

Problems and Arguments in Relativist Semantics

Dan Zeman

University of Vienna

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Plan of the course

~~LECTURE 1: Relativism and its variants~~

LECTURE 2: Main arguments in the literature, part 1: Intuition-based arguments

LECTURE 3: Main arguments in the literature, part 2: Syntactic arguments

LECTURE 4: Relativism and the attitudes

LECTURE 5: Perspectival plurality

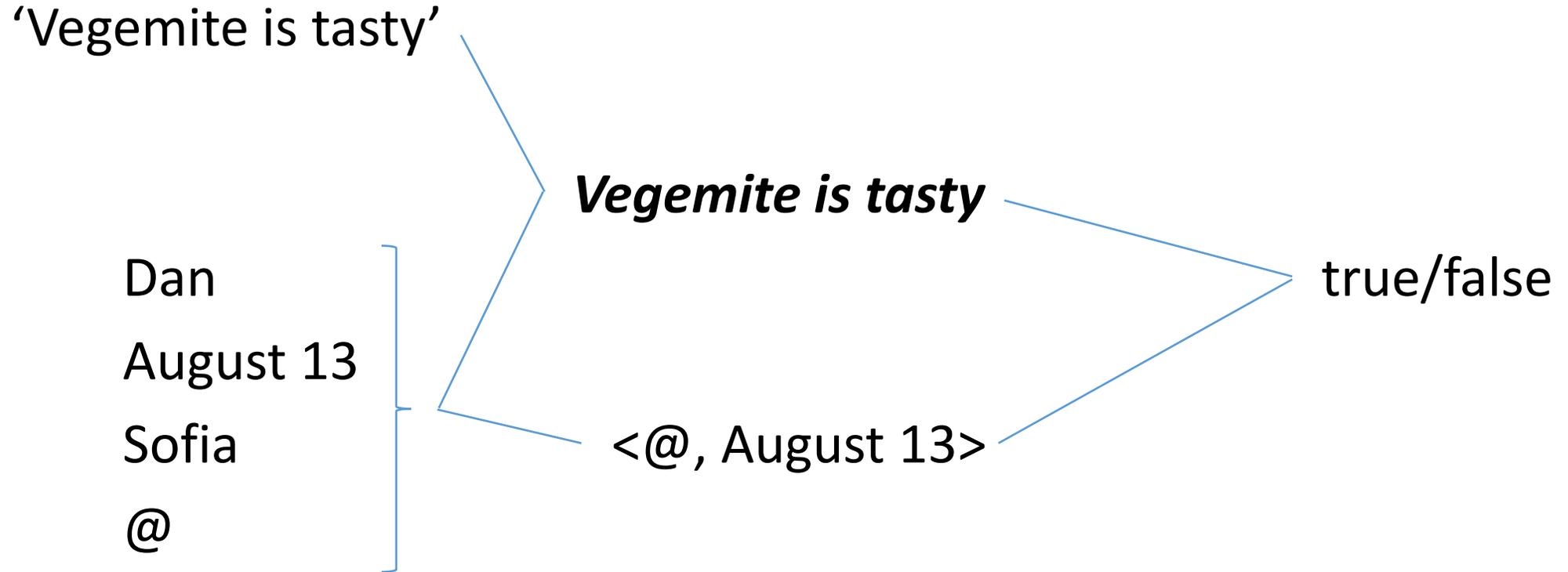
