thesis is false, and that objectivism is the folk theory which underlies the majority of uses of predicates of taste. Section 4.1 discusses the reasons to choose between subjectivist and objectivist semantics under that supposition, and concludes that if one accepts the Principle of Semantic Competence one ought to accept an error theory of taste.
Section 4.2 discusses the consequences of the error theory of taste to communication, and argues that even if objectivist metaphysics about taste is false, there is no reason to be alarmed by the error involved in objectivist taste statements. First, false or truth-valueless utterances can be perfectly meaningful as illustrated by our normal talk about non-existent entities such as zombies or Pegasus. Secondly, objectivist judgments of taste are not far from being true. Hence even the empirical error involved is negligible in most contexts. After all, a very large number of our ordinary statements are only approximations of truth.

2 The two uses of taste predicates

2.1 Subjectivist uses

There are many moves one can make in discussions and disputes about taste. At one extreme one merely aims at stating something about one’s own taste—call these “the subjectivist uses”. One makes an explicitly subjectivist judgment of taste by using various linguistic tools for subjectivising one’s judgment, for example:

(1) To me curry wurst is delicious.
(2) I find curry wurst delicious.

However, the standard view is that a bare judgment of taste like “Curry wurst is delicious” may also be implicitly subjective, i.e. its content, truth-conditions or its pragmatically conveyed content may be about the speaker.¹

Arguably, subjectivist uses are also revealed by the speaker’s behaviour in situations where a disagreement might arise or one’s past judgments are brought up. Subjectivist uses won’t give rise to serious, ongoing disagreements because what a subjectivist use of a judgment of taste conveys is truth-conditionally or pragmatically equivalent to an explicitly subjective judgment. Let me illustrate. Suppose Alice finds oysters disgusting. She is now at a restaurant with Bob where we can imagine the following exchange to take place:

(3) a. Alice (pointing at oysters): Look, oysters! They’re disgusting.
b. Bob: No they’re not, they’re delicious.
c. Alice: I find them pretty gross.

¹ On this point most of the recent relativist and contextualist theories agree, and their disagreement concerns rather the correct semantic framework.
Suppose that in (3a) Alice only intended to express her own disgust towards oysters. Since she didn’t make an explicitly subjective judgment Bob can negate the sentence she used. However, since Alice never meant to talk about anyone else’s taste, she doesn’t insist on the disgustingness of oysters and instead she reformulates her judgment in an explicitly subjective form in (3c). By doing that she signals that she isn’t disagreeing with Bob but only making a statement about her own taste. The exchange (3a)–(3b) is an instance of the kind of “faultless disagreement” that the relativist and contextualist theories typically focus on. Alice and Bob are making judgments that seem to contradict, but we feel that both are entitled to their opinion and neither is at fault.

In some situations one’s past, conflicting judgment of taste may be brought up, leading one to retract a past judgment if one’s taste has changed. MacFarlane (2009; 2014) has used the fact that people may retract their past judgments of taste as an argument for his brand of relativism. However, an account of predicates of taste must also explain why sometimes people don’t retract their judgments. Here is an example. Some years have passed since Alice and Bob’s previous dialogue. Alice has come to love oysters, and she is again in a restaurant with Bob who doesn’t know about her change of heart.

(4) a. Alice: Oysters are so delicious!
   b. Bob: What? Last time we met you said they’re disgusting.
   c. Alice: I know, my taste has changed. They were disgusting to me then.

Here Alice again emphasises that her previous judgment was about her taste back then, rather than taking back what she said as false.

In what kind of situations are predicates of taste used subjectively? First, a person who thinks that “there’s no accounting for taste” will only make subjectivist judgments of taste. She is well aware of only ever aiming to speak about her own taste and consequently she will never engage in serious disagreements, and she doesn’t retract her past judgments (unless she realises that her taste was temporarily aberrant then, e.g. as a consequence of being sick). But also, an objectivist about taste may make a subjectivist judgment when she only wants to talk about her own taste. Let us next look at what kind of people objectivists about taste are.

### 2.2 Objectivist uses

There is another kind of use of judgments of taste which lead to very different behaviour than the subjectivist uses. I don’t think there is anything controversial in accepting the existence of the conversational behaviours that I’ll describe; however, what is controversial is to treat them as “objectivist uses” of predicates of
taste. An objectivist use as I define it is a judgment which aims to state facts about
taste that are independent of the taste of the speaker or of any other particular
individual or group.

For example, if Matti says “Krombacher is better than Becks” and intends his
use to be objectivist, he isn’t only saying that Krombacher is better than Becks
to him, or to him and some relevant group. Instead he takes it to be a fact about
the beers that Krombacher is better than Becks, for any person (as long as they
don’t have a bizarre taste).\footnote{Note: \textit{good} has many other senses than being gustatorily good but our examples only intend
to use the gustatory sense of \textit{good} and \textit{better}.}

The linguistic behaviour that objectivist uses lead to contrast strongly with
the subjectivist uses. First and foremost, serious and ongoing disagreements are
possible almost uniquely with objectivist uses.\footnote{There are cases of ongoing disagreements which are not a consequence of objectivist uses,
but of a desire to e.g. calibrate the use of words in the context (see e.g. Sundell, 2011). However, I think such disagreements are marginal.)} By \textit{ongoing} disagreement I mean
one that goes on after the speakers have discovered that they hold opposing opin-
ions, and by \textit{serious} that the speakers take themselves to truly disagree, and do
not hold that no one is at fault. In other words, speakers do not take objectivist
disagreements to be faultless. Let us call them “genuine disagreements”.

