Relativism, Assertion and Deflationary Truth

Ramiro Caso

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Abstract

We provide a deflationarily acceptable account of assertion in truth-relativistic domains. First, we state what we take relativism and deflationism to be. Second, we clarify the problem of assertion in relativistic domains by singling out the features that make assertion within those domains problematic. Then, we tackle the problem directly by generalizing a standard deflationary account of the norms of assertion and by introducing two key distinctions: between internal and external norms, and between norms of assertion and norms of evaluation. We show how these distinctions may be put to work in order to account for the seemingly problematic features of relativistic assertion. We conclude by assessing the importance of the issue of assertion on the question whether truth-relativism and deflationism about truth are ultimately compatible views.

We tackle the problem of relativistic assertion from a deflationary perspective concerning truth. In order to gain clarity on the issue, first we say what we take relativism and deflationism to be. We do so in section 1. In section 2, we start dealing with the issue of relativistic assertion by singling out its problematic features: the possibility of coherently formulating norms for assertion, and the possibility of grounding a rational practice of assertion upon relative truth. In sections 3 and 4, we deal with the first problematic feature by formulating norms of assertion that are deflationarily acceptable. In section 5, deal with the second problematic feature by showing how relative truth provides for a rational practice of making and evaluating assertions within truth-relativistic domains of discourse. Finally, in section 6, we briefly turn to the question whether relativism and deflationism are ultimately compatible views, which is still an open one. The issue of assertion certainly will bear on the answer.

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†Universidad de Buenos Aires — CONICET — GAF. E-mail: ramirocaso08@gmail.com.
1 Preliminaries

The key insight of deflationism may be put in a slogan: *Truth is not a very interesting notion.*¹ There are two important features of our truth predicate (or truth concept): its role as a device for blind assent and its role as a device of generalization into sentential position. Thus, truth is important as a linguistic device because of the expressive resources it adds to language. But that is pretty much its importance, and the source of its interest.

The idea that truth is not an interesting notion (barring considerations of expressiveness) has two sides. First, that truth cannot be analyzed, reduced, or explicated in terms of other concepts. Second, that truth cannot play a substantive explanatory role in philosophical accounts.² Since considerations of analyzability, etc., of the concept of truth in terms of other concepts won’t play any essential role in what follows, we’ll leave them aside. Consequently, I’ll take it that a view of truth is deflationary if (a) it considers truth to be a linguistic device for blind assent and generalization, and (b) it considers that it has no interesting explanatory role to play in philosophical accounts.³ Admittedly, the idea that truth may play an interesting or substantive explanatory role is not a clear one. However, we need not make it clearer at this point: We’ll assume that if the role truth plays in a given philosophical account can be shown to be purely expressive or generalizing, then it is not a substantive, explanatory one.⁴

The other view in question is relativism about truth. It is usual to characterize relativism in theoretically laden terms. Thus, relativism is supposed to be the view that propositional truth is relative to a context of assessment, or that utterance truth (as different to from propositional truth) is relative to an extra parameter (besides a possible world).⁵ However, these characterizations are theoretical renditions of a core, non-theoretical insight, and it is this insight the one that characterizes relativism about truth. The insight is that the correctness of certain utterances is sensitive to the situation from which those utterances are being assessed, as opposed to the situation of their production. One example of this phenomenon would be:

(1) Apples are tasty

The idea is that you may assess my utterance of (1) as correct or incorrect (true

¹As all slogans, this one cannot do justice to deflationism, but it provides a first characterization. Indeed, deflationary views concerning truth are as variegated as they are numerous. The upshot is that it’s not at all easy to settle on a characterization of deflationism that satisfies all of its advocates. However, there is a family resemblance among deflationist views on truth that justifies the slogan.
²For the classical locus, see Horwich [9, p. 52].
³This sidesteps the debate concerning deflationism and the requirement of conservativeness over a base theory strong enough to provide a structural theory of truth-bearers. Obviously, whether truth can be taken to be just a device for generalization into sentential position (and not an inferential device as well) has deep consequences for the understanding of deflationism about truth. However, we need not commit ourselves to any take on the issue of conservativeness, since nothing discussed here will require the formulation of particular axioms or rules of inference involving truth—everything may be dealt with using truth in just its expressive, generalizing role.
⁴Two ways of doing this are to show that formulations containing truth may be replaced by schematic formulations, and to show that they may be replaced by infinite conjunctions. We’ll exploit these procedures later.
⁵The former characterization is MacFarlane’s (*passim*), while the latter can be found, for example, in García-Carpintero [6] and Recanati [13].
Our official characterization of relativism will be that the correctness conditions of certain utterances are assessment sensitive. By this we mean that the correctness (or otherwise) of certain utterances (in the act sense) depends partly upon the situation from which those utterances are being assessed. Examples of truth-relative domains could be matters of taste, modal and epistemic justification claims, epistemic modals, knowledge attributions, statements about the open future, among others.\textsuperscript{6}

There are two points concerning correctness that need to be made. The first point concerns the kind of correctness in question. Utterances may be evaluated as correct or incorrect with respect to many dimensions. Thus, an utterance may be deemed correct because it is sincere, truthful, relevant, or even polite. Conversely, it may be deemed incorrect because it is insincere, untruthful, irrelevant, or even impolite. The sense of \textit{correctness} that is relevant for our purposes is \textit{truthfulness}. At this point, all we can say about this dimension is that an utterance of “snow is white” is correct (in the favored sense) just in case snow is white, an utterance of “2 + 2 = 4” is correct just in case \(2 + 2 = 4\), and so on. The second point is terminological: Why talking of correctness instead of truth in our official formulation of truth relativism? The reason is that qualms have been voiced concerning the predication of truth and falsity to utterances understood as acts, as opposed to their contents. See, for example, MacFarlane \[12\]. There is indeed something peculiar about calling an act \textit{true} or \textit{false}—as opposed to proper or improper, correct or incorrect, etc. So we’ll keep talk of correctness in our official formulation of relativism about truth. However, since philosophers are used to go beyond good grammar, we’ll help ourselves with talk of truth concerning utterances understood as acts, when this is useful in making a point.

\section{The Problems of Relativistic Assertion}

It is usually thought (and it is a thought we won’t dispute) that assertion is, somehow, closely related to truth. This quite general impression may be cashed out in two different (albeit obviously related) ways. On the one hand, we may think that truth is the aim of assertion (or, at any rate, an important one).\textsuperscript{7} On the other, we may think that truth is the yardstick by which to measure the correctness (or incorrectness) of assertions. The usual link between these ideas is that, if truth is a goal of assertion, then whether an assertion is correct or not depends on whether it achieves its goal or not, i.e., on whether it is true or not.

\textsuperscript{6}One pitfall that should be avoided is to think that truth relativism is a global view, that is, that the correctness conditions of every utterance are assessment sensitive. This is not the view advocated here. Rather, relativism is a local, even if possibly quite widespread, phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{7}MacFarlane \[11, p. 334\] argues that we cannot characterize assertion as aiming to truth (or, indeed, as constitutively or normatively aiming to anything) because, in asserting, we aim to a whole range of goals having little to in common, if anything at all, such as conveying true information about the world, lying, attempting to convince others, attempting to move others towards a certain course of action, etc. On accounts such as this, lying may provide cases of normatively well-behaved assertions. Now, I think that this is correct, but that it doesn’t actually falsify the claim that assertion aims at truth...\textsuperscript{[COMPLETAR]}

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We have a good idea of how these features of assertion fit together when non-relative truth is at issue (or so we can concede here). However, when we countenance the idea of relative truth, this picture of how truth and assertion relate to each other gets blurry at best. On the one hand, we no longer know whether norms for assertion may be coherently formulated in terms of truth. On the other, we don’t know whether these norms may ground a rational practice of assertion.

This latter point is the import of Evans’ [3] and García-Carpintero’s [6] attack on the idea of relative truth. As Evans points out, assessment sensitive correctness conditions for utterances seem to entail that truth cannot be a guide in deciding what to assert or in interpreting the utterances of others, for what is true at the asserter’s situation may be false at the assessor’s. Hence, we wouldn’t know how to make correct assertions: In spite of asserting something true from our perspective, we would still be liable to reproach. García-Carpintero deepens this worry: Relative truth cannot ground a rational practice of assertion, for the asserter is unable to put herself in a position to comply with the requirement of producing (mostly) correct assertions—if correctness is assessment sensitive, she cannot be in a position that warrants the production of correct speech acts. Hence, she cannot rationally comply with the injunctions the practice of assertion makes upon her.

How, then, are we to make sense of assertion, if we countenance relative truth?

3 Relativistic Assertion and Deflationary Truth

As we saw, truth seems to constitute an important norm of assertion.8 Now, I take it that “truth is a norm of assertion” means something like the following: in asserting, the speaker is subject to the following injunction,

\[
\text{assert only what’s true.}
\]

Of course, what this really means is something like:

(INA) For all \(x\): assert \(x\) only if \(x\) is true

Another way of describing the injunction to which the asserter is subject, this time from a perspective different from the asserter’s, is:

\[
\text{a speaker ought to assert only what’s true.}
\]

Again, this is just a universal quantification, this time with a deontic operator (which we’ll take as unproblematic in what follows):

(ENA) For any \(S,x\): \(S\) ought to assert \(x\) only if \(x\) is true.

