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Disagreements about Taste as Metalinguistic Negotiations — Some Critical Remarks*

The problem which has been at the heart of the debate between contextualists and relativists at least since 2004 (cf. Kölbel 2004) centres on the analysis of predicates used to express one's subjective judgement. It is a large group of expressions including predicates of personal taste (e.g. *tasty*, *fun*), aesthetic predicates (e.g. *beautiful*), terms characterized by a significant evaluative component alongside the descriptive one (e.g. *athlete*, *torture*), and constructions used to express emotions (e.g. "it is *sad* that") or other kinds of internal experience (e.g. "it is *comfortable*"). It is in the case of disagreement between two speakers that contextualist and relativist theories[1] give significantly different accounts of what is going on.[2] Consider the following example:

(1) ANNA: Going to the opera is fun.

TOMEK: What are you saying? Going to the opera is not fun at all. It's boring!

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[1] There are almost as many kinds of contextualism and relativism as there are authors. In what follows, contextualism will be understood as the group of theories which would accept what I take to be the contextualist interpretation of dialogue (1); by the same token, relativists (in my sense) would endorse what I regard as the relativist construal of (1).

[2] Or at least most proponents of these theories see it this way. For the view that contextualism is only a notational variant of relativism, see Stojanovic 2007.

It is usually assumed that contextualists interpret the sentences uttered by Anna and Tomek as containing hidden indexicals — in this case associated with the speakers — so that, in the context, the (simplified) contents of these utterances amount to:

(2) ANNA: Going to the opera is fun_{A}.

TOMEK: Going to the opera is not fun_{T}.

Thus, the semantic contents of these sentences are not mutually exclusive because the speakers mean something different by their use of the predicate *fun*. Anna says that going to the opera is *fun for her*, and Tomek — that going to the opera is *not fun for him*. Therefore, Anna and Tomek are not really disagreeing but merely talking past each other.

This interpretation of what is going on when people are talking about matters of taste has been considered fatal for contextualism by relativists. It is important, they argue, that a semantic theory be able to account for what many language users intuitively see as a characteristic feature of the disputes about taste and, perhaps, also about other issues in which the central claims concern speakers' judgements — namely, *faultless disagreement*. Faultless disagreement is a situation in which two speakers contradict each other, but none of them can be considered wrong about what they say (Kölbel 2004).[3] Given that Anna's and Tomek's utterances (the predicates used) have different contents, there is no real dispute, and so contextualism is unable to make room for faultless disagreement.

The relativist interpretation of (1) makes it possible, according to its proponents, to account both for the disagreement and for the faultlessness. On this reading, the semantic content of *fun* stays the same whether it is uttered by Anna or by Tomek, but the truth values of their utterances differ from person to person as the context determines the individual who plays the role of the judge. Thus, sameness of content allows the speakers to genuinely disagree, and the fact that what Anna says can be evaluated true relative to her and what Tomek says — true relative to him, allows this disagreement to be faultless.[4]

Most contextualists do not consider this a serious threat to their views. Some of them say that what seems like faultless disagreement is usually not a disagreement but a case of misunderstanding and leave the question of what makes it look like a real disagreement open. Others try to account for the disagreement intuition and look

[3] "A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker *A*, a thinker *B*, and a proposition (content of judgement) *p* such that: (a) *A* believes (judges) that *p* and *B* believes (judges) that not-*p* [and] (b) Neither *A* nor *B* has made a mistake (is at fault)" (Kölbel 2004: 53-54).

[4] This is a very simplified account of what a relativist might say about disagreement. Such radical relativists as John MacFarlane (2014: 118-141) provide a very elaborate classification of kinds of disagreement and, accordingly, of faultless disagreement — some of which relativism can account for and some of which it cannot. The version I am discussing here is closer to the moderate relativist view put forward by Max Kölbel (2004).

for an explanation at the level of metalinguistic processes. In this paper, I will comment on the strategy belonging to the second group of solutions, namely, the idea that in many cases of what looks like disagreement the speakers participate in so-called metalinguistic negotiations. To the best of my knowledge, this view gained vast interest due to Timothy Sundell's paper *Disagreements about Taste* (2011), followed by Chris Barker's *Negotiating Taste* (2012). In 2013 Sundell teamed up with David Plunkett to present a more detailed view on metalinguistic negotiations which resulted in the publication of *Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms* (Plunkett, Sundell 2013). It is to these articles that I will mostly refer in discussing the metalinguistic strategy.