What are the characteristics of a genuine disagreement? Let us look at Matti’s
objectivist judgment “Krombacher is better than Becks” again. In case someone
disagrees with him he will defend his statement. He can do that by offering argu-
ments, by not taking the opponent’s point of view seriously (e.g., by taking him or
her to be insufficiently sophisticated regarding beer), by specifying what for him
constitutes a good beer and so on.

If the person Matti is discussing with makes objectivist judgments as well, the
disagreement may go on for a long time without them coming to an agreement
while both continue to think they are right. Alternatively one of them may become
convinced and change her mind; or they may come to think that they don’t know
how to resolve the dispute and end it at that; or they may even ask a third person’s
opinion, or consult an expert. In short, the disagreement follows the pattern typical
to disagreements about ordinary facts.

Another behavioural disposition that goes with objectivist judgments is re-
tracting one’s judgments once one has changed one’s mind. For example, suppose
Matti later comes to think that actually Becks is better than Krombacher. If
someone now reminds him that he used to think the opposite, he will take back
his judgment by saying e.g. “I know, I was wrong”. It’s worth noting that such
cases are disagreements with one’s past self. Since in retracting one admits that
one was wrong, that’s more evidence that there are disagreements of taste where someone is taken to be wrong (in these cases, the speaker’s own past self).

What is worth noting is that objectivist uses are particularly challenging for a theory of semantics of predicates of taste which takes the existence of faultless disagreements as the basic datum to be explained. Indeed, the main contextualist and relativist theorists (e.g. Glanzberg, 2007; Lasersohn, 2005; Kölbel, 2003; MacFarlane, 2014) don’t acknowledge the existence of objectivist uses as I have described them at all. The reason is obvious; whereas subjectivist uses invite to relativise truth or to posit a hidden parameter or free enrichment, objectivist uses are much harder to account for as we’ll see later. Before we return to the two uses and their significance to the semantics of predicates of taste, let us discuss what underlies the two uses of taste.

3 Objectivism about taste

3.1 The folk view about taste

In this section I will argue that objectivist uses are pretty much the default use of predicates of taste, and that they are a consequence of a simple and appealing theory of taste—our “folk” theory so to speak, because it is the theory we usually grow up with and only give up after reflection. For our purposes we don’t need to attempt at a precise characterisation of it but generally the theory includes something like the following statements:

**Objectivism about value**
1. Many objects have value properties.
2. Humans track the value properties of objects.
3. A person can be a more or less accurate tracker of those properties.
4. A value judgment predicates value properties.
5. One can be wrong in one’s value judgments.
6. Value judgments are true iff they correctly track the value properties.

The statements are about value properties and value judgments generally and so apply to e.g. aesthetic or moral judgments as well. The idea is that objectivist uses of judgments of taste are manifestations of “implicit beliefs” in the objectivist theory as applied to taste-related evaluative properties like deliciousness, fun, or tastiness. To clarify, I don’t mean that people have explicitly formed a theory in their mind which they try to express by their judgments of taste. Rather, people might not be able to state the folk theory, but their linguistic behaviors make
most sense when we assume that they believe the theory. That is the idea behind implicit beliefs.

The statements above speak abstractly of tracking value properties, and the method by which one tracks them varies between the subject matters. For example, properties like deliciousness and tastiness are tracked by the senses of smell, taste and touch which together create the perception of flavours. For aesthetic judgments, traditionally philosophers have spoken of “the faculty of taste” which is exercised when making an aesthetic judgment about say, beauty. Generally, the notions of a good or bad taste are linked with the idea of being able to correctly track the taste-related value properties. A person with a bad taste attributes value where none is or simply fails to track the value of an object.

Since our grounds of judgments of taste are our sensory abilities, we should rather expect people to be objectivists about taste. For example, we all agree that people with normal vision track the visual properties of the world. Not the visual properties to someone, but just the visual properties. In other words, there is a fact about the matter of how something looks or sounds, so it’s rather natural to think that there are also facts about the evaluative properties which are tracked by our other senses.

For illustration about objectivist thinking in practice, let us return to Matti and his objectivist judgment “Krombacher is better than Becks”. Why he says that is because he believes he can track the properties that make beers good, in other words, that he has a sufficiently good taste regarding beers to make an objectivist judgment. Why he thinks he has a good taste might be because he is experienced in beer tasting, because he is confident that he is naturally apt at it, or because his evaluations about beers are generally met with agreement; his reasons are not important, but typically they play a role in determining his behaviour if his statement is challenged.