LECTURE 2

Main arguments in the literature, part 1: Intuition-based arguments

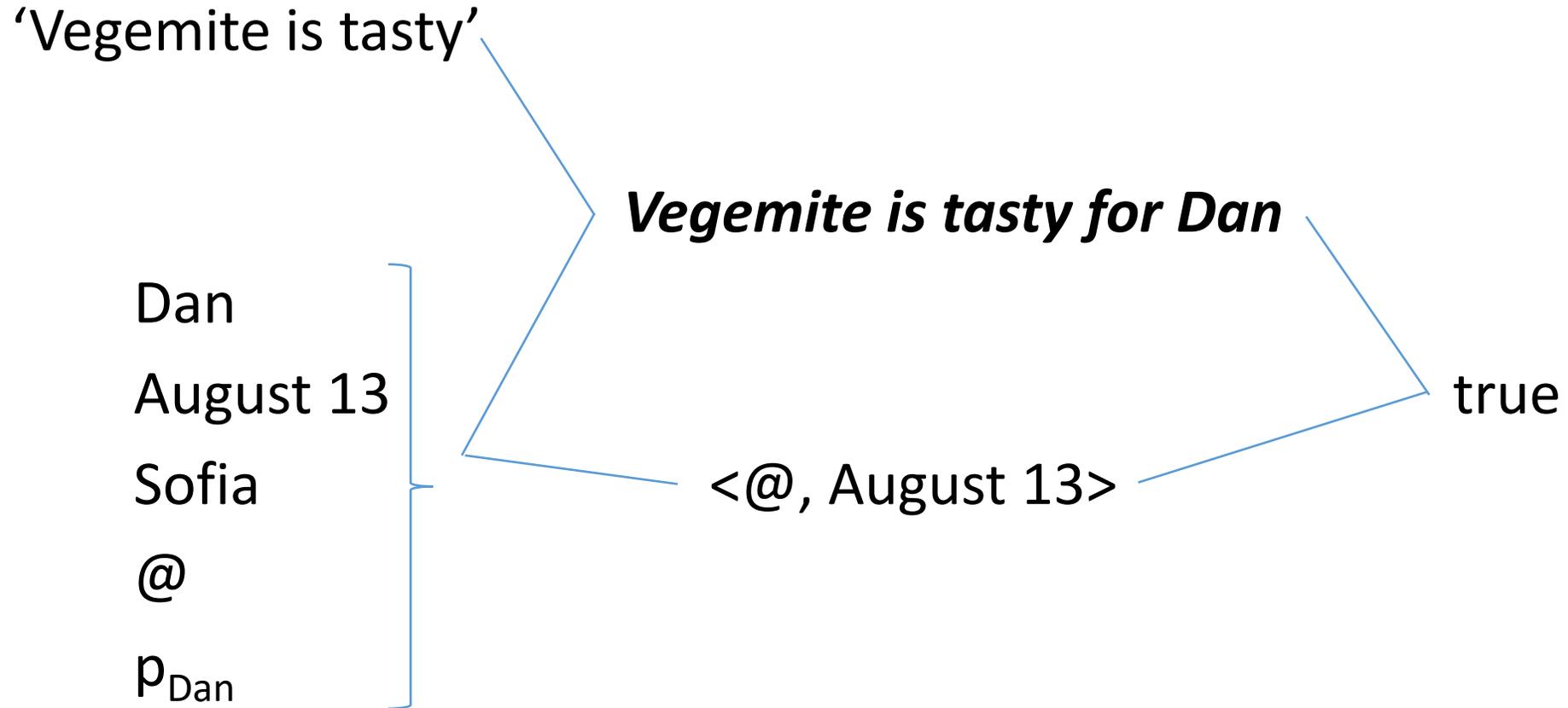
Logical space

	Is there a place for perspectives?	Are perspectives part of content or circumstance?	Is utterance truth relative or absolute?
Absolutism	No	–	Absolute
Contextualism	Yes	Content	Absolute
Moderate Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Absolute
Radical Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Relative

