

**Talking about appearances:  
the roles of evaluation and experience in disagreement**

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**Abstract** Faultless disagreement and faultless retraction have been taken to motivate relativism for predicates of personal taste, like ‘tasty’. Less attention has been devoted to the question of what aspect of their meaning underlies this relativist behavior. This paper illustrates these same phenomena with a new category of expressions: appearance predicates, like ‘tastes vegan’ and ‘looks blue’. Appearance predicates and predicates of personal taste both fall into the broader category of experiential predicates. Approaching predicates of personal taste from this angle suggests that their relativist behavior is due to their experience-sensitivity, rather than their evaluative meaning. Furthermore, appearance predicates hold interest beyond what they can teach us about predicates of personal taste. Examination of a variety of uses of appearance predicates reveals that they give rise to relativist behavior for a variety of reasons — including some that apply also to other types of expressions, such as epistemic modals and comparative terms. This paper thus serves both to probe the source of relativist behavior in discourse about personal taste, as well as to map out this kind of behavior in the rich and under-explored discourse about appearances.

**Keywords** Philosophy of language; Faultless disagreement; Appearances; Evaluation; Personal taste; Relativism

## 1 Introduction

Speakers disagree about things all the time. Remembering some event differently from you, I might claim that it took place on a Tuesday, while you claim it was a Wednesday. We might have no way to check who is right. But nothing about ordinary thought or language leads us to doubt that there is an objective truth of the matter. One of us is just getting things wrong.

Disagreements about matters of personal taste often feel different. After we’ve both tried some coconut cake, I might claim that it’s tasty, while you claim that it’s gross. If we’re both basing these claims on our differing gustatory experiences of the cake, it’s dissatisfying to insist that one of us is just getting things wrong. And yet there is a conflict. What I assert, you reject. We might “agree to disagree,” but we do, nonetheless, disagree.

Let us call disagreements fitting this description cases of *faultless disagreement* (where this label is understood to carry no implications about how theoretically to account for such cases). Faultless disagreement makes it seem like truth in the domain in question is not absolute, but instead can vary from perspective to perspective. It’s not just that we can’t check whether the cake is in fact tasty; rather, we’re inclined to say that from my perspective, it’s true that it is, while from yours, it’s false.

The same conclusion can be reached based on cases of *faultless retraction*, where a speaker must take back an earlier claim, which was nonetheless made without mistake. When I was a child, I insisted that coconut was gross. I now think it's delicious. While I take back my earlier claim, it's odd to say that I was mistaken in making it. After all, my gustatory experience of coconut at the time was of just the right kind to support the claim that it's gross. It's natural to think that from my past perspective, it was true that it was gross, while from my current perspective, it's false.

I will call faultless disagreement and faultless retraction *relativist effects*, as both pull us away from an absolute view of truth about the claims involved. Do relativist effects in discourse about matters of personal taste show that truth about personal taste is not absolute? This question has been the subject of much debate by theorists in philosophy of language and linguistics in recent years. I do not weigh in on this debate here. Rather, I focus on the related but less-discussed question of what aspect of the meaning of the terms involved underlies their apparently relativist behavior. *What kind of difference in perspective are these terms sensitive to, when they give rise to faultless disagreement and retraction?*

There is a tendency to associate the seemingly variable truth of claims about personal taste with variation in speakers' evaluative standards.<sup>1</sup> But while these sorts of claims are certainly evaluative, this is not the only distinctive thing about them. They are, more specifically, evaluative claims made on the basis of a certain *experiential* response. Speakers' evaluations differ; but this, at least often, has its source in their different experiences of the stimulus in question. Can we isolate the effects of this experience-dependence, from effects due properly to evaluative differences? Luckily, the English language includes terms that allow us to do precisely this.

The term at the center of discussion about relativist effects in discourse about personal taste, 'tasty', is, after all, synonymous with the complex expression, 'tastes good'. To the extent that the former gives rise to relativist effects, the latter does too, and presumably for the very same reason. So, we may ask, are relativist effects with 'tastes good' due to something about 'tastes', something about 'good', or something about their combination?<sup>2</sup> On its own, the appearance verb,

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<sup>1</sup>Kölbel (2002) treats personal taste and aesthetic claims together in this respect. Lasersohn (2005) and MacFarlane (2014) don't commit to doing so, but wonder whether weightier evaluative terms, like aesthetic and moral predicates, also call for relativist treatment, recognizing that this would be a significant philosophical consequence. That something about evaluation is to blame for relativist effects with predicates of personal taste is also reinforced by a tradition of relativism about evaluative judgments about morality, found for example in Harman (1975).

<sup>2</sup>See MacFarlane (2014): 142.

‘tastes’, does no evaluative work. It can be combined with any number of adjectives (to form predicates like ‘tastes vegan’, ‘tastes rotten’, etc.), and the result is not an evaluative predicate, unless the adjective on its own is. We are thus led to the question of whether appearance predicates generally — predicates not only about how things taste, but also about how they look, smell, sound, and feel — give rise to relativist effects, even when not combined with any evaluative vocabulary.<sup>3</sup>

I have two main goals in this paper. First, on the basis of relativist effects in discourse about appearances, I argue that such effects in discourse about evaluative matters of personal taste are due to the *experientiality* of the vocabulary in question, and not to anything special about evaluation. Second, I offer an overview of relativist effects in discourse about appearances, a domain so far under-discussed in the recent semantics literature surrounding relative truth. I do this by distinguishing varieties of faultless disagreement about appearances, showing how, depending on the case, it displays similar characteristics to faultless disagreement in other domains — not only in discourse about matters of taste, but also in discourse involving epistemic modal and comparative constructions.