Naturally Matti also thinks that what he said is true, and it is true because Krombacher is better than Becks; and again, not just to him, but to everyone (whether or not they realise it). Unless Matti has an exceptionally high opinion of himself as a beer taster he is also ready to concede that he might be wrong. He could end up changing his mind if say, his favourite beer expert announced that Becks was better than Krombacher, or all of his usually reliable friends told him so. In that case he would most likely retreat to a subjectivist statement by saying e.g. “Ok, maybe Becks is actually better but I still like Krombacher more”.

So, the first and strongest argument for objectivism as the folk view about taste is that it’s the best explanation for genuine disagreements of taste. But I think other facts about the culture surrounding taste support the view as well. The following are examples of cases where the people’s behaviours are best explained by attributing them folk objectivist beliefs. There are plenty of disagreements of taste where people basically get angry if you try ending their disagreement with saying “There’s no disputing about taste” (try saying that to fans of food, drink or
music). I think they get angry because they think you’re wrong: there is disputing about taste.

One can induce long discussions in Italians by asking them questions like “Which is the best kind of pasta?”. It’s hard to believe that the topic would be so fascinating if they took it to be merely a matter of everyone expressing their personal preferences. Or watch the French talk hours about food and try making sense of it thinking that they’re all just talking about their own taste. Or, imagine that you’re having a meal at a relative’s or a friend’s place and they ask how the meal was. If people were subjectivists about taste, it should be ok to say “I didn’t like it”. But by saying that you would actually be implicating that the food wasn’t good, objectively speaking, thereby upsetting the cook.

The very idea of good and bad taste makes sense only on the background of objectivism: If taste was just a matter of personal likes and dislikes, what would it mean that someone has a bad taste? Admittedly, we can talk of bad taste ironically or as an exaggeration. But nevertheless, there is even a certain amount of consensus regarding what counts as bad taste. For example, Stern & Stern (1990) offer a fascinating look into visual and cultural phenomena that are broadly considered to be of bad taste—ironically perhaps, but if taste was merely a personal matter, talk of bad taste would not work, even ironically.

The importance of matters of taste is shown in the pleasure we take in discussing and disagreeing over the values of things: which foods or drinks are good and why, which clothes are stylish or cool, which activities are most fun. I’ve argued that genuine disagreements make best sense of the basis of objectivism, but so do serious discussions about taste. The point of explaining to someone why one shouldn’t add ketchup to a bolognese sauce is typically not only that one personally doesn’t like it, but that there is something inherently (gustatorily) bad about the combination. Hence, by convincing another of what one considers a truth about taste (e.g. “There should be no ketchup in bolognese sauce”) one aims to make them better off. That’s the point of truths: they’re informative, and knowing truths usually makes life easier. In contrast, truths about one’s personal taste are irrelevant to pretty much anyone else. Supposing that judgments of taste are always subjective fails to make sense of the importance we grant to discussions about taste in our lives.

Admittedly it is difficult to tell genuinely objectivist judgments from mere exaggeration or loose talk. But still, objectivism about taste is not only an unreflective attitude people lapse into when drinking beer but a default approach to taste which is manifest in various forms in our societies. Any travel guide is filled with authoritative statements about the gustatory or other taste-related values of places, activities and restaurants, and the same holds of other guidebooks and reviews in general. People follow the advice because they trust that the critics are sophisticated, knowledgeable and able to discriminate the good from the bad. If the advice leads one for example to eat food that seriously displeases one, a typical
response is to think that the critic doesn’t know what she is talking about; she
doesn’t have a good taste, and shouldn’t be working on a profession that requires
it.

Let me give an example of the kind of cultural phenomenon that I take to
manifest objectivism about taste. Here’s a quote from an article by the French
correspondent of the BBC news:

Take one picture I saw recently (...) It was supposed to be a bitter-sweet comedy (...) What we got was two hours of inconsequential, plotless twaddle (...) Or take the comedy Le Vilain (The Villain) which has just come out. It is billed as an offbeat caper (...) my 14-year-old daughter and I both agreed, on emerging, that there was one minor drawback: it wasn’t funny. (...) My point is that (...) what we had been led to believe was that these films were actually pretty remarkable. (...) It was the serious critics in Le Monde, Le Figaro and elsewhere, who used adjectives like hilarious, tender, burlesque, complex, original.” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/8474488.stm)

The quote is from an article that aims to show how the French culture is doing
poorly because they refuse to see its poorness, and instead even the serious critics
praise mediocre works of art. The author is so confident in his own and his 14-
year-old daughter’s abilities to discern what is genuinely funny that he concludes
that all the critics are either self-deluded or intentionally misleading because they
want to maintain that French movies are still great. (The author even admits later
in the article that others in the audience did find it funny: “I may not have found
Le Vilain funny, but a lot of people in the audience were in stitches.”)

Again, ironic or not, the journalist’s very argument on the poor state of French
culture relies on his own ability to track the funniness of films (an ability he con-siders superior to the abilities of all those others in the audience who were in
stitches). If subjectivism about taste was indeed the default view as most philoso-
phers hold, the author would have simply concluded after the film that his sense of
humour is different from that of the French. But instead, he goes for an elaborate
conspiracy theory of lying critics because he believes that they really do evaluate
the film as he does—as not funny.