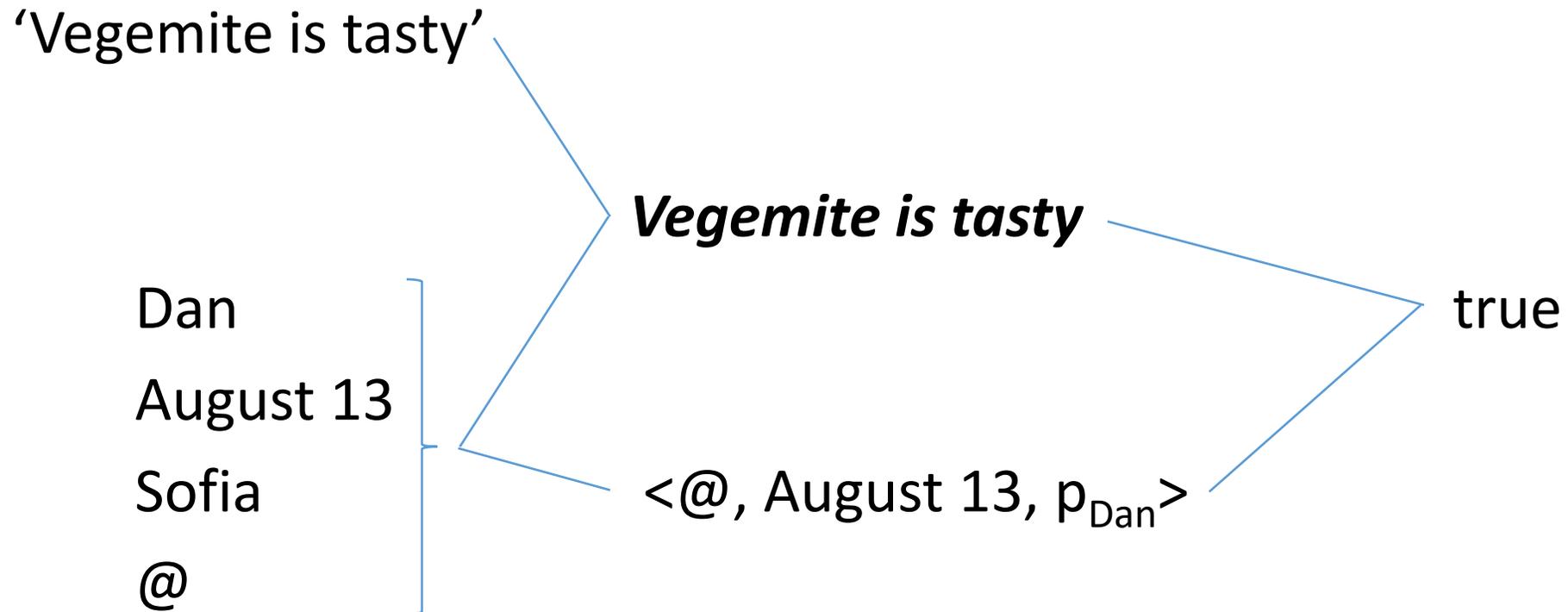
Absolutism about PTs



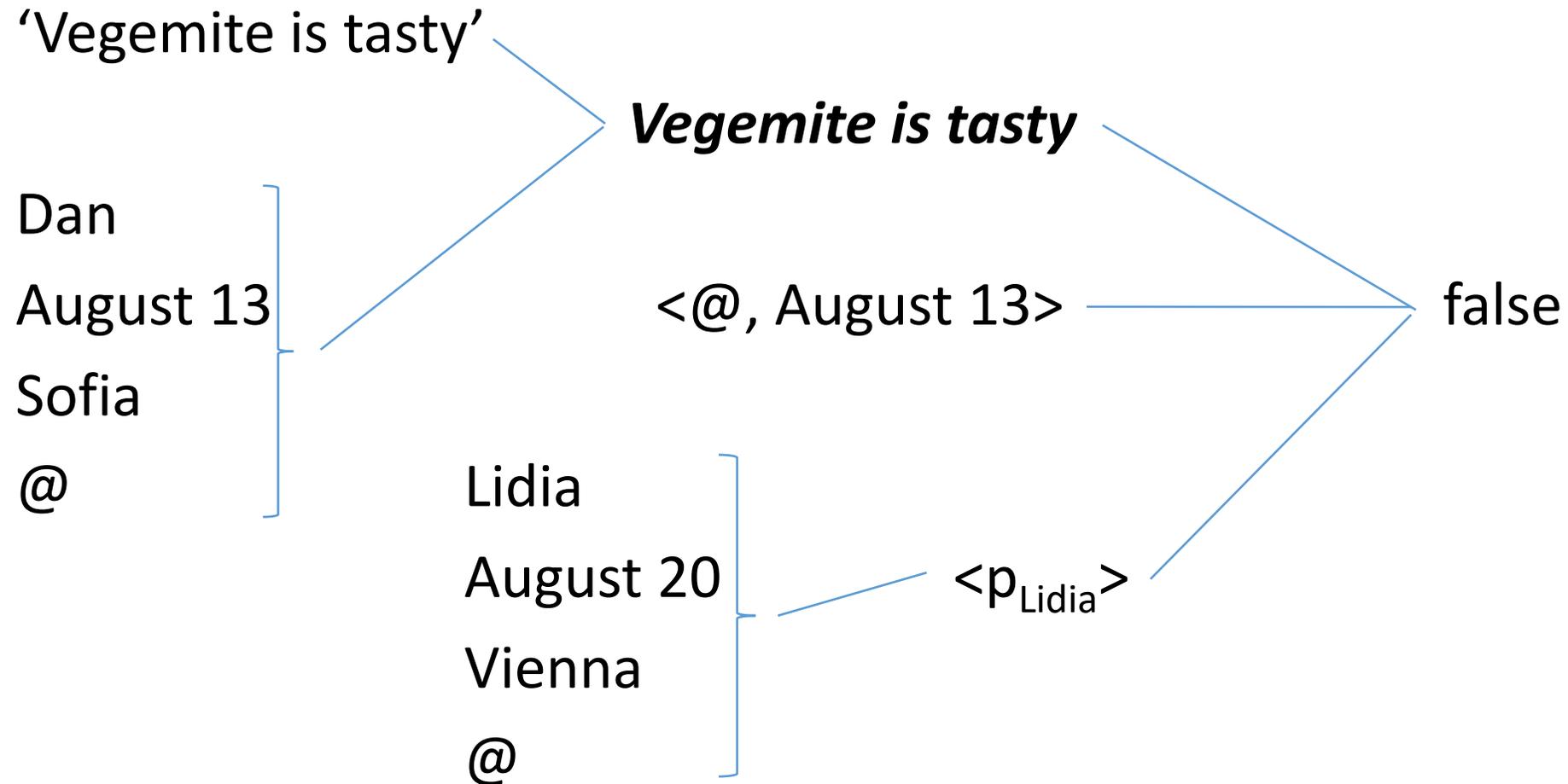
Contextualism about PTs



Moderate Relativism about PTs



Radical Relativism about PTs



Plan for Lecture 2

1. The argument from faultless disagreement
 - a) The argument
 - b) Contextualist (and expressivist) answers
 - c) Absolutist answers
2. The argument from retraction and its challenges
3. The argument from eavesdropping cases and further questions

1. The argument from faultless disagreement
 - a) The argument

Faultless disagreement, intuitively

- By far, the most discussed argument in this debate is the challenge from faultless disagreement.

- Working example:

DIALOGUE

A: Vegemite is tasty.

B: No, it's not. It's horrible. (...)

- **Claim:** exchanges like DIALOGUE elicit the intuition i) that A and B disagree; ii) neither is at fault (in the relevant sense).

Definition

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (a content of judgment) p such that

- (a) A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that not- p
- (b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault).

(Kölbel (2004: 53-54))

Characteristics

- 3 things to note:
 - the notion of disagreement used in the challenge is **doxastic** (couched in terms of belief/judgment and propositions);
 - the contents believed/judged by the two thinkers are **incompatible** (p and not-p), which makes them disagree.