The plan is as follows. In §2, I show that relativist effects arise with appearance predicates, just as they do with the more familiar evaluative predicates of personal taste. The parallel behavior of appearance predicates and predicates of personal taste raises the possibility, discussed in §3, that relativist effects in all of these cases have their source in variation in subjective experience, rather than anything special about evaluation. This idea is bolstered by the existence of a distinctive class of *experiential predicates*, which includes both appearance predicates and predicates of personal taste. However, the hypothesis that all relativist effects with experiential predicates are due to variation in subjective experience faces difficulties, particularly once we recognize the variety of uses to which appearance predicates can be put, and the variety of situations in which faultless disagreement with them can arise. This variety is the subject of §§4–5. In §4, I show that appearance predicates can give rise to faultless disagreement for reasons other than variation in experience. Indeed, they can give rise to such disagreement for reasons that are also responsible for faultless disagreement in other, non-experiential cases. Then, in §5, I argue that there is nonetheless a restricted class of experiential predicates, which includes predicates of personal taste, for which

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<sup>3</sup>Appearance predicates, for my purposes, are any predicates formed from a verb of sensory appearance (‘tastes’, ‘looks’, ‘smells’, ‘sounds’, ‘feels’, and ‘seems’), together with a complement. Examples include the already-mentioned ‘tastes good’ and ‘tastes vegan’, as well as predicates like ‘looks red’ and ‘sounds like a frog’.

experiential variation remains the most plausible source of relativist effects. Thus, there is no need to look to anything special about evaluation to find the source of relativist effects in discourse about matters of personal taste.

## 2 Relativist effects: personal tastes and appearances

In this section, I show that appearance language gives rise to relativist effects. I do so by presenting relativist effects in the more widely-discussed domain of personal taste, and showing that appearance language behaves in just the same way.<sup>4</sup> This approach will allow us to see that appearance predicates carry the same interest as predicates of personal taste, as far as the debate about relative truth is concerned, while remaining neutral about what particular theoretical approach may best capture the behavior.

To emphasize: What I say about relativist effects in this paper will not settle whether they in fact call for a relativist analysis, or whether they can instead be accounted for adequately within other approaches, such as contextualism,<sup>5</sup> expressivism,<sup>6</sup> or objectivism.<sup>7,8</sup> I use the terms “faultless disagreement,” “faultless retraction,” and “relativist effects” to label the sort of behavior that, for better or for worse, has motivated theorists to adopt a relativist notion of truth.<sup>9</sup> The present investigation into relativist effects in discourse about appearances holds interest even for those who reject relativism as the way to account for them; for there still remains the question of what the difference is between the expressions giving rise to these effects, as compared with ordinary context-sensitive or clearly objectivist expressions, with which (as we’ll see shortly) no such effects arise. My interest is in the sources of the discourse effects that lie behind the debates over relative truth and its alternatives.

Consider the following dialogue, by now standard in discussions about predicates of personal taste:

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<sup>4</sup>In discussing these effects with predicates of personal taste, I draw on previous literature, including: Kölbel (2004), Lasersohn (2005), Lasersohn (2016), Stephenson (2007), Egan (2010), MacFarlane (2014).

<sup>5</sup>See e.g. Pearson (2013), Plunkett and Sundell (2013), Sundell (2011), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), Stojanovic (2007), Glanzberg (2007).

<sup>6</sup>See discussion in MacFarlane (2014): §7.3.

<sup>7</sup>See e.g. Anthony (2016), Wyatt (2018).

<sup>8</sup>Stojanovic (2017a) gives a nice overview of the state of the debate.

<sup>9</sup>See Eriksson and Tiozzo (2016), Palmira (2015), and MacFarlane (2014), Chapter 6 for discussion of different, more theory-laden, ways of characterizing the behavior. Though I am indebted to MacFarlane’s work in this area, I disregard his advice to stop using the label “faultless disagreement” altogether. I believe that it remains useful for capturing an intuitively distinctive kind of disagreement.

- (1) **Context** Aline and Bob have both tried the same cake. Aline enjoyed it, but Bob didn't.
- a. **Aline:** This cake is tasty.
  - b. **Bob:** No, it's not tasty!

Aline and Bob seem to be in disagreement here: they disagree about whether the cake is tasty. And yet, this disagreement doesn't seem quite the same as another sort of disagreement Aline and Bob might have, over an ordinary factual matter, as in the following:

- (2)
- a. **Aline:** This cake is vegan.
  - b. **Bob:** No, it's not vegan!

Here, Aline and Bob disagree about whether the cake is vegan. Furthermore, one of them must clearly be mistaken about what the cake is like. Either it's vegan or not, and once the truth of the matter comes out, one of them will have to admit that they were wrong. But the dispute about taste in (1) seems different. There, it's tempting to say that so long as each speaker is basing their claim sincerely on how they experience the cake, there's a sense in which neither is mistaken. The contrast with the purely factual case is brought out in the following:

- (3)
- a. As far as its taste suggests, this cake is vegan; but maybe it isn't (actually) vegan.
  - b. ?? As far as its taste suggests, this cake is tasty; but maybe it isn't (actually) tasty.

No matter one's evidence or experience, it is appropriate to express uncertainty about a purely factual matter, like the cake being vegan. By contrast, given a certain experience of the cake, it becomes very odd to express uncertainty about whether the cake is tasty. This is the intuition behind the faultlessness side of faultless disagreement.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, then, in saying the cake is tasty, Aline is really just saying that it's tasty *to her*. And similarly, Bob is just saying that it isn't tasty *to him*. This would easily make sense of the intuition that neither is mistaken, and the contrast between (3-a) and (3-b). But now we risk losing the intuition that the exchange nonetheless involves a disagreement. For the dispute about taste in (1) is also different from an exchange in which each speaker explicitly relativizes their claim, as in the following:

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<sup>10</sup>MacFarlane (2014) gives the following assertion conditions for 'tasty': "If you know first-hand how something tastes, call it 'tasty' just in case its flavor is pleasing to you, and 'not tasty' just in case its flavor is not pleasing to you" (p. 4). Group-based contextualists, like Pearson (2013), and objectivists, like Anthony (2016), somewhat downplay this entitlement, but the contrast between the previous two sentences stands. The contrast between (1-a) and (2-a) can be captured, even if we only take the oddness of claims like (3-b) to be present as a default.

