

Disagreement and coordination in matters of taste

Longer abstract for sophia conference, Louvain la Neuve

Recent research on disagreement in matters of taste has focused on the semantics and pragmatics of predicates of taste, but the conceptual and empirical issues relevant for understanding the communicative dimension of such disputes – why we have them, and how we deal with them -- extend into areas that touch on the evolutionary psychology of expressing attitudes (Green, 2009), the role of social emotions and argumentation in morality (Haidt, 2001) and the function of cohesion and trust in small and large groups (Davis, 2001). Systematic fault lines in matters of taste typically reveal where and how individuals were socialized and where the in-group/outgroup consensus lies. The capacity to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’ often focuses on attitudes that play a key role in organizing our social preferences. In socialization and integration the adoption of pre-existing interests, values and preferences (often required for the creation and maintenance of joint, or shared projects) plays a key role.

Disagreements in matters of taste have two easily recognizable dimensions that do not easily fit together. On the one hand, there is a sense of faultlessness – each party seems to be *prima facie* right about her judgement because it reflects how she herself is affected by a state of affairs or where her preferences lie (the judgements are *de se*, as Egan stresses (Egan, 2014). On the other hand, occasions that prompt such judgements often reveal that it matters, in the context of the conversation, to the participants that it becomes *common knowledge* that she is so affected (Chwe, 2013). In many small-scale cases of acting together, coordination is important and attitudinal disputes must be resolved (Bratman, 2007). If you and I are going to decorate a room, together, we’d better agree on which color we prefer for the walls. When a disagreement becomes public, it becomes *common knowledge* among the participants that there is a disagreement between them (Thomas et.al. 2014). If I prefer cannelloni and you don’t, but there is no Italian restaurant within walking distance (there is one downtown, but it’s hard to find and it might be closed), one of us has to give in. Shopping can be extremely tedious when incompatible preferences are constantly ventilated. One reason is that we seek alignment or convergence of non-doxastic attitudes, as psychological research on the functional and social role of attitude alignment of preferences and values testifies (Wood 2000). Seeking convergence of attitudes and avoiding attitudes that cannot be jointly satisfied is the basis for the formation of joint goals, projects and the creation and maintenance of delicate social bonds. The feeling of ‘us’ requires common knowledge that specific values, preferences and pro-attitudes are shared.

Common knowledge among all those involved (‘the players’) about what is preferred or what is to be preferred is useful to select an equilibrium in a coordination game (but note that the selected equilibrium need not be symmetrical --, someone may have given in.) A *public announcement* of what one prefers or what is to be preferred – the public announcement reveals how one is going to act hence what is preferred or is to be preferred) reduces uncertainty about how the other party is going to act, and it invites the audience to also publicize her judgement, either directly or indirectly, thus reducing unpleasant surprises that might arise in the course of action. When Alice makes her preferences or preferred strategy, or choice public, she makes common knowledge with Bob what he can reasonably expect her to choose. But it is equally important that agents are open to the

possibility that their personal values, desires or preferences – in particular those they would act on if they were to act alone or if they were not engaged in a joint project -- will sometimes have to be adjusted, bracketed or perhaps even abandoned. If you prefer McDonalds while I prefer KFC, then apart from our distinctively unhealthy preferences, what is at stake is who is going to give in order to save the shared overarching project of having a snack together rather than having to lunch separately. In *Battle of the Sexes* two equilibria preserve the non-disputed shared preference to go out on Saturday night.

Selecting a mutually beneficial equilibrium typically requires consistent preferences ('I'll do the cooking if you do the dishes'). 'Mutually beneficial' does not mean that the underlying preferences or desires must somehow be merged or be similar. Alice's preference for *x over y* can be reconciled with Bob's preference for *y over x* by agreeing to be *indifferent* between these preferences, or to let an external device (a toss, for example) select which equilibrium will be played, which is better than to push ahead and abandon a *shared* preference *u over z*. (In *Battle of the Sexes*, Bob and Alice can toss a coin to decide how the evening will be spent, or take what they did last Saturday as a suitable precedent.)