 - the notion of mistake or fault is **not epistemic** (i.e., it is assumed that the interlocutors' cognitive apparatus functions properly, they both know what they are talking about etc.). Rather, being at fault amounts to **saying something false**.

Disagreement as state vs. activity

- Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009) distinguish between two types of disagreement:
 - Disagreement as a **state**: involves two people who need not interact.
 - Disagreement as **activity**: necessarily involves people interacting.
- Here I focus on *disagreement as activity* (given the exchanges), but this is consistent with disagreement in state being the more fundamental notion (I'm neutral on this issue).

Problems for Contextualism

- Faultless disagreement is problematic for Contextualism because it cannot account for **disagreement** (at least if conceived as doxastic).
- The contents expressed by A and B in DIALOGUE are not incompatible:

DIALOGUE (C)

A: ***Vegemite is tasty for A.***

B: ***Vegemite is not tasty for B,***

although neither A nor B are at fault (they both say something true).

Problems for Absolutism

- Faultless disagreement is problematic for Absolutism because it cannot account for **faultlessness** (at least if conceived as non-epistemic).
- The Absolutist gets disagreement because the contents expressed by A and B in DIALOGUE are incompatible:

DIALOGUE (A)

A: ***Vegemite is tasty.***

B: ***Vegemite is not tasty,***

but either A or B is at fault (one of them says something false).