- (4) **Context** As in (1).
- a. **Aline:** This cake is tasty *to me*.
  - b. **Bob:** # No, it's not tasty *to me*!

Two features distinguish our original disagreement about taste in (1) from this one. First, the disagreement about taste in (1) licenses explicit markers of denial, like ‘No’, in a way that the exchange in (4) does not (as indicated by the ‘#’ mark). Second, this comes along with a difference in the attitudes it is appropriate for speakers to have towards the various claims in these two cases. Consider, for instance, what reactions are appropriate for an outside observer overhearing the dialogues. An observer overhearing (4) can easily take both Aline and Bob to be making accurate claims — indeed, she ought to think this, so long as she thinks both of them are being sincere. By contrast, an observer overhearing the dispute in (1), can't view both claims to be accurate: cannot take the cake both to be accurately described as ‘tasty’ and as ‘not tasty’. This fills out the disagreement side of faultless disagreement.

Faultless disagreement about matters of personal taste is thus a phenomenon distinct from both purely factual disagreement, as in (2), and cases involving ordinary context-sensitive expressions (e.g. ‘me’), as in (4). Purely factual cases involve disagreement, but not faultlessness; while explicitly relativized cases involve faultlessness, but not disagreement.

Faultless retraction of taste claims — where a speaker must take back a claim that was made faultlessly — can be characterized similarly. Here is a case adapted from MacFarlane (2014):

- (5) a. **Context** It's 1975 and John is a child. He likes fish sticks.  
**John:** Fish sticks are tasty.
- b. **Context** It's 2010 and John is grown up. His tastes have changed and he no longer likes fish sticks.  
**John:** I take it back, fish sticks aren't tasty.

The faultlessness here is essentially the same as what we saw above, in the case of interpersonal faultless disagreement. John's experience in 1975 is such that expression of uncertainty about the tastiness of the fish sticks would not have been appropriate, making his assertion in (5-a) faultless in a sense that has no analogue in a purely factual case. For instance, if John's parents chose to misinform him about the constitution of fish sticks in order to trick him into eating them, we might take his claim that fish sticks are vegetarian to have been reasonable in many ways. But still the contrast remains that uncertainty about whether the fish sticks are vegetarian is coherent in the

face of all this evidence, in a way that uncertainty about whether they're tasty, given a certain experience, is not.

Perhaps, then, as a child, John really just meant that fish stick were tasty *to him then*. But this fails to make sense of the call for retraction at the later time.

- (6) a. **Context** It's 1975 and John is a child. He likes fish sticks.  
**John:** Fish sticks are tasty *to me now*.  
b. **Context** It's 2010 and John is grown up. His tastes have changed and he no longer likes fish sticks.  
**John:** # I take it back, fish sticks aren't tasty *to me now*.

Just as in the case of disagreement, we can distinguish the retraction present in discourse about personal taste by two features. First, explicit retraction ('I take it back') is felicitous in (5) in a way that it isn't in the explicitly relativized case in (6). And, second, this comes along with a difference in what attitude adult John should take towards his childhood claims. As an adult, John should have no trouble viewing his sincere childhood claim in (6-a) to be accurate. By contrast, he cannot at the later time view his childhood claim in (5-a) to be accurate.

Now, we're ready to show that faultless disagreement and retraction also arise in discourse about appearances. Consider the following two examples of disagreement about appearances:<sup>11</sup>

- (7) **Context** Alex and Briana are looking at the same dress, but have different experiences of its color.<sup>12</sup>  
a. **Alex:** That dress looks blue and black.  
b. **Briana:** No, it looks white and gold!
- (8) **Context** Alex and Briana both tasted the same cake. Alex rarely eats vegan food and really notices when baked goods lack ingredients like butter and eggs; Briana is more used to vegan food, so their lack doesn't strike her as much.  
a. **Alex:** That cake tastes vegan.  
b. **Briana:** No, it doesn't taste vegan!

These are cases of faultless disagreement, just as identified in discourse about personal taste above. First, the disagreement side. In both cases, the linguistic denial, 'No', is felicitous, and an observer can't view both claims as accurate — can't view as accurate both that the dress looks blue and

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<sup>11</sup>To avoid repetition, I just give cases with 'tastes' and 'looks' for now. But we could also easily find cases with 'smells', 'feels', 'sounds', and 'seems'; and my claims about appearance language are to be understood to apply to predicates formed with all of these verbs.

<sup>12</sup>This situation is similar to one many people experienced in early 2015; see, e.g. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_dress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress).

black, and that it looks white and gold (assuming, of course, that it's just two colors); or that the cake both tastes vegan and fails to taste vegan. And just as with the case of 'tasty' above, we can contrast the patterns of disagreement in (7) and (8) with what we would get in the nearby explicitly relativized cases, where the speakers make explicit to whom things appear the way they do.

- (9) **Context** As in (7).  
a. **Alex:** That dress looks blue and black *to me*.  
b. **Briana:** # No, it looks white and gold *to me!*<sup>13</sup>

In (9), not only is the explicit denial infelicitous, but an observer could also easily take both speakers' claims to be accurate. Thus, there is no disagreement in the sense we've identified in the disagreements about appearances in (7) and (8), as well as in the original disagreement about personal taste in (1).

Second, the faultlessness side. Just as with sincere assertions about personal taste, sincere assertions about appearances are faultless in a sense that has no analogue with purely factual assertions that are merely well-supported by evidence.

- (10) a. As far as its taste suggests, this cake is vegan; but maybe it isn't (actually) vegan.  
b. ??As far as its taste suggests, this cake tastes vegan; but maybe it doesn't (actually) taste vegan.

