

Taste Predicates and the Acquaintance Inference

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Taste predicates (*tasty*, *delicious*, etc.) along with aesthetic predicates (*beautiful*, *elegant*, etc.) typically carry with them a requirement of *first-hand knowledge*. If we restrict our discussion to *tasty* (for simplicity), we have:

- **Observation 1:** Utterances of the form *o's are tasty* (e.g. *The lobster rolls are tasty*) typically convey the information that the speaker has actually tasted an *o* (Pearson, 2013).

Call the sort of inference associated with *tasty* an *acquaintance inference*. An utterance of the form *o's are tasty* would normally be odd if its associated acquaintance inference were false (if the speaker had, for example, only been told by a friend that the item in question was tasty). This is puzzling, for note the contrast here with most other predicates: I can, for example, say *The lobster rolls contain paprika* even if I haven't tasted them. I might assert this on the basis of testimony from a reliable informant. Here first-hand knowledge (i.e. tasting) is not required for assertion.

What is the nature of the acquaintance inference associated with *tasty*? The phenomenon has been discussed in philosophical aesthetics, where it has been analyzed as a conversational implicature (Mothersill, 1984). But the implicature hypothesis faces two problems:

- **Observation 2:** While conversational implicatures do not typically project over negation, acquaintance inferences do.
 1. *Scenario: a passerby is speaking to a motorist who is out of gas.*
 - (a) There is a gas station around the corner. (*implicates p*, where *p* = *there is a gas station around the corner that is open*)
 - (b) There isn't a gas station around the corner. (*doesn't implicate p*)
 2. (a) The lobster rolls at *Neptune Oyster* are tasty. (*suggests q*, where *q* = *the speaker has tasted the lobster rolls at Neptune Oyster*)
 - (b) The lobster rolls at *Neptune Oyster* are not tasty. (*also suggests q*)
- **Observation 3:** While conversational implicatures can usually be cancelled quite easily, acquaintance inferences resist cancellation (cf. Klecha, 2013).
 3. There is a gas station around the corner, but it isn't open.
 4. ?? The lobster rolls at *Neptune Oyster* are tasty, but I haven't tried them.

Note that **Observation 2** also suggests that acquaintance inferences are not entailments, since entailments typically do not project over negation.

Observations 2 and **3** might seem to suggest that acquaintance inferences arise from a lexical presupposition of taste predicates (cf. Pearson, 2013), since presuppositions also project over negation and resist cancellation:

5. (a) John stopped smoking. (*presupposes that John used to smoke*)
- (b) John didn't stop smoking. (*also presupposes that John used to smoke*)
6. ?? John stopped smoking, but he never used to smoke. (*presupposition can't be cancelled*)

But the presupposition hypothesis also faces two problems:

- **Observation 4:** Presupposition-canceling negations cannot target acquaintance inferences.
 7. John didn't *stop* smoking – he's never smoked a cigarette in his life!
 8. ?? The lobster rolls at *Neptune Oyster* aren't *tasty* – I haven't even tasted them!
- **Observation 5:** Acquaintance inferences project over negation, but fail to project over many other presupposition 'holes'.
 9. *The following usually presuppose that John used to smoke:*
 - (a) If John stopped smoking, his doctor will be happy.
 - (b) John probably stopped smoking.
 - (c) Did John stop smoking?
 10. *The following do not suggest that the speaker has tasted the lobster rolls:*

- (a) If the lobster rolls are tasty, I will invest in the restaurant.
- (b) The lobster rolls are probably tasty.
- (c) Are the lobster rolls tasty?

(This last observation presumably also rules out an analysis in terms of *conventional* implicature.)

The unusual behavior of taste predicates can be explained by adopting the *Acquaintance Principle* (AP) (cf. Wollheim, 1980) and the *knowledge account of assertion* (Williamson 2000, a.o). The knowledge account of assertion says: One must assert p only if one knows p . AP says: Generally speaking, one can only know whether o 's are tasty if one has tasted an o . AP is roughly equivalent to the conjunction of two claims: AP+ which says that, generally speaking, one can only know that o 's are tasty if one has tasted an o ; AP− which says that, generally speaking, one can only know that o 's are *not* tasty if one has tasted an o .

If (competent speakers generally know that) one can know p only if q is true, then given the knowledge account of assertion, an assertion of p will typically convey q ; in such cases, we say that an assertion of p *epistemically implicates* q . For example, since one can know p only if one knows p (here $q = \text{one knows } p$), an assertion of p epistemically implicates that the speaker knows p .

If (competent speakers generally know that) AP+ holds, then *I have tasted o* is a an epistemic implication of *o is tasty*; if (competent speakers generally know that) AP− holds, *I have tasted o* is also an epistemic implication of *o is not tasty*. So AP+ explains why acquaintance inferences arises in the first place (**Observation 1**), and AP− explains why they project over negation (**Observation 2**). **Observations 3** and **4** are likewise explained by this approach, since:

- Unlike conversational implicatures, epistemic implications resist cancellation:
 - 11. ?? It's raining, but I don't know that it's raining.
- Unlike presuppositions, epistemic implications cannot be targeted by presupposition-cancelling negations:
 - 12. ?? It's not *raining* because I don't *know* that it's raining.

What about **Observation 5**, the unusual projection pattern of acquaintance inferences? On this account, acquaintance inferences project over negation because of AP−, which more or less follows from AP. But note that AP doesn't entail analogous principles concerning conditionals or epistemic modals, such as 'AP-*probably*', which would say that, generally speaking, one can know that o 's are probably delicious only if one has tasted an o . Thus, the present account doesn't lead us to expect acquaintance inferences to project over presupposition holes generally.

Two final points. First, this is only the beginning of an explanation of the acquaintance inference, since I have said nothing about *why* AP is true. Why is taste/aesthetic knowledge so different from other kinds of knowledge in this regard, which can normally be based on indirect evidence (such as testimony)? Second, **Observation 1** says that utterances of the form *o 's are tasty* typically convey that the speaker has tasted an o . Typically, but perhaps not always. So suppose there are contexts in which one can appropriately utter something of the form *o 's are tasty* without having tasted an o . Is this a problem for the present account? Not necessarily. For note that AP only says that *generally speaking*, one can only know whether o 's are tasty if one has tasted an o . So AP allows that *sometimes* one can know whether o 's are tasty even if one *hasn't* tasted an o . Thus, my conjecture is that contexts (if such there be) in which a speaker can utter a sentence of the form *o 's are tasty* without having tasted an o are contexts in which the speaker can know whether o 's are tasty even if she has not tasted an o . A complete account of the acquaintance inference, then, would include an account of why knowledge of taste claims requires acquaintance in most situations, but not in all. This is left as a topic for future inquiry.

References

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