The plan is first to explain the difference between canonical and non-canonical disagreements (section 1). In section 2, I spend some time analysing the semantic features of some predicates of personal taste and try to reconstruct different ways in which they participate in metalinguistic negotiations. I give a few examples of metalinguistic negotiations in section 3. In section 4, I present a typology of gradable adjectives which places the predicates of personal taste within the category of multi-dimensional ones. I argue that what follows from this analysis is that the cases of metalinguistic negotiations centred on predicates of personal taste turn out to be either cases of misunderstanding (and can be resolved), cases of disagreement which is clearly not faultless, or cases of *talking past* which face the same problem contextualism had on the literal level of utterances. I suggest that there is an irreducible semantic component to predicates of personal taste which makes it impossible to fully negotiate their meanings. I propose a candidate for this component — a "personal algorithm" which is used by the speakers to weigh different dimensions of a given predicate against one another in deciding whether or not to apply it.

1. CANONICAL AND NON-CANONICAL DISPUTES

Plunkett and Sundell argue against the kind of argument which is often used in metaethical disputes: from the assumption that two speakers genuinely disagree it is inferred that they share the meaning of the concepts they are using. According to the authors, what often happens in such situations is not only that the speakers do not mean the same thing by the evaluative term they are using, but also that the disagreement lies precisely in the conflict between the understandings they employ. In other words, by arguing over whether this or that is good, we are negotiating either what the meaning of the term *good* is or what it should be. Before I discuss this claim in detail, let me draft the general framework in which it is grounded.

Plunkett and Sundell distinguish between canonical and non-canonical disputes. The former are defined as disputes consisting of utterances by which one speaker literally expresses an item (proposition, plan, etc.) which is fundamentally in conflict with the item literally expressed by the other speaker in the manner appropriate to

items of that type (for propositions *p* and *q* it is *p* entailing not-*q*, for plans — preclusion of joint implementation, etc.). On the other hand, non-canonical disputes are those in which the literally expressed contents are compatible, but what is in conflict are the contents expressed non-literally. Consider the following example:

(3) *A*: They got married and had a baby.

B: No, they had a baby *and* got married.

In this case, even though *A*'s and *B*'s utterances literally express perfectly compatible contents, they disagree. *B* opposes the conversational implicature produced by *A*, that is, the suggestion that the people *A* is talking about first got married and then had a baby.[5] Virtually all kinds of implicatures can play a central role in a dispute. A particularly interesting example is a disagreement over scalar terms:

(4) *C*: Anna is happy.

D: No, she's not happy. She's *ecstatic*!

By denying what *C* says, *D* is making the point that, even though being ecstatic is compatible with being happy, *C* should have used a stronger term to express Anna's feelings more accurately (assuming that these adjectives lie on the same scale).

It is worth noting that Plunkett and Sundell claim that the question of whether a disagreement is genuine should not be conflated with the issue of how the contentious information is conveyed. Therefore, disagreement on the non-literal level is no less genuine than the disagreement over literally expressed content.

2. RELATIVE GRADABLE ADJECTIVES

Before showing how metalinguistic negotiations function as non-canonical disputes, let me briefly present the linguistic account of adjectives which I will assume as accurate for my purposes (the assumption is shared by many other participants of the debate). Christopher Kennedy (2007) divides gradable adjectives into two groups.[6] The first group are absolute gradable adjectives (AGAs) such as *open*, *pure*, *full* which require that the object of which they are predicated have either a minimum or a maximum degree of the property in question. These adjectives are not context-sensitive, in the sense that *open*, as applied to a door, will mean the same thing in all contexts. The second group consists of relative gradable adjectives (RGAs) which can be true of an object once a cut-off point (or a threshold) is settled by the context of the utterance.

[5] Whether or not we take (3) to be a non-canonical dispute will depend on one's view on whether chronological order is communicated pragmatically (implicature) or e.g. via explicatures. I adopt the former approach here.

[6] The discussion will be limited to gradable adjectives. An adjective is non-gradable if it cannot be (seriously) used in the comparative constructions, e.g. "#This dog is more dead than that one".