As noted above, any experience or evidence you like about the cake still allows for the felicitous expression of uncertainty about whether it's vegan, for example, as illustrated in (10-a) (a repetition of (3-a) above). By contrast, given a certain experience of the cake, the appearance claim — that it 'tastes vegan' — is not appropriately doubted. This is why the claim in (10-b) is odd in a way that (10-a) is not. Thus, the same features of faultlessness and disagreement that we found in disagreement about matters of personal taste are found in disagreement about appearance too.

Cases of faultless retraction with appearances are expected when how something appears to a speaker changes over time. Again, I offer two cases:

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<sup>13</sup>Note that even the possibility of modification by prepositional phrases like 'to me' marks a commonality between taste predicates and appearance predicates, that they don't share with factual predicates:

- (i) #That dress is blue and black to me.

I return to this in the following section.



- (11) a. **Context** Jana has just come inside from bright sunlight and looks at a jacket.  
**Jana:** That jacket looks black.  
b. **Context** Later, her eyes have adjusted to the light inside.  
**Jana:** I take it back, the jacket looks blue.
- (12) a. **Context** Admir tastes a cake and finds it dense and oily.  
**Admir:** This cake tastes vegan.  
b. **Context** Admir’s friend has by now given him samples of a variety of other cakes, teaching him to discern the taste of butter from oil. He tastes the original cake again, and with his more refined powers of discrimination detects some buttery flavor.  
**Admir:** Never mind, this cake doesn’t taste vegan.

The call for retraction is the same here as what we found in the case with personal taste in (5). In contrast to an explicitly relativized variant, the changes in experience expressed in (11) and (12) felicitously allow taking back the earlier claim. And this comes along with not being able to view both earlier and later claims to be accurate. Finally, the faultlessness is just as we saw in the discussion of faultless disagreement: given the speaker’s experience at the time of assertion, uncertainty about the appearance claim is inappropriate (whereas it always remains appropriate with purely factual claims, however well-supported by the evidence they may be).

This empirical discussion shows that the relativist effects previously identified in discourse about matters of personal taste also show up in discourse about appearances, even in the absence of any evaluative expressions.<sup>14</sup> One upshot of this is that the range of relativist effects is broader than previously discussed, and that appearance language deserves a place alongside expressions like predicates of personal taste in the semantic debates over departures from traditional objectivist semantics.<sup>15</sup> In short, we may disagree faultlessly, and have to retract faultlessly-made claims,

<sup>14</sup>Some theorists, particularly in linguistics (e.g. Rett (2014)), understand evaluative expressions very broadly, to include all gradable adjectives. To clarify: for my purposes, evaluative expressions are to be understood more narrowly, to include just those (such as predicates of personal taste, as well as moral and aesthetic predicates) that have valenced or normative meanings.

<sup>15</sup>Pearson (2013) notes that first-hand experience effects (which I’ll discuss in the next section) with taste predicates also show up with ‘seems’ (p. 118), and Ninan (2014) points out that this extends to all appearance verbs (p. 291). Doran (2015) discusses the semantics of copy raising constructions, such as in (i), where the appearance verb has a ‘like’-complement that contains a pronoun that corefers with the main subject.

- (i) *Tom* looks like *he*’s cooking.

I’ll discuss a case of disagreement about appearances from her thesis in §4 below. However, the variety of uses of appearance language that concern me in this paper don’t come out just by considering copy raising cases. For instance, no copy raising appearance report is equivalent to a claim using a predicate of personal taste. While (ii-a) and (ii-b) can be used equivalently, (ii-c) is not equivalent with either.

- (ii) a. The cake is tasty.

not only about whether things are tasty, but also about *how* things taste, and how they look, feel, smell, and sound. To the extent that truth relativism is motivated for claims about personal tastes, it's equally motivated for claims about appearances. But investigation into relativist effects with appearance language holds interest beyond merely adding another class of expressions to the discussion. In the next section, I turn to the question of what relativist effects in appearance discourse might reveal about the sources of such effects in discourse more broadly.

### 3 Experiential language

The previous section illustrated relativist effects with appearance language, even in the absence of any evaluative language. This is relevant to the issue, raised in the introduction, about the source of relativist effects with predicates of personal taste. As noted there, the synonymy of 'tasty' and 'tastes good' raises the question, posed by MacFarlane (2014), about whether we should locate the source of relativist effects with 'tastes good' in something about 'tastes', something about 'good', or something about their combination. The cases of faultless disagreement and faultless retraction with predicates like 'tastes vegan' and 'looks white and gold' show that appearance language on its own gives rise to these effects — since the effects are clearly not present with factual predicates like 'vegan' and 'white and gold' on their own. Thus, it's an open possibility that relativist effects with both predicates of personal taste and appearance predicates have nothing to do with evaluation, and everything to do with the role of subjective experience in their interpretation or use.

Bylinina (2017) and Stojanovic (2017b) identify a class of *experiential predicates*. These predicates are interpreted relative to an experiencer argument, which may be left implicit, as in (13-a), or made explicit in an experiencer prepositional phrase headed by 'to' or 'for', as in (13-b).

- (13) a. This cake is tasty.  
 b. This cake is tasty to/for Sam.
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- b. The cake tastes good.  
 c. The cake tastes like it's good.

Brogaard (2013) considers and rejects the idea that 'seems' displays relativist behavior. She writes:

Suppose we both hear on the radio that there will be a hurricane in our area. 'It seems that our home will be flooded,' I say. You reply that it does not seem that way. If we are equally rational, one of us has evidence not available to the other, for example, evidence that the radio station is notoriously unreliable. In this case, then, we disagree about facts about the situation. (Brogaard (2013): 223)

This is inconclusive, however. First, it's not obvious in this case that if neither of us is irrational, then we must disagree about facts of the situation. But even granting that, disagreement about facts of the situation doesn't preclude faultless disagreement. This is clear from cases of faultless disagreement involving epistemic terms, like 'might' and 'probably'. I discuss the comparison between appearance and epistemic vocabulary in §4.