I’ve argued that objectivism is the folk view. But I also want to add that there
shouldn’t be anything surprising that it is the folk view. After all, our tastes are
pretty much alike. Compare matters of taste to some clearly objective matters of
fact like whether a certain economical or historical theory is correct. In the latter
case there are major epistemological obstacles in finding out the truth, but clearly
there is a truth. Likewise we may suppose that it’s difficult to find the truth about
taste but often we do agree, and when we don’t, we need to keep searching the
truth.

We know that with matters of taste education and experience change us and
make our tastes more refined. So it is a rather natural assumption that we would
converge in our tastes if only we had the same experiences. We all know that
adolescents have a different taste to adults and even if it’s partly due to random fashions and their level of development, it’s also due to the fact that they’ve had little experience of the relevant objects of taste.

Suppose one accepts that folk objectivism makes best sense of most uses of judgments of taste. What needs to be addressed is the question about the relation of objectivism to people’s grounds for their judgments of taste. After all, as the relativists emphasise, we are faultless because we judge on the basis of our own personal experiences of which we cannot be mistaken. I don’t think there’s a conflict there. Think about vision for example. We all see things pretty much the same way, but sometimes we misperceive. Our judgments about the looks of things are grounded in our subjective visual experiences, but we think that everyone perceives alike and therefore subjective experience is a guide to objective properties. The same line of thinking applies to taste properties. In other words, the folk epistemology of taste holds that overall one’s personal experiences are reliable but not infallible guides to the objective taste properties.

This ends my argument that objectivist thinking underlies most uses of judgments of taste. But, one may ask, if objectivism is the default approach to taste, then how come subjectivism is so dominant in philosophy and linguistics that the current semantic accounts focus almost exclusively on the transparently subjective uses like faultless disagreements? Maybe because subjectivism is a consequence of reflection and theorising. I’ve argued above that objectivism is a very natural position to have since judgments of taste are based on perception just like judgments about looks or sounds. It’s only when one begins to really think about taste, or perhaps witness too many unsolvable disagreements, or read about facts of flavour perception that one becomes a subjectivist.

I have described two uses of predicates of taste which display rather different behaviour. But I should add that we need not think that there are only purely objectivist and subjectivist uses. Some uses may be somewhere in between, and the similarity of tastes plays a crucial role here. As long as one remains within one’s taste peers (persons with a very similar taste) it is easy to make objectivist statements since the peers will tend to agree. But the more varied the group of discussants is regarding their tastes, the more it encourages the subjectivist stance simply because no agreement seems to be reachable. Furthermore, some predicates may standardly be used more subjectively than others just because there is less agreement about the phenomenon (fun might be the best example).

3.2 Subjectivist semantics cannot explain objectivist uses

Suppose objectivist uses are the default uses, as I have argued. As mentioned, the recent trend has been to emphasise the subjectivist uses and to give semantics which can explain them (as illustrated by relativists and contextualists alike).
Let us call the theories which posit judge dependence (either of content or of truth-conditions) “subjectivist semantics”, and the theories that don't posit it “objectivist semantics”.

Subjectivist semantics does not have an explanation for objectivist uses. Most importantly, subjectivist accounts cannot explain genuine disagreements of taste without positing something like normative or practical disagreement. Let me briefly explain why. Traditionally it is assumed that a competent language user has implicit knowledge of the truth-conditions of the sentences of the language. That knowledge manifests itself in speakers’ truth-value intuitions, for example when someone makes a judgment of taste. The assumption is often repeated in the literature on predicates of taste as well. For example, Stojanovic (2007) formulates it as follows:

Semantic Competence (SC): Speakers of English are semantically competent with predicates of taste: they master their meaning and truth conditions. (Stojanovic, 2007, 696).

In a typical disagreement about taste a hearer takes the speakers’ utterance that contains a taste predicate to be false. That shows that the taste predicate is not relativised to the speaker since were it the case, the hearer would very rarely if ever be in a position to take the speakers’ utterance to be false. To illustrate, if Peter is in the pub with Matti when he says that Krombacher is better than Becks, it is a perfectly normal reaction from Peter’s part to say (or to think) “That’s false”. If the proposition expressed by Matti was “Krombacher is better than Becks for Matti”, it would not be a normal reaction for Peter. That is enough according to the traditional methodology to strongly support the view that the truth-conditions do not contain the speaker.