RGAs include e.g.: *tall*, *old*, *expensive*. When we know the threshold for tallness in a given conversational context (for example, we are talking about seven-year-old children), saying "Jim is tall" will convey information to the interlocutors, namely that Jim's height exceeds the value above which seven-year-olds count as tall.

This property of RGAs opens up a possibility to convey information about the context (or threshold) via the use of an adjective. Let us imagine that *E* and *F* — two people living in the Amazon jungle — utter the following sentences in the presence of a European tourist:

(5) *E*: This ant is big.

F: No, it's not big.

If they are having this conversation as they are all looking at the ant, *F*'s denial would normally not sound felicitous: after all, they all see how big the ant is. If, however, this exchange had been preceded by the tourist asking how big the ants living in the Amazon jungle were, then *F*'s response would make sense. This is because *E* and *F* are not discussing the ant's size but rather the prevailing standard of size for ants in the Amazon jungle.

The kind of disagreement exemplified by (5) is a paradigmatic case of metalinguistic negotiations (see Barker 2002). Arguably, a lot of our uses of relative gradable adjectives are in fact metalinguistic, in the sense that in saying "*x* is P" we are not so much talking about what *x* is like as setting or negotiating a standard (or a threshold) for P.

Most predicates of personal taste belong to RGAs and are used in disputes structured similarly to (5). At the same time, contextualists have had a problem accounting for the intuition of disagreement in such exchanges as (1). It is only natural, then, to look for an account of disagreement about matters of taste which makes use of the contextualist-friendly notion of metalinguistic negotiations. This is the strategy adopted by, among others, Sundell, Plunket, and Barker. Let me now present in detail a few examples used by these authors to illustrate their idea.

3. METALINGUISTIC NEGOTIATIONS

Plunkett and Sundell (2013) offer several examples of metalinguistic negotiations along the following lines. Imagine two cooks preparing a restaurant meal. They taste the fish soup they have just made and say:

(6) *G*: This soup is salty.

H: No, it's not salty at all!

We can, of course, imagine that *G* and *H* have a salinometer and they check salinity of the soup. If it exceeds the value *n* which is considered to be the threshold of *salty*,

then it turns out that one of them has been wrong and needs to retract her claim. Clearly, this is not what happens in the restaurant kitchens around the world. Rather, *G* and *H* believe that the other has a similar taste impression but that she got the threshold for *salty* wrong. In other words, they are negotiating the threshold for *salty*. Alternatively, *H* might think that *G* got the comparison class wrong. For instance, *G* might think they are cooking for a group of hypertension patients who are supposed to be on low-sodium diet, while *H* might think they are cooking for the salt-craving cinemagoers. Even though the propositions asserted in (6) are in a sense compatible (since *G* and *H* set the parameter for *salty* differently), the speakers are disagreeing because, via asserting the propositions, they are pragmatically advocating suitable parameters.

However, not all cases of metalinguistic negotiations need involve advocating standards for a gradable adjective. Let me present two examples provided by Plunkett and Sundell which illustrate a different sort of dispute:

(7) *I*: Secretariat is an athlete.

J: No, Secretariat is not an athlete.

(8) *K*: Waterboarding is torture.

L: Waterboarding is not torture.

Example (7) is taken from Ludlow (2014), who was listening to the sports radio. Secretariat was a racing horse that had won many awards. The participants to the discussion shared the knowledge of Secretariat's accomplishments in sports but did not agree on how the word *athlete* should be used in this context. We can assume that the first speaker systematically uses this term to refer to non-human animals displaying certain qualities (like that of having won many races) while *J* uses it exclusively in reference to humans of the same qualities. So, in this case, Plunkett and Sundell claim, the dispute is about how this term should be used in the context — it is about the character of the predicate.

Example (8) can be interpreted in a similar way. Namely, imagine that *L* uses a definition of *torture* which is the conjunction of the following: (a) an act performed to obtain information, (b) an act inflicting severe suffering, (c) and act inflicting permanent impairment of a significant body function. *K*, on the other hand, uses a definition of *torture* that consists *grosso modo* only in (a) and (b). In this discussion, *L* and *K* are pragmatically advocating their own definitions.

Plunkett and Sundell argue that the disagreements of the kind presented above are no less substantial than "factive" (canonical) disagreements. They argue that such disagreements often survive paraphrase and the participants often wish to claim the word for social or psychological reasons. Thus, not only does *K* argue for her definition of torture as more accurate but she also wants the concept of waterboarding to be associated with the term *torture* because of its various connotations and rhetorical force.

4. PROBLEMS

The idea that we are metalinguistically negotiating by expressing judgements is very convincing. By pointing to it, Plunkett and Sundell accomplished the task of identifying the source of the intuition of disagreement we might have when hearing such dialogues as (5) or (6). Still, it is doubtful whether we can extend this model to include negotiations about taste. I shall argue that at least in the paradigmatic case of disputing taste, i.e. in situations which are supposed to be subject to faultless disagreement, contextualism is unable to account for genuine disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiations.

4.1. Negotiating *tasty*

At the outset, let me mention one important point. I believe that the disputes about whether or not something is tasty need not always be non-canonical. Occasionally, a speaker might simply have the intention of arguing for the claim that this-or-that is tasty to people in general (or to a particular group) — which is intended simply as a statement of a fact, namely, that a majority of a certain group of people find this thing tasty — while the other might be denying it. In this sense, the speakers are not involved in a metalinguistic negotiation but in an ordinary disagreement about facts, which has no potential of being faultless. This point might be considered controversial but since it does not seem to be crucial for the present discussion I will take it for granted here.

I would like to focus on the claim that other disputes involving assertions that a given thing is tasty can be considered as genuine disagreements in virtue of being metalinguistic negotiations. Let me start by saying that some disputes about taste (*prima facie* faultless disagreements) might not be as easily explained in terms of metalinguistic negotiations as others. In what follows, I will show a couple of distinct ways in which speakers might be negotiating *tasty*.

Tasty is a relative gradable adjective and as such its interpretation depends on the context in at least three important aspects. Differences between these interpretations can result in the conflict about:

– specification of the comparison class,
– specification of the scale,
– specification of the threshold within the comparison class.

4.1.1. SPECIFICATION OF THE COMPARISON CLASS:

(9) *M*: It's tasty.

N: No, it's not tasty at all!

M: Well, it's tasty *for canteen food*.

N: Okay, it's tasty for canteen food.

In this case, *N* denies what *M* says about the food insofar as *N* takes *M* to be referring to a different comparison class, for instance, the food they eat in general or restaurant food. Once *M* makes it explicit which class she was referring to, what seemed like a disagreement turns out to be a misunderstanding. Incidentally, it also happens that *M* and *N* have a roughly similar understanding of what it is to be tasty for canteen food. We could also think about *M* as using a mental shortcut. Her *tasty* is actually short for *tasty-for-canteen-food*. Since they were both in a canteen, *M* was justified in assuming that *N* would understand the shortcut. Even if this dispute is a case of metalinguistic negotiation at first, the negotiation results in a compromise, and so the disagreement quickly dissolves — the speakers realize it was a misunderstanding.

4.1.2. SPECIFICATION OF THE THRESHOLD WITHIN A COMPARISON CLASS

It can happen, however, that the disagreement about what it means to be tasty for canteen food persists.

(10) *M*: It's tasty.

N: No, it's not tasty at all!

M: Well, it's tasty for canteen food.

N: No, it's not even tasty for canteen food.

I will come back to this case at the end of the next section.

4.1.3. SPECIFICATION OF THE SCALE

In their forthcoming paper, Louise McNally and Isidora Stojanovic elaborate on the distinction between unidimensional and multidimensional adjectives (Kamp 1975, Klein 1980), which I am going to assume here. A unidimensional adjective is an adjective for which only one criterion is used to order individuals according to the property it refers to. For instance, in the case of *tall* this criterion will simply be height. I assume that *tall* has one linear scale reflecting the character of the term, and this scale can accommodate comparison classes and thresholds of all kinds of items.

