Expressive Content and Predicates of Personal Taste

It is not straightforwardly clear how we might provide truth conditions for sentences containing predicates of personal taste (henceforth PoPTs), e.g. fun. According to Lasersohn (2005) a semantic theory of PoPTs must account for the intuition that each of the speakers in (1) is expressing a true statement, and yet B is directly contradicting A. This is known as the problem of faultless disagreement (Lasersohn 2009).

(1) A: Kissing is fun.
   B: No, kissing is not fun.

Lasersohn’s solution is that, in addition to the time and world indices familiar from Kaplan (1989), a judge index must also be supplied, in order to be able to complete the truth conditions and provide truth values. However, unlike the familiar indices, the judge index is not part of the semantic content (in the sense of Kaplan 1989), which allows for B’s response to negate the same semantic content that A has asserted; this accounts for the contradiction. Still, each statement may be true, because the judge index is supplied by the context in the derivation from contents to truth-values, allowing each speaker to be the judge of his/her own utterance.

The cost of this analysis to semantic theory is that we are asked to accept a notion of contradiction that is, as Lasersohn admits “without substance”, for it deals with no matter of fact. Furthermore, under this analysis contradiction occurs at the level of semantic content, despite the fact that truth conditions are not yet provided at that level – the truth conditions hinge upon knowing who the judge is, but this is not part of the semantic content. Thus the intuition that there is a contradiction somehow exists independently of knowing what the truth conditions even are.

An additional problem becomes evident when we compare sentence (1) to sentence (2), which differs, as Lasersohn has it, only in that the judge has been made linguistically overt.

(2) Kissing is fun for me.

Under Lasersohn’s formalism (1) and (2) mean exactly the same. But observe the following discrepancies. Imagine a couple in love passionately kissing; it’s quite appropriate for one of these lovers to express their feelings by saying (1); but at this moment of passion it would be extremely odd to utter (2), which would rather be more appropriate in a context of some conscious reflection, not at the moment of kissing proper. Or suppose you are happy to meet a close friend, it would be perfectly sensible to use on this occasion (3), but much less so (4):

(3) Hey! It’s great to see you!
(4) ??Hey! It’s great for me to see you!

Lasersohn’s analysis offers no account of these intuitions.

The theory I propose in a nutshell: when sentences containing PoPTs lack an overt experiencer, then they are used expressively; i.e. the speaker expresses his/her personal attitude/feeling, and no propositions or truth-values are involved (see Wittgenstein (1953) §244, Kaplan’s (2005) notion of Expressive Contents, and Potts (2007) for a formalism of expressive contents). On the other hand, when an experiencer is linguistically overt, such sentences are used descriptively, i.e. they are used to report a proposition. An overt experiencer is indeed otiose when expressing, quite simply because speakers express their own attitudes or feelings. The problem of faultless disagreement simply disappears as no propositions are involved in expressive utterances. The contexts alluded to above, of a passionate kiss or of saying hello to a good friend, are by their very nature such that call for an expressive utterance (I want to express that I’m happy to see you, not report on it), and so this accounts for the oddity in making the experiencer overt in these cases.

Indeed, my prediction is that whenever a sentence containing a PoPT is used expressively the experiencer will be left covert. This predication is born out; for instance a Google search for the exact string: ‘Damn! It’s fun to x!’ yields 1.25x106 results while ‘Damn! It’s fun for me to x!’ yields one. This is predicted, seeing as the interjection “damn” supplies a linguistic context which makes the utterance expressive and so, by hypothesis, doesn’t admit an overt experiencer. Parallel results emerge for many different initial interjections and many different PoPTs, as is shown in the paper.

Going back to (1), each speaker is simply expressing his/her subjective individual attitude, without any contradiction, or indeed a truth-value, being involved. Thus this proposal allows preserving all contradictions as contradictions of substance, as has been assumed since Aristotle.
References: