

# Talking about Taste Pragmatically

Tamina Stephenson  
Yale University (Linguistics / Philosophy)  
[tamina.stephenson@yale.edu](mailto:tamina.stephenson@yale.edu)

## 1 Introduction & Goals

### 1.1 Taste predicates

Typical cases: *tasty*, *fun*

Analytical issue: When something is described as tasty / fun, whose experience of taste / fun is being reported?

Answer: turns out to be complicated, and has been used to argue for a non-standard notion of truth and/or propositions

### 1.2 Starting point

Stojanovic (2007):

- From a purely semantic/formal perspective, certain relativist and non-relativist accounts of taste predicates (*fun*, *tasty*, etc.) can be shown to be essentially notational variants.
- brings up the possibility that syntax and/or pragmatics may distinguish between them.

My goal: Follow up on this suggestion regarding the pragmatics

### 1.3 Agreement & Disagreement

In the process, we'll be trying to shed light on various issues related to agreement & disagreement, including:

- What propositions are (assuming these are the things that people agree or disagree on [philosophical / ontological question])
- How propositions are introduced, challenged, and agreed/disagreed on in conversation [empirical / linguistic / pragmatic question]

### 1.4 Outline

- **Sec. 2 Core Types of Taste Constructions:** summarize what I take to be the key different ways that taste predicates are used (at least in English)
- **Sec. 3 Core Types of Semantic Machinery:** introduce some of the general approaches that can be taken towards various taste constructions

- **Sec. 4 Pragmatic Interpretation:** Try to develop pragmatic systems for the various semantic approaches

## 2 Core Types of Taste Constructions

(Lasersohn, 2005; Stephenson, 2007, others)

### 2.1 Typical “personal taste” use

1 Whee! This roller coaster is fun!

2 Yuck! This cake is disgusting.

3 Mmm! The cake is tasty.

4 Mary: This roller coaster is fun!  
John: No it isn't, it's boring!

Dialogues like (4) often described as “faultless disagreement”

More neutrally: let's call them taste standoffs

(avoids prejudging issues about disagreement AND puts focus on this as an empirical linguistic/pragmatic phenomenon)

Contrast (4) with (5)-(6):

5 Mary: This roller coaster is fun for me.  
John: # No it isn't, it's boring for me!

6 Mary: I'm a doctor.  
John: # No I'm not!

### 2.2 Contextually salient experiencer

7 [Context: John is describing to Mary how their two-year-old son Bill enjoyed a recent trip to the amusement park.]

Mary: How did Bill like the rides?

John: Well, the merry-go-round was fun, but the water slide was a little too scary.

(Lasersohn, 2005, p. 672)

8 [Context: Sam is watching his cat eat a new brand of cat food, and is happy to see that she is gobbling it up enthusiastically. Sam says:]

Sam: Oh good! The new cat food is tasty.

### 2.3 Overt experiencer PP – after predicate

9 The merry-go-round was fun for Bill.

10 The cake tastes good to Sam.

11 The cat food tastes good to the cat.

Note: Idiosyncrasy as to which preposition is used (in English) (Stephenson, 2007, no. 85):

<u>12</u>	fun for Sue	* fun to Sue
	boring for Sue	?? boring to Sue
	tedious for Sue	?? boring to Sue
	pleasurable for Sue	?? pleasurable to Sue
	?? pleasing for Sue	pleasing to Sue
	?? tasty for Sue	?? tasty to Sue
	?? delicious for Sue	* delicious to Sue
	* tastes good for Sue	tastes good to Sue
	?? tasteless for Sue	?/OK tasteless to Sue
	?? funny for Sue	funny to Sue
	exciting for Sue	exciting to Sue

### 2.4 Overt experiencer PP – pre-sentential

13 To Bill, the merry-go-round is fun.

14 To Sam, the cake is tasty.

[Note: there seems to be less idiosyncrasy when the PP is pre-sentential]

### 2.5 Believe-type attitude report – linked to attitude holder

15 Bill thought the water slide would be fun (but it ended up being too scary for him).

16 Sam believes that licorice is tasty (but he's not sure, because he's never tasted it).

### 2.6 Believe-type attitude report – linked to salient third person

17 [Context: Situation from (7), where John had taken his young son Bill to the amusement park.]  
John believes that riding the merry-go-round was fun.