Unlike *tall*, *tasty* does not have a unique linear scale. It is an example of a multidimensional adjective — an adjective for which more than one criterion is used to order individuals that have the property in question.[7] Whether we regard something

[7] Further characterization of *tasty* as an example of a multidimensional adjective is not crucial for the purposes of this discussion, but it is interesting to look into some of the proposed typologies of multidimensional adjectives. For instance, Galit Sassoon (2012) suggests distinguishing conjunctive, disjunctive, and mixed adjectives. Conjunctive adjectives are predicated of "entities [that] are required to reach the standard in *all* of their dimensions", the disjunctive ones — of entities that "are

as tasty is the result of a complicated equation in which the variables include: texture, smell, colour of the food, what it consists of, its simplicity or complexity, and so on. McNally and Stojanovic believe that predicates of personal taste are a group of adjectives which "describe properties whose applicability may depend on the way in which, or degree to which, they are experienced by some individual" (McNally, Stojanovic, forthcoming, p. 6 of the PDF). Thus, the presence of an experiencer is, at least sometimes, involved in the meaning of these adjectives. Speakers might disagree about what weight to assign to which dimension in a particular case.

Let us take a closer look at a situation in which two speakers try to negotiate the scale for *tasty*:

(11) *O*: This casserole is tasty.

P: No, it's not tasty at all!

Imagine that *O* and *P* continue arguing for their respective opinions about the casserole. *O* could try to bring to *P*'s attention features which, in *O*'s opinion, contribute to the casserole's property of being tasty. She could, for example, point to the quality of the cheese which has been used, to the fantastic smell, to the texture and the extravagant hint of nutmeg. However, even though thanks to *O*'s argumentation *P* notices and appreciates all these qualities, *P* still does not even begin to consider the casserole tasty. At some point, when *O* has no more arguments left, *P* can just say: "I understand that this casserole is creamy, fondant, and it even smells good, but these factors don't add up to make it tasty for me. It just isn't. I can't help it".

She may be well aware that normally all these qualities — i.e. dimensions — which constitute the scale for the term *tasty* are important in assessing casseroles, and she does not underestimate their weight. In this sense, *O* and *P* have reached a compromise in their negotiations about the scale. At the same time, *P* has just eaten, she is feeling under the weather and not in the mood for one-pot dishes. She does not want to argue that her concept of *tasty* is better and should replace *O*'s concept. It seems to me that further negotiation over what the meaning of *tasty* in this context should be makes no sense. It is as if *O* and *P* were stung by a bee and argued:

(12) *O*: This hurts.

P: No, it doesn't.

It follows from this observation that there is something so irreducible and perhaps unidentifiable or inexpressible about what we ultimately find tasty that explanation of the disagreement about whether something is tasty does not seem to be pos-

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required to reach the standard in but *one* of their dimensions". In the case of a mixed adjective, pragmatics determines whether having the property in question in some dimensions and not others is sufficient for the application of the adjective (Sassoon 2012: 6). I believe that predicates of personal taste belong to the category of mixed adjectives.

sible in terms of metalinguistic negotiation. In a sense, at some point there is no longer anything to negotiate about. Moreover, it might be the case that the concepts of *tasty* that *O* and *P* have are so different that (11) ceases to be a disagreement.

I see two possible explanations of this feature of *tasty* (and, I believe, of other predicates of personal taste as well). One of them would be to follow McNally and Stojanovic in postulating an experiencer argument as a component of adjective meaning. Here, however, I would like to put forward a different solution.

It seems plausible to take the meaning of *tasty* which the speaker has in mind to be a number of dimensions (or components) bound by a certain algorithm thanks to which she decides whether a given sample of food is tasty or not. This decision would be reached by weighing the dimensions against one another. Thus we would have: different flavours in certain proportions (sweet, salty, and so on), texture, aroma, etc. These dimensions would be something intersubjectively communicable, that is, something communicable in the process of negotiation if this process were to be overt, but also something implicit if the negotiation is just metalinguistic. The algorithm with which we order the importance of these dimensions would be something personal, something that takes the information about all the dimensions and yields the result: *it is tasty* or *it is not tasty*.

I would like to stress that to postulate this kind of "personal algorithm" is not to postulate a singular hidden indexical parameter next to the other dimensions which make up one's concept of *tasty*. It is rather a kind of disposition people have when they reason about whether to apply a given predicate of taste. Such an algorithm, unlike an experiencer argument, explains the fact that our decisions about what we call tasty or not tend to be (*ceteris paribus*) consistent. In other words, we do not just happen to find something tasty (in virtue of it being tasty *to us*, in a sense arbitrarily) but we have a particular taste disposition that plays a central role in our application of predicates of personal taste. This disposition can change over time and can probably be acquired.