I remain neutral about the precise semantic contribution of experiencer prepositional phrases, and whether we should in fact take there to an implicit experiencer argument in sentences like (13-a). The key point I wish to take from these theorists is that predicates of personal taste are experiential, whereas other evaluative predicates, for example moral ones, are not.

Taking the licensing of experiencer prepositional phrases as a diagnostic for experiential predicates, it's clear that appearance predicates are experiential as well. Indeed, the contrast between bare cases, like (14-a), and relativized ones, like (14-b), was key in the illustration of relativist effects in the previous section.

- (14) a. That cake tastes vegan.  
b. That cake tastes vegan to Sam.

Bylinina further observes that experiential predicates give rise to a first-hand experience requirement in utterances of unembedded sentences. This requirement comes out in the observation that utterances as in (15) are deviant.

- (15) #This cake is tasty, but I've never tasted it.

Precisely the same requirement is present with appearance predicates, something that is noted in previous discussion of the requirement in Pearson (2013) and Ninan (2014).

- (16) a. #That cake tastes vegan, but I've never tasted it.  
b. #That dress looks white, but I've never seen it.

Not only do predicates of personal taste and appearance predicates both give rise to relativist effects, but both are also experiential. Might the relativist effects then be traceable to the role of experience in the use of these predicates? Indeed, it seems fairly intuitive that these predicates give rise to faultless disagreement and faultless retraction precisely because speakers' experiences differ, and can change over time. Thus, I would like to frame the following:

- (17) **Subjective experience hypothesis** Relativist effects with experiential predicates are due to variation in subjective experience across perspectives.

If the subjective experience hypothesis is correct, then when faultless disagreement arises with predicates of personal taste and appearance predicates, it's because the speakers have different subjective experiences of the stimulus; and when faultless retraction arises with these predicates, it's

because the speaker's subjective experience of the stimulus has changed over time. This would not rule out that the perspectives also differ in other ways. For instance, based on different subjective experiences, speakers may also be led to different evaluations of some subject matter. The key point of the hypothesis, however, is that the relativist effects are explained by the difference in experience. On this picture, experiential and evaluative predicates form distinct but overlapping classes, with predicates of personal taste falling into the intersection. According to the subjective experience hypothesis, relativist effects track the experiential.

This possibility is significant for determining the scope of relativist effects in natural language. If it's right, theorists shouldn't jump from the recognition of relativist effects with predicates of personal taste to the view that all evaluative language must behave relativistically; nor need they worry, if they opt for a relativist analysis of experiential language, that they will need to abandon objectivism for weighty evaluative language, for instance about morality.

#### 4 Varieties of disagreement: epistemic and comparative cases

In this section and the next, I will look more closely at a variety of cases of faultless disagreement with experiential predicates. It will emerge next that the subjective experience hypothesis is not plausible as a fully general claim about relativist effects in this domain.<sup>16</sup> However, the hypothesis remains plausible, I will argue in §5, for a restricted class of experiential predicates, which includes predicates of personal taste.

In a case like the dress dispute, it is quite plausible that the faultless disagreement is due to differing visual experiences of the two speakers. Indeed, I built this into the description of the case, repeated here, when I used it to motivate the existence of faultless disagreement about appearances.

- (7) **Context** Alex and Briana are looking at the same dress, but have different experiences of its color.
- a. **Alex:** That dress looks blue and black.
  - b. **Briana:** No, it looks white and gold!

But in the second case of faultless disagreement about appearances, repeated next, the same is not obviously the case.

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<sup>16</sup>I'll only use cases of faultless disagreement to illustrate this, though cases of retraction would do just as well. Indeed, for my purposes, faultless retraction might be thought of as a special case of faultless disagreement: namely faultless disagreement with one's former self.

- (8) **Context** Alex and Briana both tasted the same cake. Alex rarely eats vegan food and really notices when baked goods lack ingredients like butter and eggs; Briana is more used to vegan food, so their lack doesn't strike her as much.
- a. **Alex:** That cake tastes vegan.
  - b. **Briana:** No, it doesn't taste vegan!

One could say that in this sort of situation, Alex and Briana's gustatory experiences must differ. One might argue that if one of them is picking up on some flavor more than the other is, then there must be some difference in their subjective experiences. I don't want to rule this out. But I don't want to rely on it either. It is an issue that will presumably not be answered just by an examination of discourse about appearances. Just considering the dialogue, it seems to me an open possibility that as far as we can make sense of the qualitative identity of experiences, Alex and Briana's experiences might be the same. And yet, given their different past experiences and associations with the flavors, they notice different features of the cake's flavor, and so draw different conclusions about the likely properties of the cake.

An example from Doran (2015) makes an even stronger case against a difference in subjective experience being necessary for faultless disagreement about appearances.

- (18) a. **Sam:** The man on that bench looks like he's just been dumped.  
b. **Sue:** Nuh-uh, he looks like he's got bad stomach cramps.

In describing what might be going on this case, she writes:

Suppose that the man on the bench is a total stranger, and neither Sam nor Sue will ever get to know what sort of day he was having. . . . Each speaker seems to be expressing her own impressions of the situation, much like two speakers expressing their own gustatory impressions of a particular batch of chili. . . . Sam's experiences with the world up until this point will have led her to form a series of beliefs and associative links pertaining to observable things in the world and their potential underlying causes. Perhaps in her experience, people who have recently endured heartbreak typically exhibit whatever facial expression the man on the bench is currently making. But Sue's experiences of the world may be different, and perhaps for her, the man's expression is characteristic of abdominal pain. (Doran (2015): 22)

Here, the disagreement between Sam and Sue is explained in a way that doesn't require them to have different visual experiences of the man on the bench. Instead, the two speakers' different past experiences and associations lead them to draw different conclusions based on their visual perception of the man. In this case, as well as in (8), the differences in perspective that give rise to the relativist

effects don't seem like they must be differences in perceptual experience. Rather, the perspectives differ because the speakers' (possibly alike) experiences have different informational import as to the likely properties of things.<sup>17</sup> Appearance reports that give rise to faultless disagreement for this reason have features that philosophers of perception have previously associated with what they call *epistemic* uses of appearance language. Epistemic appearance predicates are used to convey what appearances suggest about the way things really are.<sup>18</sup> That appearance predicates of this sort should give rise to faultless disagreement is in fact expected, given the similarities between them and information-sensitive expressions, like epistemic modals and probability adverbs — which have widely been discussed as giving rise to relativist effects.<sup>19</sup> For example, consider the following case with 'probably',<sup>20</sup> and compare with the variant with 'looks' in (20), appropriate in just the same context.