It should be noted that a moderate relativist cannot both claim that speakers know the truth-conditions and that they genuinely disagree either. Even if the role of the judge in the semantics is formalised as a parameter of the Kaplanian circumstance of evaluation or a Lewisian index rather than an aspect of the content expressed, it is part of the truth-conditions. And hence, as long as we assume speakers to have implicit knowledge of truth-conditions, no subjectivist theory is able to explain the truth-value intuitions speakers have in disagreements.4

4 The situation is a bit more complex in a radical relativist picture, but they face a closely related problem. Suppose that speaker-hearers know that assessment-sensitivity is true of predicates of taste, as MacFarlane assumes (see e.g. MacFarlane, 2007). Then they also know that speakers make judgments that are true as assessed by themselves, the speakers. Thus, even if a judgment is false as assessed by a certain hearer, she has no reason to insist on what’s true to themselves rather than to the speaker. It’s thus mysterious what goes on in genuine disagreements of taste. MacFarlane (2007) suggests that the disagreement is not about truth, but an attempt to coordinate beliefs. For criticism, see Hirvonen (2014).
I have argued that what explains Peter’s truth-value intuition in the above example is his belief that Matti made a false empirical claim about the beers. His utterance would have been true if Krombacher was a better-tasting beer than Becks; there is no relativisation to the speaker or a group. And Peter thinks Matti got it wrong. But now, does such a theory get into trouble explaining the subjectivist uses? No. Whichever account one has for the objectivist uses, the subjectivist uses can always be explained by free enrichment (if one accepts the existence of free enrichment). In other words, one may hold that the subjective uses are intended as such, and consequently the hearer enriches a bare judgment of taste by mentally adding e.g. for the speaker, resulting in an enriched, explicitly subjective judgment of taste like “For Matti, Krombacher is better than Becks”.

But there is no way that one could use the pragmatic story to the other direction, i.e. to take the subjectivist uses as the default ones and explain the objectivist uses pragmatically. Since the subjectivist uses are the “sophisticated” ones, we may assume that the speaker really does have an intention to subjectivise her judgment. In contrast, if objectivist uses are the default uses, it doesn’t really make sense to suppose that they come with a specific intention to objectivise a subjectivist judgment.

### 3.3 The challenge to objectivist metaphysics of taste

Suppose we conclude that a simple theory which explains a wealth of data is indeed objectivist semantics as the basic account, on top of which one may add either ambiguity or a pragmatic story to account for the subjectivist uses. For example, Moltmann (2010) and Pearson (2013) have argued for semantics which can explain the objectivist uses. According to them, e.g. tasty means roughly, tasty to people in general. Where’s the problem? In the metaphysics. There is a consensus among many authors that there simply are no such taste properties that could make true the objectivist judgments. Moreover, that’s not an esoteric fact but something that is expected to be known by everyone.

The recent theories for predicates of taste are thus driven by the presuppositions that objectivist metaphysics is false and that everyone knows that it’s false. Moreover, since there clearly are subjectivist uses of predicates of taste, the atten-

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5 Predicates of taste are gradable adjectives so they do refer implicitly to something like a comparison class, and in the case of adjectives like good, one needs to select a dimension of goodness (gustatory, health-related, moral etc.) But neither of those amount to anything like relativisation to judges.

6 This is pretty much the position of Kent Bach (2009; 2011) about epistemic modals and predicates of taste.

7 See van Wijnbergen-Huitink (2016, 6-7) [this volume] for a summary of their views.
tion has been on them since they pose no metaphysical problems. For example, Lasersohn (2005) states:

The concern is that with sentences like these [i.e. judgments of personal taste], there really is no fact of the matter, so it is not clear what to say about whether sentences like these are true or false, or what their truth conditions are.” (Lasersohn, 2005, 644, emphasis mine)

But is it obvious that there is no fact of the matter? Suppose that Pearson’s analysis is correct. Then a judgment of personal taste, e.g. “Anchovies are delicious”, is true iff anchovies are delicious to people in general. There is a fact about that. It’s important to keep in mind that objectivism doesn’t require that the value properties are independent of people altogether.

The metaphysical worry is accompanied by an epistemological one: if objectivism turned out to be true, i.e. that there are facts about deliciousness, funniness or tastiness, then those facts are extremely hard or impossible to know, as illustrated by the persistence of disagreements. MacFarlane states the epistemological worry as follows:

Although I have known some objectivists about “tasty”, most people seem to recoil from the view. They do not think that there is a “fact of the matter” about whether a thing is tasty in the way that there is a fact of the matter about whether it is red or deciduous or acidic. What underlies this intuition, I suggest, is a realization that if “tasty”, like “poisonous”, expresses an objective property of things, then our ordinary methods for deciding which things to call “tasty” are radically defective. What methods are these? To a pretty good first approximation, we call a food “tasty” when we find its taste pleasing, and “not tasty” when we do not. (MacFarlane, 2014, 3)

Let me try to spell out MacFarlane’s argument a bit. If we suppose that objectivism was true, then we would have to conclude that our own tastes are a very fallible method to find out the objective taste properties of things. Why? Presumably because we disagree about taste so much, and if objectivism is true, in every disagreement of taste at most one can be correct. Perhaps the idea is that if we believed in objectivism, we would be much more careful in making our judgments because we know the large possibility of error. But we do make judgments of taste all the time on the basis of our own tastes, and hence we don’t believe in objectivism.

First, if that’s the argument, I think MacFarlane intellectualises people too much. Being often wrong would only deter the careful types from making assertions. And, there are normally no consequences of making a judgment of taste that turns out to be considered false so there’s no reason to be cautious. Secondly, there is no conflict between the idea that we make judgments on the basis of our own taste and that objectivism is true; all we need is the assumption that normally our senses correctly track the value properties of things. Since in a genuine
disagreement of taste it’s often very hard to conclude who if any is right, people won’t often be shown wrong.