(Lasersohn, 2005, p. 678)

- 18 Mary: How's that new brand of cat food you bought?  
Sam: I think it's tasty, because the cat has eaten a lot of it.

(Stephenson, 2007, no. 34, citing Kai von Fintel, p.c.)

## 2.7 Consider-type attitude report – only linked interpretation allowed

19 Bill considers the merry-go-round fun.

20 Sam finds the cake tasty.

## 3 Core Types of Semantic Machinery

I'm trying to look at these independently of what constructions they're actually applied to, so some abstraction will be required

### 3.1 Judge Parameter

[Note: Some (though not all) of the other bits of machinery will depend on this being in place]

Baseline system: meanings are evaluated at a world and context of utterance

Modified system: meanings evaluated at world, judge, and context of utterance

For now: let's not put any importance on whether the judge is "part of the index" or "part of the context," since these notions will themselves be up for redefining.

[More generally: meanings are generated at a series of parameters: world, (time), speaker, addressee, time of utterance, ...; add to this an individual "judge"]

Basic idea:

21  $\llbracket \text{the roller coaster is fun} \rrbracket^{w,j} = 1$  iff the roller coaster is fun for  $j$  in  $w$

### Applications of the basic judge-parameter machinery:

#### ◆ Pure judge-parameter view (Laserson, 2005, 2007, 2009)

Additional machinery needed: speakers/hearers can take "autocentric" or "exocentric" perspective / stance

With autocentric stance:

Typical “personal taste” use (2.1)

*Believe*-type attitude report – linked to attitude holder (2.5)

*Consider*-type attitude report (2.7)

With exocentric stance:

Contextually salient experiencer (2.2)

*Believe*-type attitude report – linked to salient experiencer (2.6)

### ◆ **Mixed View (Stephenson, 2007)**

Additional machinery: Uses judge-referring pronoun  $PRO_j$

$\llbracket PRO_j \rrbracket^j = j$

Uses judge-parameter approach [indirectly via  $PRO_j$ ] for:

Typical “personal taste” use (2.1)

*Believe*-type attitude report – linked to attitude holder (2.5)

*Consider*-type attitude report (2.7)

### ◆ **Purely contextual account<sup>1</sup>**

The “judge” parameter is no different from any other pronominal referent

## 3.2 Experiencer argument

Taste predicates (or certain uses of taste predicates) can be treated as two-place predicates:

22  $\llbracket \text{tasty} \rrbracket^w(y) = \{x: x \text{ tastes good to } y \text{ in } w\}$

23  $\llbracket \text{tasty} \rrbracket^w = [\lambda y . [\lambda x . x \text{ tastes good to } y \text{ in } w]]$

The experiencer (or “judge”) is simply one argument of a two-place function

### ◆ **Pure judge-parameter view (Laserson):**

(Does not use this approach)

### ◆ **Mixed View (Stephenson):**

[Recall: also has special judge pronoun,  $PRO_j$ ]

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not to be confused with a view along the lines of Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson’s (2005) approach to epistemic modals, which uses both a “context of utterance” parameter and a “context of assessment” parameter. I will consider the difference between a dual-context approach and Laserson’s in Section 4.

With silent individual-denoting pronoun:

Contextually salient experiencer (2.2)

*Believe*-type attitude report – linked to salient experiencer (2.6)

With overt PP (treating it as denoting individual):

Overt experiencer PP – after predicate (2.3)<sup>2</sup>

### ◆ Purely Contextual Approach

[by definition] essentially forced to use this for all cases

## 3.3 Judge-manipulating operations

Lexical items or silent operators can manipulate the judge parameter. For example:

24     $\llbracket \text{Op-y tasty} \rrbracket^w = \{x: x \text{ tastes good to } y \text{ in } w\}$

25     $\llbracket \text{Op-y P} \rrbracket^j = \llbracket P \rrbracket^y$   
or         $= F(\llbracket P \rrbracket^y)$   
or at least  $\rightarrow F(\llbracket P \rrbracket^y)$                     [entailment]

### ◆ Pure judge-parameter view (Lasersohn):

All overt PP experiencers (2.3 and 2.4)

*Believe*-type attitudes (2.5 and 2.6) must designate the “stance” (we can look at this as a judge-manipulating item)

[Earlier versions of Lasersohn (2005) did this very directly]

### ◆ Mixed view

Overt PPs – pre-sentential (2.4)

All attitudes manipulate the judge parameter (2.5, 2.6, 2.7); (but this has no effect in the case where the judge is linked to a salient experiencer)

---

2 I don't believe I ever took a stand on how to treat the pre-sentential case (2.4) in my written work, but my inclination is to treat these as containing a judge-shifting operator that behaves much like a *consider*-type attitude predicate. This inclination is supported by the apparent lack of idiosyncrasy in which prepositions are allowed (in particular, *to*-phrases seem to be generally possible with all taste predicates), as well as by the position of the PP, which makes it likely that it applies semantically at the sentence-level.