(19) **Context** Fat Tony is a mobster who has planted evidence of his death at the docks. Andy and Beth observe the planted evidence. Andy has no idea that Fat Tony had a motive to fake his death and is convinced (though not completely certain) that he is dead. Beth, however, knows that he had such a motive and is suspicious (though doesn't rule out that the evidence is genuine).

- a. **Andy:** Fat Tony is probably dead.
- b. **Beth:** No, it's more likely that he faked his death.  
[I.e. It isn't probable that he's dead.]

(20) **Context** As in (19).

- a. **Andy:** It looks like Fat Tony is dead.
- b. **Beth:** No, it doesn't.

Faultless disagreement arises over claims with 'might' or 'probably', when the speakers have different

<sup>17</sup>Some theorists, e.g. Macpherson (2012), have argued that background beliefs influence the quality of perceptual experience. More recently, however, evidence for such *cognitive penetration* of experience has been cast into doubt by, e.g. Firestone and Scholl (2016). I thus go forward under the assumption that, at least in cases like (18), the speakers' experiences may be qualitatively alike, despite other differences in their cognition. Furthermore, as I explain in footnote 23 below, my main points can be maintained, even if cognitive penetration takes place in all of these cases.

<sup>18</sup>Jackson (1977) writes that with these uses (of 'looks'), "I am expressing the fact that a certain body of *visually* acquired evidence . . . supports the proposition" (p.30). See also Chisholm (1957), Brogaard (2014).

<sup>19</sup>In the epistemic modal literature, there is debate about the merits of relativist and non-relativist approaches to dealing with this behavior, just as there is in the literature on predicates of personal taste. See, e.g., Stephenson (2007), MacFarlane (2011), Dowell (2011), Yalcin (2011), Egan (2007), Egan et al. (2005). Again, my point doesn't depend on any particular resolution of the debate. Rather, my concern is with what kind of difference in perspective gives rise to relativist effects; and in the case of epistemic vocabulary, it is differences in the information the speakers have.

<sup>20</sup>The case is adapted from Khoo (2015), Knobe and Yalcin (2014); I change modal from 'might' to 'probably' to create a closer parallel with the appearance case.

total bodies of evidence at their disposal. Similarly, faultless disagreement arises over epistemic appearance claims, when the speakers have different bodies of evidence, acquired through the relevant sense modality, at their disposal. In cases where all the relevant information seems to be that acquired through perception, as in the previous examples, dialogues of both kinds feel appropriate, and roughly equivalent. There is a difference, however, which I mention briefly in order to further clarify the comparison being proposed. Non-appearance informational expressions have been recognized to give rise to what Yalcin (2007) terms *epistemic contradictions*, as in (21-a) and (21-b). However, epistemic appearance claims, as in (21-c), give rise to no such contradictions.

- (21) a. #Fat Tony might be dead, but he isn't.  
b. #Fat Tony is probably dead, but he isn't.  
c. It looks like Fat Tony is dead, but he isn't.

This contrast is expected, however, once we recognize that epistemic appearance claims are based on a restricted body of information — restricted to that acquired through the relevant sense modality. Traditional epistemic modals and probability adverbs, by contrast, are based on one's total body of information. It's not coherent to claim that all of one's information leaves something open, or makes it probable, while then going on to deny that it's the case. However, it can be perfectly coherent to claim that one's visually-acquired information makes something probable, while then denying that it's the case.

We have thus found one group of cases of faultless disagreement about appearances — faultless disagreement about epistemic appearances — where we shouldn't assume that what differs across the two perspectives is the subjective, perceptual experiences of the speakers. Instead, what differs seems to be the informational import of those perceptual experiences. Because of this sort of case, and more to be discussed next, the subjective experience hypothesis is not plausible as a completely general claim about the source of relativist effects with experiential language. Still, as I'll argue in §5, variation in subjective experience remains a plausible source of relativist effects within a restricted class of experiential predicates.

There is another type of case that casts doubt on a completely general subjective experience hypothesis. Consider, for instance, the following disagreements about appearances:

- (22) **Context** Max has put on very realistic face paint for Halloween, to make himself look like he has some kind of illness. Alicia and Bob both know it's just a costume.

- a. **Alicia:** Max looks like he has chicken pox.
- b. **Bob:** No, he looks like he has measles.

(23) **Context** Alicia and Bob smell a cheap, synthetically-scented perfume.

- a. **Alicia:** The perfume smells like roses.
- b. **Bob:** No, it smells like lavender.

In these cases, there is no question about the actual properties of things — it’s uncontroversial that Max has neither the chicken pox nor the measles, and it’s uncontroversial that no real flowers went into manufacturing the perfume. The question is rather what the appearances of things are more or less similar to. Appearance reports uses in this way have been called *comparative*.<sup>21</sup> Two speakers can disagree over comparative judgments like these, without necessarily having different perceptual experiences of the stimulus in question. They might be focusing on different aspects of the appearances, or they might differ in which aspects they think are most relevant. Again, that faultless disagreement should arise in cases like these is unsurprising, even without differences in the subjective experiences of the speakers. This is because comparative claims of many kinds, about things other than appearances, also give rise to faultless disagreement. Unlike the cases with information-sensitive expressions discussed above, cases with comparative constructions have not been prominently discussed in the literature on relativism. But they can clearly be found.