Also, the objectivist will emphasise that we need to be careful in distinguishing between a justified and a true assertion. Since almost the only method we have to make judgments of taste is our own taste, we are justified in making them (unless we know our taste is idiosyncratic). In that sense even objectivist can admit that a judgment of taste is “faultless”. But it doesn’t follow that old any judgment of taste is true; that depends on whether the agent indeed tracks the value properties.

Thus, the objectivist will hold that one may be justified in taking something to be fun or delicious given one’s limited previous experiences, but whether something is fun or delicious is not just a matter of one’s current likes and dislikes. Experience can teach us, and just as we come to change many of our beliefs regarding the “objective matters of fact” (e.g. that the funny furniture in the living room is called a divan, or that whales aren’t fish), we come to change our beliefs about taste. Typically we look back at our earlier selves and feel relief that we have learnt so much about all the delicious foods there are, the different ways to have fun or the different ways people can be good-looking. In contrast, it is a challenge for the subjectivist to explain how learning is possible. If one is always right when making a taste judgment, only change can take place, not development.

Perhaps the most crucial difference between objectivism and subjectivism is hence epistemological. The subjectivist insists that we only know how things taste to us, and if we took our judgments of taste as objectivist judgments, we would have to acknowledge that we’re very often wrong. The objectivist in contrast advocates caution and emphasises the possibility of mistakes in taste judgments. Moreover, the objectivist is necessarily committed to its being somewhat difficult for us to find out facts about taste which is why there is all the disagreement. A comparison with objectivism about morality is useful: few people give up moral realism and endorse moral relativism even though it’s notoriously difficult to come to an agreement about what the right moral account is.

To conclude, the opponents of objectivism and objectivist semantics would have to do two things: First, to show that objectivism really is absolutely implausible, and second, that it’s implausibility is so evident that we cannot assume that people actually use predicates of taste to make objectivist judgments. But whether objectivism is true or not, what really matters for our purposes is that its not easy to see that it is false. If it isn’t, then I think there are strong grounds to argue that objectivism is the folk view that underlies many or most judgments of taste.
4 An error theory of objectivist taste discourse

4.1 Objectivist vs. subjectivist semantics

If the subjectivist uses are in fact the marginal ones, used systematically only by a minority of speakers, the semantic account should be primarily concerned with accounting for the objectivist uses. What we will consider next is the relation between the metaphysics and the semantics. Suppose that objectivist metaphysics is false and hence—as the subjectivist intuition states—there really is no fact of the matter that could make objectivist judgments of taste true. Nevertheless people make their judgments believing the objectivist theory to be true.

Which semantic theory would be correct in that situation; one that does justice to people’s beliefs, or one that does justice to how the reality is? If the former, then people’s positive judgments of taste would turn out to be false since they attribute objective value properties that don’t exist. The possibility isn’t much considered in the literature, and for example Lasersohn (2005) dismisses it as follows:

I assume that our primary goal is to give an analysis of sentences containing predicates of personal taste which assigns them a coherent semantics. [footnote 4: Therefore I do not consider “error” theories, which assign such sentences incoherent or automatically false readings.] (Lasersohn, 2005, 650)

However, I will argue that if the majority of the speakers use predicates of taste in the objectivist way, then there’s a very straightforward argument to show that the semantics must be objectivist as well.

As was mentioned, the recent theorists of the semantics of taste predicates are uniformly committed to the principle of semantic competence which holds that speakers have implicit knowledge of the truth-conditions of their judgments. If, as we are supposing, a majority of the speakers make objectivist judgments but we give predicates of taste subjectivist semantics for metaphysical reasons, then the majority of the speakers would not master their truth-conditions. Rather than competently evaluate judgments of taste relative to themselves or some other relevant individual, they would believe that their truth depends on the objective taste properties which actually don’t exist. That’s a possible view and we will consider it briefly below, but let me emphasise that it’s not consistent with endorsing the principle of semantic competence.

If one does endorse the principle of semantic competence, then the semantics has to match people’s implicit beliefs about the truth-conditions of their judg-

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8 See Zeman (2016) [this volume] for a discussion of giving up the principle of semantic competence and the consequent “semantic blindness”.
ments. And if those beliefs are objectivist, the semantics will be objectivist. But since the world fails to make the objectivist judgments non-vacuously true, we end up with an error theory about taste discourse. But should that by itself repudiate objectivist semantics? There is a strong prima facie reason why not: by moving from objectivist semantics of taste to the error theory of taste we have effectively moved from doing semantics to doing metaphysics. But one way to see the job of semantics is that it is concerned with giving truth-conditions, not truth values. It is highly controversial to argue that our current semantics reflects how the world actually is rather than how we take it to be. Let us look at the possible objections to the error theory in more detail.