◆ **Purely Contextual Approach**

[presumably couldn't use judge-operators since the judge is like any other pronoun]

**3.4 Summary of Semantic Machinery**

◆ **Typical “personal taste” use (2.1)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	x		
<b>Mixed view</b>	x	(x)	
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

◆ **Contextually salient experiencer (2.2)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	x		
<b>Mixed view</b>		x	
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

◆ **Overt experiencer PP – after predicate (2.3)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	(x)		x
<b>Mixed view</b>		x	
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

◆ **Overt experiencer PP – pre-sentential (2.4)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	(x)		x
<b>Mixed view</b>	(x)		x
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

◆ **Believe-type attitude report – linked to attitude holder (2.5)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	x		x
<b>Mixed view</b>	x	(x)	x
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

◆ **Believe-type attitude report – linked to salient third person (2.6)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	x		x
<b>Mixed view</b>		x	(x)
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

◆ **Consider-type attitude report – only linked interpretation allowed (2.7)**

	<b>Judge dependence</b>	<b>Experiencer argument</b>	<b>Judge shifting</b>
<b>Pure judge view</b>	x		
<b>Mixed view</b>	x	(x)	x
<b>Pure contextual view</b>		x	

## 4 Pragmatic Interpretation

[I tend to think of the pragmatics as an “interpretation” of the semantics, analogous to the way that a semantic/model-theoretic interpretation relates to a syntactic system]

### 4.1 Baseline pragmatic system

Starting point: Stalnaker-type pragmatic system, on standard view where propositions = sets of worlds (Stalnaker, 1978, 2002)

- ◆ Proposition = set of worlds
- ◆ Context = context of utterance (world of utterance, speaker, addressee, ...)
- ◆ Common Ground = set of propositions
- ◆ Context Set = intersection of propositions in common ground (= set of worlds)
- ◆ Initial context set: the set of worlds compatible with what is taken for granted by the participants in the conversation

- ◆ Assertion = proposal to add proposition to common ground; can be challenged [if accepted, proposal is added to common ground; restricts context set]
- ◆ Norm of assertion: To assert p in context c, the speaker must believe p in c [There are other possibilities; this is what I work from]

[Note: here read in c as ‘in the world of c’]

## 4.2 Generalizing the Stalnakerian system

Some assumptions to get us started:

### ◆ Take as given:

- Proposition = set of indices [where ‘index’ must be defined]
- Context = all other parameters of interpretation that are independent of the index
- Common ground = a set of propositions
- Context Set = intersection of the propositions in the common ground (thus same type as a proposition)
- Assertion (that p) = proposal to add proposition p (\*) to the common ground; open to challenge
- Challenge = objection to the proposal made by an assertion (intended result: to prevent adding the asserted proposition to the common ground)
- Question = invitation to assert one of a set of propositions [norm to include: willing to accept answer]

### ◆ Define / change as needed:

- Proposition = set of \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e., plug in what an “index” is)
- Initial context set = set of indices such that \_\_\_\_\_ [should involve what is taken for granted by the participants in the conversation]
- Context = parameters \_\_\_\_\_ (independent of index)
- Additional kinds of speech acts? (or sub-types)
- Norms for the various speech acts (in a given context c)

### ◆ Example (simple worlds-based system)

- Proposition = set of worlds
- Initial context set = intersection of propositions taken for granted by the participants in the conversation
- Context of utterance = world of utterance, speaker, addressee  
[Note: “world of utterance” is independent of the “world” in the index]
- Norm for asserting p (in context c): Speaker must believe p in (the world of) c
- Norm for challenging p (in context c): It must NOT be the case that the challenger believes p in c [putting aside issues of degrees of belief<sup>3</sup>]

### 4.3 Option for “mixed” system

(Stephenson, 2007; similar ideas appear in Egan, 2007)

