

Taste Predicates and the Acquaintance Inference

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1. The Acquaintance Inference

Observation I:

Simple taste/aesthetic claims typically suggest that the speaker has first-hand knowledge of the relevant item (Kant, Mothersill, Pearson, MacFarlane).

1. The lobster rolls are tasty. (*suggests the speaker has tasted them*)
2. St. Mark's Basilica is beautiful. (*suggests the speaker has seen it*)

Call this the *acquaintance inference*. Because (1) carries this inference, it would be odd to utter it if one had only heard via testimony that the lobster rolls in question were tasty. What is the nature of this inference?

2. Not a (standard) conversational implicature

In the philosophical literature, Mothersill and Hopkins (a.o.) suggest that the acquaintance inference is a standard conversational implicature. But there are two problems with this:

Observation II:

Unlike conversational implicatures, the acquaintance inference projects over negation.

3. There is a gas station around the corner. (*implicates p = the gas station is open*)
4. There is a gas station ahead. (*doesn't implicate p*)
5. The lobster rolls are tasty. (*suggests q = the speaker has tasted them*)
6. The lobster rolls are not tasty. (*also suggests q*)

Observation III:

Unlike (standard) conversational implicatures, the acquaintance inference resists cancellation (Klecha).

7. There is a gas station around the corner, but it's closed right now.
8. ?? The lobster rolls are tasty, but I've never tasted them.



3. Not a presupposition

Pearson analyzes the acquaintance inference as a presupposition. This explains Observations I, II, and III, since presuppositions project over negation and are hard to cancel in assertive contexts. But there are two problems with this hypothesis:

Observation IV:

Presupposition-cancelling negations cannot target the acquaintance inference. *John stopped smoking* presupposes *John used to smoke*. This presupposition usually projects over negation, but can be 'cancelled' in the right environment (cf. 9). Not so with the acquaintance inference (cf. 10).

9. John didn't stop smoking – he's never smoked a cigarette in his life!
10. ?? The lobster rolls aren't tasty – I haven't even tried them yet!

Observation V:

The acquaintance inference has a different overall projection pattern from standard presuppositions. The acquaintance inference projects over negation, but not over other standard presupposition 'holes' like antecedents of conditionals (cf. 13), epistemic modals (cf. 14), questions, etc.

Let p = *John used to smoke*.

11. If John stopped smoking, his doctor will be happy. (*presupposes p*)
12. John probably stopped smoking. (*presupposes p*)

Let q = *the speaker has tasted the lobster rolls*.

13. If the lobster rolls are tasty, I will invest in the restaurant. (*doesn't suggest q*)
14. The lobster rolls are probably tasty. (*doesn't suggest q*)

Other options?

- Observations II and IV suggest the acquaintance inference is not an *entailment*.
- Observation V suggests the acquaintance inference is not a *conventional implicature*.

References

- Hopkins, 2001, "Beauty and Testimony"
Kant, 1790, *Critique of Judgment*.
Klecha, 2013, "Diagnosing Modality in Predictive Expressions."
MacFarlane, 2014, *Assessment-Sensitivity*.
Mothersill, 1984, *Beauty Restored*.
Pearson, 2013, "A Judge-Free Semantics for Predicates of Personal Taste."
Wollheim, 1980, *Art and its Objects*.

4. The Epistemic Account

The account:

A. Epistemic implication: p epistemically implicates q iff, if one knows p , then q is true.
B. The Acquaintance Principle (AP): Generally speaking, if one knows whether something is tasty, then one has tasted it (Kant, Wollheim).

AP+: Generally speaking, if one knows that something is tasty, one has tasted it.

AP-: Generally speaking, if one knows that something is not tasty, one has tasted it.

Comments:

- Epistemic implications are essentially Quality implicatures, where Quality is understood as: "Assert p only if you know p ". But it is important to note that Quality implicatures differ from standard conversational implicatures in important respects (e.g. cancellability, reinforceability).
- An example of an epistemic implication: Since if one knows p , then it is true that one knows p , I know p will be an epistemic implication of p (this is the trivial case where q = *one knows p*).

Predictions:

- **Observations I and II:** Given AP+, *I have tasted the lobsters rolls* is an epistemic implication of (1). Given AP-, it is an epistemic implication of (6).
- **Observation III:** Epistemic implications resist cancellation (cf. 8):
15. ?? It's raining, but I don't know that it's raining.
- **Observation IV:** Epistemic implications cannot be targeted by presupposition-cancelling negations (cf. 10):
16. ?? It's not raining – I don't know that it's raining.
- **Observation V:** AP doesn't imply that if one knows that something is *probably* tasty, then one has tasted it. So it doesn't predict that the acquaintance inference will project over *probably*. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for other presupposition holes like conditional antecedents.

5. Topics for future inquiry

The epistemic account faces two difficult questions:

- What explains AP? Why does knowledge of tastiness typically require first-hand experience?
- Why doesn't the acquaintance inference always accompany simple taste claims?

17. They have some tasty new items on the menu that I'd like to try.

(Note that (AP) is qualified ("generally speaking").)

There are also more empirical observations to consider. E.g. the acquaintance inference disappears under a variety of other operators:

18. These lobster rolls are going to be tasty. (Klecha)
19. Those lobster rolls must be tasty – everyone is ordering them.
20. Either those lobster rolls are really tasty or there's nothing left on the menu.

Other connections to explore: How (if at all) is this related to grammatical evidentiality? To the recent literature on relativism and contextualism about taste predicates?