Some might resist an error theory because they believe in an inherent connection between semantics and metaphysics, and that language guides us in our metaphysics. It’s not a perfectly reliable guide as shown by names for non-existents and empty predicates. But when it comes to a non-theoretical predicate such as good, there has to be some property which makes those predications true. However, we should be aware of the dangers of tying semantics and metaphysics too closely together. We clearly don’t want to rule out empirical errors that speakers make since otherwise we would be committed to statements about e.g. astrology and different religions being true (and hence also to true contradictions, e.g. “There is just one God and there are many Gods”). But we happily accept an error theory about astrology talk. So is there some principled difference between astrology statements and objectivist statements about taste that would make us accept an error theory of the former but not of the latter?

The claim that the error theorists makes is that many people are committed to a flawed empirical theory, objectivism about taste, and hence in both the astrology and objectivist taste cases the mistake is empirical, not conceptual or linguistic. The speakers are assuming things to be a certain way but they are not, and that discrepancy between their beliefs and the truth shows itself in e.g. the trusted horoscope giving false predictions, or it turning out that despite of massive training in wine tasting people’s value judgments of them still differ.

The person inclining towards taste subjectivism might again insist on a difference between the epistemological status of those statements. False beliefs about religions or astrology are due to the person having accepted a false theory, but taste properties are directly perceived or experienced and hence we cannot be mistaken about them. But that’s clearly not true about religious experience. The person who thinks he feels the presence of a demon has an equally direct expe-

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9 There are many details about which sentences end up being false, depending on one’s view about predicates with empty extensions. The standard view holds that if nothing is P then sentences of the form $(\forall x)(Px \rightarrow Qx)$ (every P is Q) are vacuously true, as well as their negations $(\forall x)(Px \rightarrow \neg Qx)$ (no P is Q).
Doing without judge dependence

Doing without judge dependence experience as the person who tastes jellied eel and thinks it’s objectively disgusting. Both are wrong in what they think the experience is about (whereas talk about mistakes regarding the experience itself perhaps doesn’t make sense).

The error theorist can thus agree that there is nothing wrong with people’s perceptions of various objects of taste. But where they do go wrong is in conceptualising those experiences incorrectly (e.g. as an experience of something objectively disgusting) which results in being liable to draw false inferences about it. For example, the believer in demons may infer that since there’s a demon, Satan exists, and the objectivist about disgusting may infer that jellied eel is disgusting to any person with a good taste.

The mistake of the taste objectivist is probably a less serious mistake of the two cases above. But other than that there seems to be no principled reason to say that the person who thinks he perceives a demon is making an empirical mistake whereas the person who thinks he perceives objective disgustingness is not. As long as we admit that a whole area of discourse may be built on mistaken empirical claims we have no reason to rule out that being the case regarding objectivist taste discourses.

Another argument against error theories can be traced to interpretationist views on the theory of meaning, and more specifically to the emphasis on the Principle of Charity (see e.g. Davidson, 2001). The principle holds that when interpreting an agent, one ought to maximise the amount of true beliefs she has (that is, maximise beliefs that are true by the interpreter’s lights). Clearly the principle isn’t supposed to apply to whatever, and for example there is no way that astrological statements could be made to come out true while also retaining the normal semantic values of the expressions in them in other contexts. But in the case of taste we can do better since as we’ve seen, the taste objectivist isn’t committing very serious errors. So given our enlightened subjectivist theoretical point of view, we’ll interpret the objectivist taste utterances as subjectivist utterances. Hence we can end up with a contextualist or moderate relativist theory according to which the truth-conditions do refer to the speaker after all.

But, the strategy has its limits. We’ll still be left with false beliefs and statements: those that a hearer such as Peter has regarding what Matti said, and worse, those that speakers like Matti have regarding their own utterances. Peter thought that Matti was making an objectivist statement, and so did Matti. So if we insist on being charitable, we get the problem known from epistemic contextualism of our semantics being committed to attributing speakers with “semantic blindness” (Schiffer, 1996; Hawthorne, 2004). In other words, Charity recommends us to relativise taste predicates to speakers since that makes speakers’ utterances true. But the speakers don’t know that that is what they said because they believe they made a speaker-independent, objectivist judgment.

Since radical interpretation and Charity applies to both beliefs and language, speakers who use taste predicates objectively are also mistaken about their beliefs
about their own beliefs. For example, Matti actually only believes that Krombacher is better than Becks to him, not that it’s better for everyone (which is what he believes he believes). That manifests itself in mistaken inferences, e.g. when Matti thinks that if Krombacher is better than Becks, then any person with a good taste prefers Krombacher. (Here his thought content in fact refers to himself, and it doesn’t follow that if Krombacher is better than Becks to Matti, any person with a good taste prefers Krombacher.) And his false beliefs about other people’s utterances manifest in his behaviour, e.g. when Matti disagrees with a person who states that Becks is better than Krombacher.

To summarise, the friend of the Principle of Charity should be aware of the radical consequences the principle has. First, it is possibly committed to speakers having false second-order beliefs (beliefs about their own beliefs). Second, it commits speakers to making false inferences and to misinterpret others’ utterances. Third, it denies that speakers have implicit knowledge of truth-conditions which is why they can make mistaken truth-value evaluations.