- Proposition = set of centered worlds (world-individual pairs)
- Initial context set = set of pairs  $\langle w, X \rangle$  such that it's compatible with what is taken for granted by the participants in the conversation that they are group X in  $w^4$
- Context of utterance = speaker, addressee
- Norm for asserting p (in c): Speaker must believe p in the world of c  
  
where x believes p in w iff  $\forall \langle w', y \rangle$  : it's compatible with what x believes in p for it to be the case that x is y in  $w'$  . p is true evaluated at  $\langle w', y \rangle$
- Norm for challenging p: It must NOT be the case that the challenger believes p in the world of c (with belief as defined above)

#### What this means:

- If the cake tastes good to Sam (for example), then this is sufficient for him to assert *The cake is tasty*; but by the same token if the cake does not taste good to Mary, this is sufficient for her to challenge the assertion.

---

3 Presumably we'll actually want to say something more like this: the challenger must give non-zero credence to not-p. I think I can safely put aside issues of gradient belief as orthogonal to an account of taste predicates.  
4 Egan (2007) suggests that the initial context set is, roughly, the set of pairs  $\langle w, x \rangle$  such that x is one of the participants in the conversation and it's compatible what is taken for granted by the participants in the conversation that they are in w. Torre (2009) discusses some reasons to prefer the formulation I am using.

[Note: I assume that if Sam says “the cake is tasty” and Mary responds, “No, it isn’t!” Mary’s utterance constitutes two speech acts: a challenge to Sam’s assertion and an assertion that the cake is not tasty]

- Non-judge-dependent propositions work the same way as in the standard system. (This includes taste predicates with overt PP arguments.)
- In general: part of the purpose of a conversation is for the participants to try to align their objective and subjective attitudes (as far as possible).

#### 4.4 An option with “stances”

(Intended to go with something like Lasersohn’s 2009 system)

Think of “stances” as defining sub-types of assertions: you can assert p from an autocentric, exocentric, or acentric stance:

- Proposition = set of worlds
- Context = world of utterance, speaker, addressee, judge
- Initial context set = set of worlds compatible with what is taken for granted by the participants in the conversation (as in basic system)
- Norm for asserting p with an autocentric stance in context c: the speaker must self-attribute the property of being an x in a world w such that p is true in w in the context  $c'_x$ , where  $c'_x$  = the same as c except that the judge is set to x
- Norm for asserting p with an exocentric stance reflecting the perspective of individual y in context c: the speaker must attribute to y the property of being an x such that p is true in w in the context  $c'_x$  (as defined above)
- Norm for asserting p with an acentric stance in context c: the speaker must attribute to every (relevant?) z<sup>5</sup> the property of being an x such that p is true in w in the context  $c'_x$  (as defined above)
- Norm for challenging an assertion of p from stance S in context c: The challenger must take the same stance as the person who made the previous assertion, AND the challenger must NOT meet the norm for asserting p from stance S.

Note about belief and stances: The norms can probably be redefined in terms of belief (as with the mixed system), if belief takes three arguments: an individual (believer), stance, and proposition.

---

5 Presumably this quantification will be restricted somehow. If we restrict it to the participants in the conversation, we ought to get a similar result to what I’ve proposed in previous work.

### **What this means:**

- In the case of asserting / challenging taste sentences with an autocentric stance, things will work in the same way as in the system for the mixed system (4.3)
- In general: we could say that part of the purpose of conversation is – for each stance – to align attitudes

## **4.5 Option for dual-context view**

The idea (based on the approach of MacFarlane (2006) and Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson (2005) towards epistemic modals).

*tasty* = ‘tasty to the speaker’ (when uttered)  
= ‘tasty to the assessor’ (when evaluated for truth)

- Proposition = set of worlds
- Context of utterance = world, speaker, addressee [“judge” = speaker]
- Context of assessment = world, assessor [“judge” = assessor]
- Initial context set = set of worlds compatible with what is taken for granted by the participants in the conversation (as in basic system)
- Norm for asserting p in context of utterance c: the speaker must evaluate p as true in the context of assessment c' such that:
  - The world of c' is the world of c
  - The assessor of c' is the speaker of c
- Norm for challenging an assertion of p (made in context of utterance c) in context of assessment c': the assessor must evaluate p as false in context of assessment c'

## **4.6 Options for purely contextual view?**

The idea: taste predicates just take a (demonstrative-like) argument.

