



Affecting Meaning. Subjectivity and Evaluativity in Gradable Adjectives
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This dissertation investigates the meaning of gradable adjectives like 'tasty' and 'long', and of sentences we can produce with these terms. In English you can say, for instance, "This cake is tasty" or "This is a long book". We can enter into disputes which are hard to settle. It appears that no one has the upper hand because 'tasty' and 'long' are, in some sense, subjective. The purpose of our research is to get a precise idea of the sense in which we can say that the meaning of gradable adjectives like these is subjective.

Formal semanticists and philosophers of language have recently paid much attention to the subjectivity of adjectives like 'tasty' because the intuitive analysis of a taste dispute challenges the traditional truth-conditional approach to meaning. We argue that to get a grip on how subjectivity enters into the meaning of gradable adjectives, one has to adopt a more encompassing view of meaning than the truth-conditional one. We need a broader view of intentionality. Adjectives like 'tasty' and 'long' are subjective in the sense that they signal how people can act, and how they expect others should act. The subjectivity of taste and of other experiences we communicate in language follows from the fact that experience is given to embodied agents. We sketch a notion of embodied intentionality ensuring that it encompasses, but also outweighs, truth-conditional content. The aboutness of evaluative judgements like "This cake is tasty" or "This is a long book" involves a mesh of information and affect. We appeal to the notion of affordance in order to specify how expected patterns of behaviour can be constituents of meaning. Affordances are action possibilities offered by the environment to agents with abilities which are, by and large, shared with others. In our account, evaluative judgements communicate our responsiveness to relevant affordances.

This sounds like an odd idea of linguistic meaning, certainly if one's aims and interests are of a formal nature. Can we do mathematics on this sort of meaning? We sketch an update system, a simplified model showing the mechanics of embodied intentionality in how agents interpret sentences like the ones above, and some other ones as well.

Unsurprisingly, chapter 1 is devoted to the general introduction and preliminaries, so our overview of the dissertation starts with chapter 2.

If you look at adjectives as a kind of word, you can single out gradable ones because they come with a comparative form (you can say "This cake is tastier than that pie", or "This book is longer than that

dictionary"), you can modify them with an adverb like 'very' (think of "This cake is very tasty", or "That is a very long book"), and you can easily find an antonym for them (for instance "This cake is disgusting", or "That is a very short book"). You can also find those features for 'full' vs. 'empty' or 'open' vs. closed', but 'tasty' and 'long' are evaluative: You can exclaim "What a long book!" or "What a tasty cake!". It would be rather strange to hear "What a closed door!". So consider gradable adjectives which are evaluative. Now zoom in again to see if they are all subjective in the sense suggested above. Are they subjective in the same way? In chapter 2, we start with a description of the general features of gradable adjectives, we locate adjectives like 'tasty' and 'long' as next-of-kin in the family, and we present a few linguistic traits to suggest that not all of them are subjective in the same way. As suggested above, some adjectives lead to disputes which are hard to settle. One can also think of the following fact: we can say "I find this cake tasty" or "Bea finds this book long". But if our discussion is about whether Joyce's "Ulysses" is longer than Baricco's book "Silk", the dispute is rather easily settled. And if you think of the two following claims, you will probably see that that the first one is odd but the second one is not: "This is tasty but I don't find it tasty" and "This is heavy but I don't find it heavy". So the initial question, "in what sense are 'tasty' and 'long' subjective?", now has to consider that these two are not subjective in exactly the same way.

In chapter 3, we give a concise review of two debates in semantics that cross our research question. On the one hand, people have analysed and formalised gradability in different ways. On the other hand, in recent years the debate on the semantics of adjectives like 'tasty' has become a battlefield for different perspectives on linguistic meaning. The positions in these two orthogonal debates adopt a truth-conditional view on meaning, except for the expressivist accounts, which actually have proposed to complement truth-conditional semantics with a non-cognitive layer of meaning to handle subjectivity. One can assess these positions considering their specific merits and threats, but in view of this common foundational root one can also identify two common denominators. They all conceive of subjectivity as a form of judge-dependence, and they end up objectivising subjectivity.