Let us reexamine dialogue (11) in the light of these considerations. *O* asserts that the casserole is tasty, and *P* says that it is not. Suppose again that they are negotiating the meaning of *tasty*. We can imagine that they agree about all the possible dimensions that are the semantic components of this adjective (also: those relevant in the present context). The only thing they do not agree about is the "algorithm": *O* and *P* simply weigh the dimensions differently. At this point, I think, there is nothing to negotiate about anymore. In the present situation all the intersubjectively communicable qualities of the casserole make it tasty to *O*, and the same qualities make it not tasty to *P*. (11) ceases to be a negotiation.

It seems to follow, then, that the contextualist strategy of invoking the concept of metalinguistic negotiations in order to safeguard the notion of genuine disagreement in the case of predicates of personal taste is unsuccessful.

A similar point applies to the problem of negotiating what it means to be tasty-for-something (e.g. *tasty for canteen food*). We can continue to negotiate what

weight each relevant dimension should have (or what these dimensions should be), but neither the reasons why one dimension should be more decisive than another nor the idea that we nevertheless find it tasty-for-something can be better motivated than "I think it's tasty because I feel it is". And that is something we do not negotiate about — it is just something we state.

4.2. So why do we keep disagreeing about *tasty*?

Why, then, do the default kinds of disagreement like the cases presented in philosophy of language papers still convince us that the intuition of genuine disagreement in such cases is well-grounded?

(13) *Q*: Liquorice is tasty.

R: No, it's not tasty at all!

The motivation behind our involvement in such discussions does not have much to do with words. It is often the question of our practice of argumentation. By arguing that something is tasty I might try to convince you (consciously or unconsciously) to buy liquorice for me as a gift from trips to Scandinavia. In other cases, I might want to affect my friend's choices concerning the question of what restaurants we should or should not visit, what kind of food we should buy, I might try to shape my kids' future propensities or prove to be extravagant. Let me emphasize that none of these topics of disagreement seem to have the potential of being faultless.[8] If it is simply an expression of my general or particular disposition to liking or disliking something, the apparent disagreement should quickly dissolve.

One more way of making a case for disagreement as metalinguistic negotiation would be to say that, for whatever reasons, the two parties might be actually conveying the following metalinguistic messages:

(14) *S*: We should be using the term *tasty* to speak about this casserole.

T: No, we should not be using the term *tasty* to speak about this casserole.

This does sound like a genuine content disagreement (we have a proposition and its straightforward negation) with a potential of being faultless. I believe that this sort of rendition of the dialogue about the casserole being tasty requires an entire paper dedicated to disagreements in normative discourses. I can only say that I am not too optimistic about finding genuine faultless disagreement in such conversations, especially if we do not want to grant faultlessness to everybody who has anything to say about norms.

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[8] Unless one thinks that all disagreements about what one ought to do are faultless. I don't.

CONCLUSION

My goal in this paper was to show that even though the strategy invoking the concept of metalinguistic negotiation can help us understand the intuition of disagreement in certain disputes about taste, it does not let contextualism have any more disagreement about taste than it already did. Sometimes our disagreement about what is tasty is a covert disagreement about what practical decisions to make. On other occasions, it is a misunderstanding about the comparison class we are referring to. Another possibility is that by using the term *tasty* we are urging our interlocutors to appreciate certain qualities of the food. Yet another option is that we are making a statement about the world — namely, that a lot of people normally call the kind of food we are eating now tasty. I hope it is clear by now that those of these disputes which are genuine disagreements are not faultless. Finally, when we actually sit down to negotiate the meaning of *tasty* with someone, we come to the point where neither of the speakers can be wrong, and this is the point where there is no longer any disagreement — ultimately even metalinguistic negotiations stop at the point when the decision of what semantic component of *tasty* makes a given food tasty to me in a particular situation is personal and non-negotiable.

This is not to deny that Plunkett's and Sundell's or Barker's research on the mechanism of metalinguistic negotiations is accurate or useful. My aim was simply to show that their solution falls short of making the contextualist accounts of disputes about taste more plausible.

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