What do we need to do to make pragmatic sense of a contextual view?

- ◆ One option: Give special pragmatic status to the argument of a taste predicate [For example, posit special speech acts and/or norms for when these arguments are there]

BUT this will probably end up looking very much like one of the systems above (getting a judge parameter in by the back door)

- ◆ This leaves us then with a standard Stalnakerian-type system

Remaining questions, then:

- Can we explain phenomena of taste with the standard pragmatic machinery?
- Do we want to?

## 4.7 Different kinds of taste standoffs

Main case(s) at issue: “taste standoffs”

26 Mary: This roller coaster is fun!  
John: No it isn't, it's boring! [=4]

Stojanovic points out: it might really depend on what happens next.

(Note: the explanations I discuss below are inspired by Stojanovic's discussion, but I've gone my own direction here.)

Imagine various continuations of the dialogue:

27 Mary: This roller coaster is fun!  
John: No it isn't, it's boring!  
Mary: Well, it's fun for me.  
John: Fine, it's fun for you. I'm just saying it's boring for me.

Possible explanation (contextualist): Mary really is saying, “it's fun for me” and John is saying “it's fun for me”; John misunderstands Mary's opening assertion as saying something at least as strong as “it's fun for both of us” and objects. Then they clarify their positions.

Another possible explanation (contextualist): Mary is saying, “it's fun for both of us” (or something stronger); John challenges this assertion – rightly and successfully – and forces Mary to back off from the stronger claim and make the weaker claim explicit.

A relativist explanation: They're asserting contradictory propositions. Being somewhat rational people, they recognize that neither assertion can succeed and settle for making weaker/related claims.

28 Mary: This roller coaster is fun!  
John: No it isn't, it's boring!  
Mary: Yes it IS fun!  
John: It is not!  
Mary: It is too!  
John: Is not!  
Mary: Is too!  
Susan: Guys! Will you shut up about the goddam roller coaster?!



31 Mary: That roller coaster only had two loops.  
John: No it didn't, it had three!  
Mary: It only had two!  
John: It had three!  
Mary: Two!  
John: Three!  
Mary: Two!  
Susan: Guys, would you shut up about the goddam roller coaster loops! [cf. (28)]

32 Mary: That roller coaster only had two loops.  
John: No it didn't, it had three.  
Mary: You're an idiot! It totally only had two.  
John: Fine, whatever, it had two loops. Just don't join any trivia contests any time soon. [cf. (29)]

Another way to look at the difference between contextualist/relativist approaches to taste standoffs:

Contextualist approach: taste standoffs are pragmatically special (extra explanations go in the pragmatics); semantics of taste predicates is no different from other expressions.

Relativist approach: taste standoffs are pragmatically the same as other disagreements/arguments; but extra work is done in the semantics.

(This, of course, may be a matter of taste...)

## References

Egan, Andy (2007). Epistemic Modals, Relativism and Assertion. *Philosophical Studies* 133: 1-22.

Egan, Andy, John Hawthorne, and Brian Weatherson (2005). Epistemic modals in context. In G. Preyer & G. Peter (Eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, meaning, and truth* (pp. 131–170). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lasersohn, Peter (2005). Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28: 643-686.

Lasersohn, Peter (2007). Relative Truth, Speaker Commitment, and Control of Implicit Arguments. In *Proceedings of the 37th Meeting of the North East Linguistic Society*.

Lasersohn, Peter (2009). Relative Truth, Speaker Commitment, and Control of Implicit Arguments. *Synthese* 166: 359-374.

MacFarlane, John (2006). Epistemic modals are assessment-sensitive. Ms., UC Berkeley. URL: <http://sophos.berkeley.edu/macfarlane/epistmod.pdf>.

Stalnaker, Robert (1978). Assertion. Reprinted in P. Portner and B. H. Partee (eds.), 2002, *Formal Semantics: The Essential Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 174–161.

Stalnaker, Robert (2002). Common Ground. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25: 701–721.

Stephenson, Tamina (2007). Judge Dependence, Epistemic Modals, and Predicates of Personal Taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30: 487-525.

Stojanovic, Isidora (2007). Talking About Taste: Disagreement, Implicit Arguments, and Relative Truth. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30: 691-706.

Torre, Stephan (2009). Centered Assertion. *Philosophical Studies* (Online First). Published online March 31, 2009.