The strategy deployed by most existing theories to account for subjectivity in the meaning of 'tasty' is to add in the semantic picture a judge (often but not always the speaker) deciding the truth, content, evidence, or attitude that taste judgements convey. When subjectivity is conceived as some form of judge-dependence, the condition of being a subject is reduced to the confines of an individual. But if we conceptualise the rule for correct application of a term as something that is up to single agents, we are left with no public and intersubjective criterion according to which we can distinguish applications from misapplications.

Mainstream approaches to gradability which also handle subjectivity as judge-dependence view the subject as a factor deciding for instance which standard of comparison prevails in a context, or which objects one should compare to say whether a given cake is tasty. But in this case, an agent's experience with an object becomes irrelevant because what decides whether, e.g., this cake is tasty is given by how the cake we are tasting relates with other similar objects. The expressivist might seem to escape this second threat but by dissociating prescriptive meaning from descriptive

meaning, they are forced to explain how these two sorts of meaning interact. The moral of this critical revision is that, to make some progress, we need to develop a non-objectivising, non-individualistic notion of subjectivity.

The first step in our positive story starts in chapter 4 with a short detour to the epistemology of taste. In a taste dispute Alf says "This cake is tasty" and Bea disagrees saying "No, it's not" shows that the subjectivity of 'tasty' does not turn the speaker's judgement into a claim that just concerns himself. The addressee is concerned, this is why she protests. Kant idea of reflective judgement, with some stretching, can bridge taste judgements, other evaluative judgements, and regular non-evaluative ones. "This cake is tasty", "This is a long book", and "This cake has nuts", are actually not that different. In all cases we take it that others should agree with us, they all make normative claims, but not all of the same nature, which is explained by how reflective judgement is involved in each case. Normative claims can sometimes be backed up with rational justifications, but not always. Other claims are similar to taste judgements in this respect, as for instance avowals like "I have a headache" or certainties like Moore's notorious claim "This is a hand". Wittgenstein's late epistemology and philosophy of psychology sheds light on why these claims are so hard to deny. Avowals and certainties put forward the embodied and embedded condition of the subject. Subjectivity develops in the interspace of subjects and constitutively depends on what happens outside rather than inside a subject, on how she acts.

The second step is to put the common denominators found in chapter 3 in a wider perspective. In chapter 5, we show how intentionality can be conceived in broader terms than the notion of underlying the idea of meaning that comes with truth-conditional semantics. For the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, intentionality is inextricably related to our embodiment. Operative intentionality, the kind of directedness we recognise in purposive movement, is basic for all cognition. The subjectivity in the meaning of 'tasty' or 'long' is explained by the fact that the cognitive agent is an embodied agent who signals her affective responsiveness. On this basis, and through the notion of affordance, as the relevant action possibilities that an aspect of the environment offers to a skilled agent, we can specify the meaning of a claim like "This cake is tasty" through the action possibilities it signals. We take this broadening of the view of linguistic meaning as the main contribution of this research.

But the initial problem was an issue for semanticists and philosophers of language with formal inclinations. So if this contribution can be of interest to them, it can only do so if we show that such conception can lead to a viable formal treatment of gradable adjectives and sentences we can produce with them. In chapter 6, we sketch a model which takes the shape of an update system, and which exploits the notion of expectation to cash out formally the way in which action possibilities enter into a model of the meaning of 'tasty' and 'long'. The system provides a proof of concept letting us see that our reasoning in chapter 5 leads to a systematic treatment of the meaning of evaluative judgements. A broader conception of linguistic meaning can be accommodated within the existing semantic frameworks.

We conclude in chapter 7 with the usual wrapping up. The subjectivity of adjectives like 'tasty' and 'long' is not at all mysterious when looked through the lens of embodiment. Natural language arises in a human setting. Human beings are fleshed minds, minded bodies. This is often not visible when one is doing semantics. The case of gradable adjectives like 'tasty' and how it relates to more ordinary ones like 'long' puts the issue on the table. It prompts us to rethink linguistic meaning, the object of study of semantics. We add at the end a more general note about how in our research, to tackle a problem for quite analytically minded philosophers, we adopt a rather continental approach. This work shows that phenomenology and semantics can cooperate. If one is concerned with linguistic meaning, paying attention from time to time to its conditions of possibility seems like a reasonable move.