The semantic and the pragmatic dimension of statements about matters of taste

It has been claimed by various authors that taste predicates like *tasty, fun*, and *beautiful* give rise to so-called faultless disagreement participants in a dialog asserting contradictory propositions without one of them being wrong. The truth-values of propositions about matters of taste are said to depend on a judge given as either an implicit experiencer argument or an additional index parameter (e.g., Lasersohn 2005, Stephenson 2007), or on first person genericity, the speaker identifying himself with each individual in the domain (Moltmann 2010). None of these accounts, however, is suited to explain the puzzle of the competent speaker: A competent speaker of a language will know if a word involves an implicit argument or judge parameter. So why should he bother to express a denial in the first place? For example, if Ben would interpret Ann's assertion in (1a) as saying that licorice is tasty to her, or by her judgment, or in her community, why should he deny her assertion by asserting that licorice is not tasty to himself? This puzzle casts doubt on any account involving a judge parameter, and in fact casts doubt on the very idea of faultless disagreement – why not accept the denial expressed by Ben in (1b) as genuine disagreement?

(1)   a.   Ann: Lakritze ist lecker.   'Licorice is tasty.'
          b.   Ben: Nein! Lakritze schmeckt eklig.   'No, it isn't, it tastes terrible.'

This paper will follow Stojanovic (2007) in considering the idea of faultless disagreement as a misconception arising from an implicit switch to a bird's eye view which is not available for discourse participants. It will be argued that accounts accepting faultless disagreement conflate the semantic and the pragmatic dimension obscuring more general underlying mechanisms. The proposal in this paper will distinguish semantically between evaluative propositions (about matters of taste) and descriptive propositions (about matters of fact) where the latter express claims about the way the world is and the former express claims about the interpretation of predicates. Secondly, on the pragmatic dimension subjective judgments will be distinguished from general ones where the latter license plain denial while the former are immunized against denial by, e.g., embedding under the attitude verb *finden* ('consider'/'think') – note that Ben's denial in (2b) is not acceptable.

(2)   a.   Ann: Ich finde Lakritze lecker.   'I think licorice is tasty.'
          b.   Ben: # Nein! Lakritze ist eklig.   'No! Licorice tastes terrible.'

Concerning semantics, it is well-known that even dimensional adjectives like *groß* ('big'/'large') can be used evaluatively and, in this use, can be embedded under *finden* (cf. Saebo 2009). It is also well-known that dimensional adjectives allow for a descriptive and for a meta-linguistic reading of the proposition they occur in (Barker 2002). On a descriptive reading, (3) presupposes a cut-off point of what counts as large in the context and asserts that the actual size of the apartment is above the cut-off point. On a meta-linguistic reading, (3) presupposes the actual size of the apartment and asserts that the cut-off point is below the size of the apartment. The meta-linguistic reading coincides with the evaluative reading of (3), and it is in fact the only one licensed under *finden* – the sentence in (4) cannot mean that the speaker considers the apartment to have a size which is above a presupposed cut-off point.

(3)   Die Wohnung ist groß.   'The apartment is large.'
(4)   Ich finde die Wohnung groß.   'I think the apartment is large.'

In the case of the dimensional adjective *groß* there is a clear-cut distinction between the descriptive and the meta-linguistic reading – either the cut-off point or the actual degree is presupposed in the context. This distinction is possible because degrees of size are absolute values – size relates to a proportional scale. Degrees of beauty are not absolute – beauty relates to a merely ordinal scale (cf. Sassoon 2011). So statements about beauty can only be given in a relative fashion – you can say that the beauty of something exceeds the cut-off point or that the cut-off point is below the beauty of this thing. But neither of these degrees can be given independent of the other, they must be given as an ordered pair. Thus, in the case of taste

predicates the cut-off point is necessarily part of the assertion which is the reason why evaluative propositions always have a meta-linguistic reading. The semantics of evaluative propositions will be spelt out in Krifka's enriched notion of a common ground consisting of a pair of worlds and interpretations such that updating evaluative propositions will reduce interpretations instead of worlds (cf. Krifka 2012).

Concerning pragmatics, the difference between general judgments and subjective ones will be spelt out in the discourse framework in Farkas & Bruce (2009) which includes, in addition to the common ground, a set of individual discourse commitments for each discourse participant. While the common ground contains the propositions shared by all participants, individual discourse commitments are not shared, but are still public in the sense that the other participants noticed them. The distinction between common ground and individual discourse commitments is perfectly suited to capture the difference between general and subjective judgments: The former are intended to enter the common ground and if controversial, give rise to genuine disagreement. The latter need not enter the common ground (that is, they do not enter the 'table'.) If controversial subjective judgments will stay mere individual commitments, but if commonly agreed upon they will finally turn into common ground. Presenting a proposal as a subjective judgment thus provides a by-pass strategy to hopefully achieve agreement without risking disagreement.

To conclude, there is a semantic and a pragmatic dimension involved in the interpretation of evaluativity. Semantically, evaluative propositions differ from descriptive propositions in reducing possible interpretations instead of reducing possible worlds.[1] Pragmatically, subjective judgments differ from general judgment in being first-person relativized (e.g. by embedding under *finden*) and thus immune against denial. In judge-based accounts the semantic and the pragmatic dimension is conflated since evaluative propositions are treated as being implicitly first-person relativized – (1a) is always interpreted as (2a). This analysis cannot account for their different behavior in discourse and it obscures an important generalization: Neither of the two dimensions is confined to matters of taste. There are propositions requiring a meta-linguistic interpretation beyond matters of taste, for example, definitional sentences, cf. Krifka (2012). And there are first-person relativized judgments including descriptive propositions, for example when embedded under *meiner Meinung nach / in my opinion* (cf. also Stephenson's (2007) analysis of epistemic *might*). Thus statements about matters of taste make use of two different, more general mechanisms of natural language interpretation, meta-linguistic interpretation and first-person relativization).

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[1] Egan (2010) considers an account of taste predicates such that propositions about matters of taste are interpreted meta-linguistically. He finally rejects this option for reasons of pragmatics: Although partners in a dispute may conclude that they will not come to a common judgment, their conflicting assertions remain in force, which cannot be accounted for in a standard model of common ground. However, it can be accounted for in a model including individual discourse commitments, as in Farkas & Bruce (2010).