(24) **Context** Alvin and Brian observe Dev, whom they know to be an amateur swimmer, in a competition. Alvin is impressed by his technique, though Brian can’t help focusing on his mediocre speed.

- a. **Alvin:** Dev swims like a professional.
- b. **Brian:** No, he doesn’t!

Here, the two speakers can be assumed to have the same knowledge of what it takes to be a professional swimmer and in what ways Dev lives up to and falls short of this. However, they disagree about how all these factors should be combined and weighed into a judgment of whether he swims similarly enough to a professional for the comparative claim in (24-a) to be appropriate.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, there are cases of relativist effects with experiential language where the operative difference in perspective is something other than a difference in subjective experience; so, the subjective

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<sup>21</sup>Jackson (1977), for instance, writes that in these cases, ‘It looks like an F’ seems to mean that it looks the ways Fs normally do (p.31). See also Martin (2010) for a detailed account of comparative appearance reports.

<sup>22</sup>Faultless disagreement over comparative claims is plausibly a special case of faultless disagreement involving multidimensional gradable predicates. See e.g. Silk (2016), Kennedy (2013).



experience hypothesis framed in §3 is not plausible as a fully general claim about relativist effects with experiential language. In particular, in faultless disagreement involving both comparative and epistemic appearance claims, it isn't necessary for the speakers to have different subjective experiences (though, of course, they might sometimes). The differences in perspective can instead come down to other things, like differences in information, or differences in comparative judgments.<sup>23</sup> That differences like these should give rise to relativist effects is expected, given that relativist effects arise with information-sensitive and comparative claims already, even in non-appearance cases. In probing the subjective experience hypothesis, we have thus found striking connections between appearance predicates and other kinds of, non-experiential, expressions. It makes a lot of sense that appearance claims should be able to behave similarly to claims involving these other expressions. Where epistemic modals allow us to make claims sensitive to our information, there are (epistemic) appearance predicates that allow us to make claims sensitive to our appearance-based information; where comparative constructions in general allow us to compare things, there are (comparative) appearance predicates that allow us to compare things with respect to their appearances in particular. Given that appearances are things we gain information from, and that we can compare, it makes sense that appearance predicates should have both of these uses.

## 5 Varieties of disagreement: phenomenal and evaluative cases

Because of the cases discussed in the previous section, the subjective experience hypothesis is not plausible in full generality. Still, I would like now to defend it as a claim about relativist effects within a restricted class of experiential predicates. That is, I will suggest that for some kinds of claims about appearances, faultless disagreement involving them does require a difference in the subjective experiences of the speakers.

A first case of this kind is the dress dispute already mentioned. There, if the two speakers are faultless in their claims — respectively that the dress looks blue and black, and that it looks white

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<sup>23</sup>In footnote 17 above, I mentioned the possibility of cognitive penetration of perceptual experience. If that does happen, then it may be that in all of the cases discussed in this section, the differences in information or comparative judgments result in differences in perceptual experiences. Let me make two points about this possibility in connection to my aims in this paper. First, it would do nothing to undermine the claim, which I will argue for in the next section, that relativist effects with predicates of personal taste come down to differences in subjective experience. Second, it would also leave intact the connection that I have drawn in this section, between certain uses of appearance predicates and information-sensitive and comparative expressions. Even if differences in information or comparisons can penetrate experience, to give rise to relativist effects that track experiential differences, this would still in an important sense vindicate the claim that relativist effects with appearance language in these cases have the same source as relativist effects in non-appearance cases.

and gold — then it seems their visual experiences should differ qualitatively. It is, at the very least, much harder to point to what else is supposed to differ about their perspectives, to underlie the disagreement.

Philosophers in the perception literature have identified a third use of appearance claims, besides the epistemic and the comparative mentioned above: namely, a *phenomenal* use. In these cases, the appearance is qualified or described directly. It is controversial which appearance claims should be thought of as phenomenal.<sup>24</sup> I introduce the term simply in order to have a label for cases that are importantly different from those considered in the previous section — and in particular to be different in placing constraints on the phenomenology of the speakers, when they perceptually experience the stimulus that they’re talking about. The claims in the dress case plausibly fit this description, but I will rely on less controversial examples. Consider the following, for instance:

- (25) **Context** Ayse and Betty smell some cheese. Ayse finds it overpowering, while Betty doesn’t.
- a. **Ayse:** The cheese smells strong.
  - b. **Betty:** No, it doesn’t.
- (26) **Context** Alf and Bill taste the same wine. Alf finds it sweet, Bill doesn’t.
- a. **Alf:** The wine tastes sweet.
  - b. **Bill:** No, it doesn’t.

What is the source of faultless disagreement about appearances in these cases? It is extremely natural to say that what differs across the speakers’ perspectives here is how they subjectively experience the stimulus, olfactorily in (25), and gustatorily in (26). But, one might press: is this kind of difference really necessary? Above, I held that we shouldn’t rule out that speakers disagreeing about epistemic or comparative appearances might nonetheless have qualitatively alike experiences. Could it not also be that the speakers in these two cases have qualitatively alike experiences, but differ in terms of whether they find that to be sweet or strong? This possibility is difficult to make sense of. What is it for something to taste sweet to you (to make it such that a claim as in (26-a) could be faultless) other than for the gustatory experience to have a certain quality, which is lacking or less prominent in the experience of someone else (for whom the claim

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<sup>24</sup>Jackson (1977) takes the main examples to be those ascribing color and shape appearances, while Martin (2010) believes that those are best thought of as comparative, while true phenomenal cases involve predicates that can apply primarily to appearances, such as ‘sweet’ or ‘splendid’, rather than those which primarily apply only to ordinary objects, such as color predicates.

in (26-b) would be faultless)? And similarly for (25). In these cases, the judgments of the speakers have their source in the qualities of their perceptual experiences, in such a way that to faultlessly disagree, their experiences must differ.