To conclude this section, we’ve seen that appeals to the connection between language and metaphysics is no reason to resist an error theory of taste, and reliance on the Principle of Charity has radical consequences both in terms of the kind of error it attributes (not empirical but linguistic), and because it rejects the methodology according to which the truth-value intuitions of the speakers should be respected. Therefore, even if objectivism about taste is false, if we want to correctly account for what people believe (including beliefs about what they say), we should go for the semantics that corresponds to their views on taste.

In contrast, subjectivist semantics severs the link between what people say and what they believe they say and is hence committed to denying that speakers have knowledge of truth-conditions of judgments of taste. Let me next argue that from the point of view of successful communication there is not much difference whether objectivism about taste turns out to be true or false, and hence an error theory is not problematic in that respect either.

4.2 False but nearly true utterances

Let us first consider the well-known and commonplace cases of utterances with questionable truth-values. There are no zombies, yet I can successfully convey something quite specific by remarking to a friend who has had a rough night that he looks like a zombie. Did I say something true? There are no zombies so literally speaking it’s not possible to look like a zombie. Same question can be posed about our talk of Pegasus, Donald Duck, demons, telepathy and so on. So the first point to consider is whether making a false or truth-valueless claim has consequences for communication.
My friend understood what I meant, and all of us would understand judgments made about the above-mentioned non-existents. When people didn’t yet know that witches don’t exist, they still had perfectly interpretable discourses about witches. Most of their utterances about witches were of course false (e.g. “The witch who lives next door has left a dead marmot on my doorstep”, “I must have been cursed by a witch” etc.), but they managed to communicate exactly what they wanted: beliefs about witches, those dangerous beings with supernatural powers.

What is crucial to see is that for the purposes of communication what matters is primarily that the content is understood, not that it is true (even if true judgments are way better from the point of view of sharing information). If you and I are believers in witches and you tell me you have been cursed, I become alarmed and maybe recommend you to contact another witch who will perform a counter-curse. No communication breakdown takes place because we share our strange set of false beliefs. And that is the situation regarding objectivism about taste (assuming that it’s false): taste objectivists are embarked on their common search for the unattainable goal, the objective truth about taste. Communication only fails if the speakers disagree about what exists, which is why a discussion about taste between an objectivist and subjectivist is bound to turn philosophical.

However, in the case of taste what makes the situation happier than that of the witch-believers is that the utterances of taste objectivists are not far from the truth. First, people are after all similar in their tastes so often an objectivist taste statement will be true of a large number of people, even if it fails as an objectivist statement that is about everyone (or about people generally). Second, people like to hang out with others with very similar tastes. In such a group the objectivist statement will at the best case hold of everyone so it’s almost as good as true. Likewise, if two taste peers disagree, they may very well come to an agreement because their arguments really make sense given their shared background tastes (such arguments would of course leave cold a person with a very different taste).

Objectivism is thus close enough to being true without it causing any real disruptions in our ordinary lives. And arguably, a very large number of our ordinary statements are not quite true anyway. For example, is France hexagonal and Italy boot-shaped? Was it really 3pm or four past three when you answered the question about what time it was? Do you really know that you’ll stay home tonight (after all, your home might have burnt down)? Exaggeration and sloppi-

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10 Gilbert Harman’s views about morality are close to the view suggested here about taste (Harman & Thomson, 1996; Harman, 2000). He thinks our moral statements are false since they presuppose the truth of moral objectivism, and hence we should revise our moral talk and accept that at best we have moral statements that are true relative to communities. Revision might be easier to achieve in the taste case due to the various existing ways of relativising one’s taste statements (e.g. by saying “to me this is fun”).
ness are totally commonplace but both contribute to falsehoods: our utterances are very often false but nearly true. Does it matter whether that is due to a slight empirical error, exaggeration or sloppiness? I can’t see why it would as long as the falsehood is close enough to truth.

5 Conclusions

What I’ve argued in this paper is that most speakers are committed to objectivism about taste and that is the best explanation of “genuine” disagreements about taste and other ways in which we talk about taste. Subjectivist uses exist as well, but when the speaker is making a subjectivist statement, she will not engage in disagreements or serious conversations about the topic. Hence, no use of taste predicates is at once both subjective and such that it can be disagreed with (except in the rare cases where the speaker is mistaken about her own taste).

I then addressed the subjectivist challenge to objectivism about taste, arguing that their case is rather weak against objectivism, and especially against the idea that objectivism is the folk view (even if it is actually false). Finally, I argued that even if objectivism about taste turns out to be false there are strong reasons in favour of objectivist semantics for taste predicates. If one is convinced that semantics should be done based on what people take the truth-conditions to be, then an error theory seems inevitable. Otherwise semantics ends up severing the link between linguistic meaning and beliefs, and has to posit “semantic blindness”.

Finally, I have argued that an error theory of taste has hardly any consequences for successful communication, and no consequences for communication between people who believe in objectivism. And given that the error in objectivism about taste is rather harmless, the objectivist judgments about taste are close enough to being true so that no harm is done by such talk.

Acknowledgement: I want to thank two anonymous reviewers, Julien Dutant, Michael G.F. Martin and the audience at the Subjective Meaning Workshop for helpful comments and discussions.

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