Relativism and faultless disagreement

- Arguably, faultless disagreement is not problematic for relativism, because it accounts both for **disagreement** and **faultlessness**.
- The relativist gets disagreement because the contents expressed by A and B in DIALOGUE are incompatible:
DIALOGUE (MR + RR)
A: ***Vegemite is tasty.***
B: ***Vegemite is not tasty.***
- She also gets faultlessness because neither A nor B are at fault (each says something true relative to the relevant perspective – i.e., theirs).

1. The argument from faultless disagreement
 - b) Contextualist answers

Contextualist answers

- Recent contextualists answers to the challenge from disagreement can be arranged in 3 groups:
 - Denying the intuition of disagreement in central cases.
 - Construing disagreement as pragmatic rather than semantic.
 - Taking disagreement to be conative rather than cognitive (i.e., “clash of attitudes”).

Rejecting the intuition in core cases

- Many contextualists (Stojanovic (2007), Glanzberg (2007), Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009), Moltmann (2010), Schaffer (2011) etc.) have complained that the exchanges put forward by relativists are too indeterminate to elicit intuitions of disagreement. Schaffer: “the case for relativism relies on a misrepresentative sample of underdeveloped cases” (2011: 211).
- Once such dialogues are properly completed, it can be shown that Contextualism can account for them (even assuming disagreement is doxastic).

Rejecting the intuition in core cases

- For example, disagreement arises when both interlocutors use ‘tasty’ exocentrically (from another person’s perspective):

DIALOGUE-EXO

A (from C’s perspective): Vegemite is tasty.

B (from C’s perspective): No, it’s not tasty.

- In contrast, there is no disagreement when both interlocutors use ‘tasty’ egocentrically (from one’s own perspective):

DIALOGUE-EGO

A (from A’s perspective): Vegemite is tasty.

B (from B’s perspective): No, it’s not tasty.

Arguments against the possibility of disagreement in core cases

- [Sheer appeal to intuitions: Glanzberg (2007).]
- Stojanovic (2007), Moltmann (2010): What do the interlocutors disagree **about** in DIALOGUE-EGO?
- Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009): no intuition of disagreement in
 Son (about to go to camp): The summer is going to be fun.
 Father (having to work to pay for camp): No, it's not gonna be.
- Stojanovic (2007): the argument from retreat. People are quick to qualify their utterances: 'All I mean is that it is tasty *to me*.' etc.

Disagreement as pragmatic

- Disagreement has been connected to a range of pragmatic phenomena:
 - **Presupposition:** 'A: John has stopped smoking./B: No, he never smoked.'
 - **Implicature:** 'A: Todd has four kids./B: No, he has five.'
 - **Metalinguistic negotiation:** 'A: Feynman is tall./B: No, he's not tall.'
 - **Discourse moves:** 'A: Everyone can vote./B: No, women still cannot vote.'
- General strategy: take the disagreement in exchanges like DIALOGUE to involve such phenomena.

“Presuppositions of commonality”

- López de Sa (2007, 2008, 2015) has claimed that when speakers use predicates of taste a presupposition of commonality is in place – that is, it is accepted in the context of the exchange that the interlocutors are **similar in taste** (they have the same standard, they occupy the same perspective etc.).
- The presupposition being in place makes disagreement **possible**.
- The disagreement is whether vegemite is tasty *according to their common taste*.

“Presuppositions of commonality”

- DIALOGUE is rendered as
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A (PC): **A and B are similar in taste.**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B (PC): **A and B are similar in taste.**
- Question: what happens when the presupposition is *not* in place?
López de Sa (2007, 2008): nothing gets expressed, due to presupposition failure (compare: ‘The king of France is bald’). López de Sa (2015): the remaining disagreement is conative.

“Presuppositions of superiority”

- Zakkou (2015) also takes disagreement to arise at the level of presuppositions, but they are not of commonality, but of superiority – that is, each interlocutor presupposes that their taste (their standard, their perspective etc.) is superior.
- DIALOGUE is rendered as
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A (PC): **A’s standards are superior to B’s.**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B (PC): **B’s standards are superior to A’s.**

Implicatures

- Finlay (2005) takes disagreement to arise at the level of implicatures. Sentences with predicates of taste generate **normative** implicatures.
- DIALOGUE is rendered as
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A (IC): **Everyone should like vegemite.**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B (IC): **No one should like vegemite.**
- Question: What is the range of the normative implicature?