This discussion now brings us to appearance predicates that are closest in meaning to predicates of personal taste — namely, those that are used to ascribe evaluative properties on the basis of appearances.

- (27) **Context** Ann and Ben get a whiff of cigar smoke. Ann finds it unpleasant, while Ben likes it.
- a. **Ann:** That smells gross.
  - b. **Ben:** No, it doesn't!
- (28) **Context** Aline and Bob have both tried the same cake. Aline enjoyed it, but Bob didn't.
- a. **Aline:** This cake tastes good.
  - b. **Bob:** No, it doesn't!

I avoided cases like these in arguing for the presence of relativist effects with appearance language, because in order to do that, it was necessary to factor out any contribution from evaluative language. Now, however, I turn to them as further examples of phenomenal appearance claims. To make the assertions in (27) and (28) faultlessly, the speakers must have experiences with a particular character, either pleasant or unpleasant. And it's hard to imagine these cases of faultless disagreement, without taking the speakers' experiences to differ in this way.<sup>25</sup> Again, though, one might press: couldn't the two speakers have qualitatively alike experiences, but differ in whether they find the smell gross, or the taste pleasant? But as with the non-evaluative phenomenal cases

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<sup>25</sup>There are superficially similar cases, to these as well as to (25) and (26), where the appearance claims would be epistemic or comparative; and in these cases the appearance claims do not feel equivalent to claims with predicates of personal taste. This would be the case, for instance, if the speakers were discussing whether some food has spoiled, and used 'tastes good' to mean not something about the pleasant quality of the flavor (as 'tasty' must be used!), but rather to mean that the flavor suggests that the food is still fresh.

There are also superficially similar cases where the appearance claims are phenomenal, but the disagreement is not based in differing qualities of the speakers' experiences. Two main alternatives are available. First, the disagreement may be due to differences in what each speaker takes to be the threshold for the application of the predicate — for instance, what is good-tasting enough to count as tasting good, or sweet enough to count as tasting sweet? Second, it may be due to differences in what each takes to be the relevant comparison class — for instance, Aline may judge that the cake tastes good because she's comparing it to supermarket-bought cakes, whereas Bob judges that it doesn't because he's comparing it to cakes he normally eats at nice parties. Both of these reasons for faultless disagreement are operative in cases involving gradable adjectives in general, not just experiential predicates (see Barker (2002), as well as references in footnote 22 above). But these do not exhaust the reasons for faultless disagreement with phenomenal appearance claims. My question here should be understood to be about the source of the disagreement in the remaining cases. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on this point.

in (25) and (26) above, this possibility is challenging to make sense of. Rather, the positive or negative assessments in these sorts of cases seem to be expressing something about the quality of the experience itself. Whether or not it might be possible to make sense of the faultless disagreements in (27) and (28) without such experiential differences, crucially, there is no pressure to appeal to such a possibility. For we already have a ready explanation of the presence of faultless disagreement in cases like these: namely, variation in subjective experience across perspectives. Cases of relativist effects with evaluative phenomenal appearance predicates lend no support to the view that relativist effects have their source in evaluation.

In just the same way, there is no reason to tie relativist effects to evaluation in cases involving traditional predicates of personal taste, such as the much-repeated (1) (equivalent to (28) above):

- (1) **Context** Aline and Bob have both tried the same cake. Aline enjoyed it, but Bob didn't.  
a. **Aline:** This cake is tasty.  
b. **Bob:** No, it's not tasty!

I cannot definitively rule out that faultless disagreement about phenomenal appearances or matters of personal taste might be due to differences in perspective other than differences in the subjective experiences of the speakers. What I do hope to have motivated is that differences in subjective experiences are an extremely intuitive way to explain why faultless disagreement arises in these cases — and to the point where it is hard to see how to make sense of the difference across speakers without appeal to an experiential difference. To the extent that this is the case, it relieves us of any burden to explain relativist effects in these cases by appeal to the evaluative contents of the claims. Once we approach the language of personal taste via its similarity to the language of appearance, its relativist behavior no longer immediately raises any worry about relativism bleeding into the whole domain of the evaluative. Rather, relativist effects are naturally viewed as arising from the fact that these expressions are experiential.

## 6 Conclusion

Appearance language has received little attention in the semantic debates surrounding relative truth. I have shown, first, that relativist effects arise with appearance predicates, just as they do with predicates of personal taste. Thus, to the extent that relativism is motivated for the latter, it's equally motivated for the former. I've further shown how investigation of relativist effects with

appearance language can lend insight into the source of relativist effects with predicates of personal taste. With those appearance predicates that are closest in meaning to predicates of personal taste — phenomenal appearance predicates — the plausible source of relativist effects is variation in subjective experience across perspectives. I proposed that this role of experience is the source of relativist effects with predicates of personal taste too, so that there is no need to appeal to anything special about evaluative vocabulary to explain these effects.

Along the way, I also illustrated the variety of uses to which appearance language can be put. In addition to the phenomenal examples that are most relevant to the question about predicates of personal taste, there are also epistemic and comparative examples. In these cases, however, relativist effects may be due not only to experiential differences, but also, respectively, to informational differences (on analogy with epistemic modals), and to differences in comparative judgments (on analogy with other comparative constructions). This variety in uses of appearance language is unsurprising, given the various ways in which we can be interested in appearances themselves: they are sources of information about the appearance-independent world, they can be the objects of comparisons, and they can also be bearers of evaluative qualities, as pleasant or unpleasant. In the end, I hope not only to have provided a new perspective on discourse about matters of personal taste, by focusing on its experiential rather than evaluative side, but also to have brought out the interest in investigating the rich subject of discourse about appearances.

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