Default agreement with subjective assertions

It has been observed that the illocutionary behavior of subjective assertions (in (1)) differ from the one of objective ones (in (2)) in a variety of respects; these differences led to the claim that the two moves should be assigned different discourse profiles (Beltrama 2018a, 2018b).

(1) **Subjective**: The movie was awesome. (2) **Objective**: The movie was set in 1995.

In this talk, we propose that the difference can be explained instead via a unified mechanism of assertion for declarative sentences, refining the notion of *default agreement* (Farkas and Bruce 2010) within a judge-dependent framework (Lasersohn 2005, Stephenson 2007). Our proposal allows us to separate the idea of default agreement from the idea of common ground update, while preserving a uniform mapping between syntactic form and conventional discourse update.

The empirical asymmetry. Relying on experimental evidence, Beltrama (2018a,b) observes that subjective assertions behave differently from objective ones in three respects. First, they do not systematically lead to a CG update after a silent response from the hearer; second, they do not engender a conversational crisis following a denial on the part of the hearer (Beltrama 2018b); third, they can both host and license discourse particles in responses that are not felicitous with objective assertions (e.g., *totally*, Beltrama 2018a).

(3) **A**: The m. was awesome. **B**:Totally! (4) **A**: The m. was set in 1995. **B**:# Totally!

This is *prima facie* a problem for theories of assertion which posit a mechanism of Default Agreement (e.g. Farkas & Bruce 2010) by which asserted content automatically is added to the Common Ground (CG) unless an interlocutor overtly objects: such theories don't seem to predict that assertions should vary in their CG-updating potential or in shaping the possible response moves on the part of the hearer. In view of this, Beltrama (2018a) proposes that sentences that contain subjective predicates encode a hybrid type of update: they commit the speaker to p, similar to regular assertions, but they load the table with the question as to whether the interlocutor agrees with p, similar to polar questions. While explaining the need for an explicit uptake on the part of the hearer for p to enter the CG, this analysis ends up assigning different discourse profiles to syntactically undifferentiated classes of declarative sentences. As such, it abandons the assumption that the CG-Update procedure triggered by an utterance is systematically related to the syntactic clause type of the uttered sentence – a crucial explanatory desideratum in current theories of assertion (e.g. Ciardelli et al. 2013, Farkas & Roelofsen 2017) – leading to an unnecessary proliferation of discourse effects vis-a-vis a limited inventory of clause types. In this talk, we take a different approach to explaining Beltrama's asymmetry: we assume a fully general mechanism of assertion for all syntactically declarative sentences, and refine the notion of default agreement such that the asymmetry is derived principledly from the semantic distinction between subjective and non-subjective predicates.

Preliminaries We assume, for the sake of concreteness, Lasersohn's (2005) judge-dependent semantics, in which semantic interpretation is parameterized to a judge j in addition to the usual contextual parameters.[1] The interpretation of subjective predicates is dependent on the judge parameter; the interpretation of non-subjective predicates is not. This allows us to define the difference between 'subjective' and 'objective' sentences like so (non-judge parameters suppressed for readability throughout):

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[1]Nothing crucial rests on this choice. We could just as easily use MacFarlane's (2014) assessment-sensitive semantics, or Coppock's (2017) outlook-based semantics, or any other semantics in which there is a definable distinction between the class of subjective and objective sentences along the lines given below. It is less clear that our proposal could be couched in Pearson's (2013) quantificational semantics, in which that distinction is not obviously definable.

(5) A sentence S is subjective iff $\exists j, j', [\![S]\!]^j \neq [\![S]\!]^{j'}$
  S is objective iff it is not subjective, i.e. $\forall j, j', [\![S]\!]^j = [\![S]\!]^{j'}$

We also assume an extension of judge-dependence to the Common Ground along the lines sketched by Stephenson (2007, §5.1), in which the CG is a set of sentential denotations derived via semantic interpretation parameterized to a judge who is the sum of all conversational participants:

(6) Given a set I of n interlocutors $\{i_1, i_2, \ldots, i_n\}$ and a sentence S, if all $i \in I$ have taken on commitments entailing that for all $i \in I$, $[\![S]\!]^i = 1$, $[\![S]\!]^{i_1+i_2+\ldots+i_n} \in CG$

In plain language, a sentence's content becomes common ground not if all interlocutors have committed to the truth of that proposition as parameterized to *some* judge, but rather only if all interlocutors have committed to the truth of that proposition as parameterized to *each* interlocutor.

A refined mechanism for default agreement We assume, with Stephenson, that when a speaker incurs a commitment by virtue of their assertion, that commitment is to the truth of the asserted sentence *as parameterized to herself.*

(7) A speaker s who makes an assertion using a sentence S incurs a commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$

We propose that default agreement is simply a default assumption that the addressee is willing to adopt the speaker's commitment herself, *with no parameter shifts*:

(8) DEFAULT AGREEMENT: When s makes an assertion using S, for all interlocutors i, i incurs a commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$, unless i overtly indicates otherwise

Crucially, each interlocutor i by default assumes a commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$, *not* $[\![S]\!]^i$.

We can now see that this mechanism predicts a distinction between subjective and objective sentences in terms of whether default agreement will lead to their content becoming common ground. Consider first objective sentences. By definition, if S is objective, then for any speaker s and interlocutor i, $[\![S]\!]^s = [\![S]\!]^i$. So the speaker's commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$ entails a commitment to $[\![S]\!]^i$, as does the commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$ that i incurs via default agreement. All interlocutors are therefore committed to the truth of $[\![S]\!]$ as parameterized to each interlocutor, and CG is updated. Consider now subjective sentences. By definition, if S is subjective, then for any speaker s and any (non-identical) interlocutor i a commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$ does not entail a commitment to $[\![S]\!]^i$ (at least if we don't make the somewhat bizarre assumption that s and i make identical subjective judgments). So s's commitment to $[\![S]\!]^s$ leaves us in the dark about whether they take $[\![S]\!]^i$ to be true, as does i's commitment to the same proposition, incurred via default agreement. CG cannot be updated (again, unless we are willing to make the assumption that the parties involved make identical subjective judgments with respect to the subjective predicates in S).

Conclusion and ramifications Our proposal allows one to separate the idea of default agreement from the idea of common ground update. In a judge-dependent framework with the proper notion of common ground, default agreement actually predicts that subjective and objective sentences will differ in their common ground updating potential. Default agreement only leads inexorably to common ground for sentences whose truth does not vary with the choice of judge parameter. From a broader perspective, this accounts captures the empirical differences between subjective and objective assertions without assigning distinct illocutionary profiles to these moves.

References: Beltrama, A. 2018a. *Totally* between subjectivity and discourse. *Journal of Semantics.* **Beltrama, A. 2018b.** Subjective assertions are weak. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung.* **Ciardelli, I. et al. 2013.** Inquisitive semantics. *Language and linguistics compass.* **Coppock, L. 2017.** Outlook-based semantics. *Linguistics and Philosophy.* **Farkas, D. & Bruce, K. 2010.** On reacting to assertions and polar questions. *Journal of Semantics.* **Farkas, D. & Roelofsen, F. 2017.** Division of labor in the interpretation of declaratives and interrogatives. *Journal of Semantics.* **Lasersohn, P. 2005.** Context dependence, disagreement, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy.* **MacFarlane, J. 2014.** *Assessment sensitivity*. Oxford University Press. **Pearson, H. 2013.** A judge-free semantics for predicates of personal taste. *Journal of Semantics.* **Stephenson, T. 2007.** Judge dependence, epistemic modals, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy.*