Metalinguistic negotiation

- A number of contextualist authors (Sundell (2011), Plunkett & Sundell (2013), Ludlow (2014), Plunkett (2015) etc.) propose to interpret disagreement as metalinguistic – that is, either about what the meaning of a word **is** in a context or about what the meaning of a work **should be** in a context.
- DIALOGUE is rendered as
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A (MC): **The meaning of ‘tasty’ is/should be m_1 .**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B (MC): **The meaning of ‘tasty’ is/should be m_2 .**

Discourse moves

- Silk (2016) has proposed that we interpret disagreement as clash of different discourse moves (that is, as different proposals to fill in the conversational scoreboard).
- The type of discourse move Silk appeals to has to do with the values we assign to contextual elements – here, the perspective.
- DIALOGUE is rendered as
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A (DM): **The value for p is A's perspective.**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B (DM): **The value for p is B's perspective.**

Disagreement as conative

- An old and famous distinction taken from expressivist literature between “disagreement in belief” and “disagreement in attitude” (Stevenson (1944)).
- Predicates of taste (and perspectival expressions generally) are seen as expressing speakers’ (conative) attitudes: *preferences, wishes, mere evaluations* etc. Disagreement involving predicates of taste is seen as clash of such attitudes (Huvenes (2012, 2014), Buekens (2011), Gutzmann (2016), Marques (2016) etc.)
- [Compatible with both Pure and Hybrid Expressivism.]

Disagreement as conative

- Most authors don't take a stance on what the conflicting conative attitudes are. Here I will use PRO (a generic positive conative attitude) and CON (a generic negative conative attitude).
- DIALOGUE is rendered as
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A: **PRO (vegemite)**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B: **CON (vegemite)**
- Alternative: PRO and CON towards the perspectives themselves.

1. The argument from faultless disagreement
 - c) Absolutist answers

Absolutist answers

- Most absolutists insist that understanding faultlessness as **epistemic** is a legitimate way of responding to the challenge: Schafer (2011), Hills (2013), Baker & Robson (2015) etc. [Problem: no distinction between objective and subjective areas of discourse.]
- Unorthodox absolutist views: Wyatt (2017).

Wyatt's absolutist solution

- Wyatt (2017): absolutist solution to the problem.
- Three core claims:
 - Distinction between **semantic content** (what is needed for compositionality) and **assertoric/doxastic** content (what people assert/believe);
 - **Rule** of assertion/belief: a subject *S* rationally ought to assert/believe the content <vegemite's flavor is pleasing to *S*'s tastes> if *S* knows that *S* has experienced licorice's flavor first-hand and that it is pleasing to *S*'s tastes.
 - Disagreement is not doxastic, but **conative** (i.e., in *preferences*).

Wyatt's absolutist solution

- The third claim gets disagreement, the second gets faultlessness, and the first gets absolutism.
- DIALOGUE is rendered under Wyatt's view as follows:
 - A (SC): Vegemite is tasty.
 - A (A/DC): Vegemite is tasty for A.
 - A: **PREFER (vegemite)**
 - B (SC): Vegemite is not tasty.
 - B (A/DC): Vegemite is not tasty for B.
 - B: **DISPREFER (vegemite)**

2. The argument from retraction and its challenges

Retraction

- **Retraction** is a speech act whereby one “takes back” a previous claim by means of certain locutions (i.e., ‘I was wrong’), following a change in perspective (“disagreeing with one’s former self”).
- Working example:
 - RETRACTION
 - A (as a child): Vegemite is tasty.
 - A (as an adult): I was wrong. Vegemite is not tasty.
- **Claim:** A’s utterance of ‘I was wrong’ is felicitous; her second sentence is (intuitively) true.

Problems for Contextualism

- Retraction is problematic for Contextualism:

RETRACTION (C)

A (as a child): ***Vegemite is tasty for A-as-a-child.***

A (as an adult): ***A-as-a-child was wrong. Vegemite is not tasty for A-as-an-adult.***

- If Contextualism is true, 'I was wrong' is infelicitous. Also, the content of A's utterance as a child is compatible with the content of her utterance as an adult (hence, no disagreement).

Problems for Moderate Relativism

- Retraction is problematic for Moderate Relativism, too:

RETRACTION (MR)

A (as a child): ***Vegemite is tasty.***

A (as an adult): ***A-as-a-child was wrong. Vegemite is not tasty.***

- If Moderate Relativism is true, 'I was wrong' is infelicitous. Also, the second sentence uttered by A as an adult is not true – since the relevant perspective is that of A as a child.
- No problem for Radical Relativism!

Conceptual challenges to retraction

- Marques (2016) argues against MacFarlane's claim that there is a retraction norm that speakers ordinarily follow (together with others).
- MacFarlane's (2014) formulation of the norm:

Retraction Rule. An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of p made at c_1 if p is not true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 .
- If that norm is in place, why would we bother assert anything, since we know that there are/will be contexts in which what we say is/is no longer true? Intuitively, the context that matters in evaluating an original assertion is that of utterance.

Empirical challenges to retraction

- Several empirical tests have been devised recently: Knobe & Yalcin (2016), Kneer (ms), Zakkou & Dinges (ms), Marques (ms).
- **Findings:** people very rarely retract!
- Desideratum: to isolate the conditions under which retraction is both *possible* and *reasonable*.

Cross-domain variation

- Both with disagreement and retraction, there seems to be variation across domains in the **fault** we attribute to those we disagree with (including our previous selves).
- In the taste domain, disagreement and retraction (usually) seem to involve low levels of fault. In contrast, in the moral domain they (usually) involve high levels of fault.
- How is this to be explained?

Possible explanations

- This shows that predicates of taste and moral terms should be given different semantic treatments (Stojanovic (2016)): predicates of taste are relational, moral/aesthetic terms are not.
- The assertoric/doxastic norms associated with the two types of expressions vary (Ferarri (2016)): in the moral case they involve attributing fault, in the taste case they don't.
- The different levels of fault come from evaluating the standards/perspectives themselves differently (Ferarri & Zeman (2015)): we evaluate the speakers possessing certain standards/adopting certain perspectives.

3. The argument from eavesdropping cases and further questions

Eavesdropping cases

- **Eavesdropping cases** register one's reaction to overhearing a claim made from a different perspective.

- Working example:

EAVESDROPPING

A: Vegemite is tasty.

B (to himself): That's not true. Vegemite is not tasty.

- **Claim:** B's utterance of 'That's not true' is felicitous; his second sentence (intuitively) true.

Problems for Contextualism and Moderate Relativism

- Eavesdropper cases pose the same type of problems for Contextualism and Moderate Relativism as retraction does (assuming that 'That' in B's first sentence targets the content of A's utterance).
- Similarly, no problem for the Radical Relativism!

Further questions, 1

- Does relativism really capture disagreement? If everyone asserts/believes relative to their own perspective, then they don't in fact disagree (more like they talk past each other).
- Possible answer: there is no single notion of disagreement, but many – each suited for different areas of discourse (MacFarlane (2014)).

Further questions, 2

- Are asserters/believers aware of the relativity to perspectives? If not, then they are “semantically blind”. If yes, the disagreement vanishes.
- Possible answer: engaged vs. disengaged stances (Lasersohn (2005); Lynch (1998)).

Further questions, 3

- What is the point of disagreement if relativism is true?
- Possible answer: it fosters convergence (MacFarlane (2007)).

Summary and conclusion

- Faultless disagreement, retraction and eavesdropping scenarios have been used by the Radical Relativist against Absolutism, Contextualism and Moderate Relativism.
- There is a significant number of answers to the challenge from faultless disagreement, both from Contextualism and Absolutism. In addition, it is not completely clear that Relativism (in either form) can explain disagreement properly. Additional claims might be needed.
- The arguments from retraction and eavesdropping scenarios have been weakened both by conceptual and empirical challenges.
- A comprehensive relativist reply to these is currently missing.

Thank you!

dan.zeman@univie.ac.at

danczeman@gmail.com