I am going to explore the idea that, just as one can play the **informing** and **requesting** game simultaneously (explored by Searle and others under the heading of 'indirect speech acts'), so can speakers simultaneously play the **informing** and **alignment** game. But what kind of language game is it to *seek attitudinal alignment*? I first explore a typical coordination game and the problem of *equilibrium selection*. Then I look at a classification of speech acts in terms of what speakers want from their audience. It will turn out that a typical judgement of taste has two different goals: one of seeking to inform the other party, and one of seeking alignment in attitude with the other. Audiences can focus on one of these goals, focus on both, or even rationally ignore that alignment was being sought.

Alice and Bob have a dispute that originates in incompatible preferences, i.e. preferences that cannot be satisfied simultaneously, in the same world. On Saturday morning, they plan how to spend the evening together. Alice prefers a Bach concert while Bob prefers a Stravinsky concert. Given that they prefer to spend the evening together rather than separately (which is common ground, and not under discussion), they must align their first order preferences. The typical incentivization matrix has the following structure:

| | | |
|---|-----|-----|
| | C | D |
| C | 2,1 | 0,0 |
| D | 0,0 | 1,2 |

(figure 1, *Battle of the Sexes*)

| | | |
|---|-----|-----|
| | C | D |
| C | 2,2 | 0,0 |
| D | 0,0 | 1,1 |

(figure 2, *Pure Coordination*)

Battle of the Sexes differs from a pure coordination game (figure 2) where both players have symmetric preferences and coordination failure is the result of strategic uncertainty (which can, but must not be solved by making the choices sequential, such that the first player's choice becomes the salient option for the second player). How to resolve the dispute? The first player's move can either *prime* the second player to adopt the speaker's attitude or the first player can *check for alignment* – check for which equilibrium they can agree on. This analysis of disputes in matters of taste as ingredients of pre-play negotiations will be the focus of my paper. The broader context of the paper is the study of alignment of preferences. Seeking alignment is an important goal of human communicative interaction (Tomasello 2008). Contrary to speech act theories which focus on illocutionary acts individuated by verbs that label the speech acts we perform (as in Austin 1962 and Searle 1969), Tomasello views seek to locate speech acts in a taxonomy that also covers non-verbal types of cooperative interaction like pointing, and this from a functional perspective: what is it that speakers typically want from their intended audience when they issue a non-verbal or verbal communicative action? Tomasello recognizes three broad types of cooperative interaction and it is important to note that every token communicative interaction incorporates to a certain degree all three of them (Tomasello, 2007). *Requestive* communication takes place when a speaker wants the recipient to do something that will help the speaker/sender. These actions reflect, to use Tomasello's apt social reformulation of a well-known formula of Searle's, a *You-to-Me* direction of fit: the aim is that you (the intended audience) conform to my desire: if you accept my request, you are willing to satisfy my desire. 'Ordering', 'requesting', 'asking' are the familiar labels for the illocutionary component of such acts, but requestive communication does not depend on the existence of labels for illocutionary actions and the classification is based on typical effects aimed at by the speaker and fully recognized by the intended audience as the effect aimed at. *Helping* is communicating with the aim of conforming to your desires to those of others – speech acts with a *Me-to-You* direction of fit. Individuals often want to help without even being requested to. I typically inform you of things that I think you will find helpful or interesting, given my knowledge of your goals and interests. When I inform you, I let you know (or put you in a position to know) what you (at least, in my eyes) need to know to realize your projects. (Helping by letting the recipient know what she might find useful to know may be have further self-centered motives.) When I help you with information, I often indirectly request you to confirm that you publicly accept what I thought was important for you. You let me know that you now take yourself to know what I told you.

The third communicative motive is *sharing*. Philosophers of language have paid scant attention to sharing feelings and alignment of attitudes as a communicative goal in dyadic engagements, but one early exception was Immanuel Kant who famously held that in judgements of taste the speaker

makes “a claim to the agreement” of others: ‘Through the judgment of taste (on the beautiful) it imputes (‘ansinnen’) the delight in an object to everyone’ (V, 213-4), and ‘the pleasure (felt in the determination of an object as beautiful) is at the same time declared through the judgement of taste to be valid for everyone’ (ibid., 221). The insight was not lost to Richard Hare, who held that expressivism includes the view that a taste judgement has a ‘commending function’. *Expressing* an attitude (rather than describing the attitude one has) is not like letting steam off, as the familiar but misleading paraphrase ‘Hurray for pizza!’ would suggest. Its aim has three dimensions: to *inform* the other about one’s own attitude, and to seek *alignment* by indirectly *requesting* her to publicize her preferences or affections. We focus on the first and second dimension.