We may coin a couple of terms in order to talk about these two different ways of spelling out the injunction of assertion on speakers. The first formulation we call an internal norm, for it makes sense from the asserter’s perspective. In

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8Since Williamson’s [14, ch. 11] attack on truth-based accounts of assertion, the idea that truth is the (primary) goal of assertion lost reputation among analytic philosophers. In any event, if the primary norm of assertion is to be formulated in terms of knowledge rather than truth, the truth norm is still a derivative one that applies to assertion as well.
order to understand it, the asserter has to understand (tacitly or implicitly) what it is to assert something, what it is for something to be true, and how to quantify over all things assertible. (I take it that every decently competent speaker understands these notions in the requisite way.) The second formulation we call an external norm, that is, a norm that makes sense from a third person perspective—from which we may describe the norm to which the asserter is subject in making assertions. To understand this formulation, we (but not the speaker) need to understand the terms involved, and arguably this time the understanding involves theoretical knowledge, not a tacit or implicit one.9

Before we move to considering norms for assessment sensitive assertions, it will prove helpful to inquire whether these norms, which include a non-relative truth predicate, are deflationarily acceptable. And indeed they can be shown to be so, for we can show true to be playing (both in (INA) and in (ENA)) a purely expressive role.10

What (INA) amounts to, on this account, is an infinite conjunction of injunctions like:

assert “s1” only if s1
assert “s2” only if s2
assert “s3” only if s3

The upshot is that the normativity of (INA) derives from whatever normativity is possessed by the injunctions in the list (and the normativity of these injunctions shouldn’t be problematic, for certainly a speaker ought to assert that snow is white only if snow is white, that 2 + 3 = 5 only if 2 + 3 = 5, and so on).11 This should make it clear why we may endorse (INA) with a clear conscience: (INA) is a respectable principle by deflationary standards.

By the same token, (ENA) can be shown to be a deflationarily acceptable principle, since it amounts to an infinite conjunction of sentences like:

For any S: S ought to assert “s1” only if s1
For any S: S ought to assert “s2” only if s2
For any S: S ought to assert “s3” only if s3

If we can make sense of ought (and, why couldn’t we?), we can also accept (ENA) without further qualms.12

Now, countenancing an assessment-sensitive truth predicate changes how we treat the norms of assertion. Arguably, the internal norm doesn’t involve further complications, for, in a relativistic mood, we’ll have no qualms about considering that the truth predicate that figures in (INA) is assessment sensitive, in the sense that whether or not a given utterance of a sentences s is true (for a suitable s on a particular occasion of use) depends (partly at least) upon the context from which that utterance is being assessed. Provided we can give a story about how it may be that our truth predicate behaves that way, there is no

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9This doesn’t require, of course, that we have definitions of all the concepts involved in terms of “more understandable” ones: their explication by means of their articulation in an explicit theory may be enough for the requisite knowledge in this case.

10Cfr. Field [4] [CHECK CITATION].

11Well, actually it is somewhat problematic (see fn. 7 for details).

12“Ought” is assessment-sensitive—does this cause trouble for me?
problem in endorsing the relativistic reading of (INA). And it seems to me that
the story is quite simple: our ordinary truth predicate behaves relativistically
because (a) we have relativistic practices within certain areas of discourse (i.e.,
we accept or reject claims by evaluating them with respect to our own standards,
rather than the asserter’s), and (b) our truth talk inherits this feature in virtue
of the equivalence between “s” and “it is true that s”. Hence, any assessment
sensitivity that may be present in the truth predicate can be explained in terms
of its disquotational nature and the relativistic evaluative practices that we
actually have for certain areas of discourse. So, the “perspectivality” of assertion
that follows from a relativistic understanding of (INA) may be explained in
deflationarily acceptable terms.

However, the formulation of the externalist norm does require further com-
plications. For, if we countenance an assessment-sensitive truth predicate and
we keep the formulation as is, then our external norm will track correctness
according to our standards, rather than correctness according to the asserter’s.
Hence, if we keep the current formulation of the externalist norm, we’ll wrongly
evaluate the practice of the asserter, for the injunction is for her to assert what’s
correct given her standards, not what’s correct according to ours.

In an inflationary mood, we could provide something like an explicitly rela-
tivized truth predicate that tracks the asserter’s standards:

For all $x$, $S$: $S$ ought to assert $x$ only if $x$ is true given $S$’s standards.

However, such a formulation would involve a theoretical truth predicate that
is not obviously intelligible. Moreover, what gives content to that predicate on
usual relativistic theories is its insertion in a fully developed truth-conditional
semantic theory that is not obviously deflationarily acceptable. Hence, we
need a deflationarily acceptable predicate capable of playing a generalizing role
akin to that of truth, but that is not assessment sensitive in the same way.

4 Finding an External Norm

I think that such a notion may be found. However, since I’ll be proposing an
account of assertion that uses a notion akin in spirit to those of proof and of
proof procedures, I’ll start with a revision of mathematical assertion in terms
of proof that may be acceptable to a deflationist.

4.1 A Proof-Theoretic Account of Mathematical Asser-
tion

The starting point is the idea that mathematical assertion may be viewed as
governed by an external norm akin to:

For any $S, x$: $S$ ought to assert $x$ only if $x$ is provable.

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13This idea is also advanced by Wright [15] and endorsed by Field [5].
14Most deflationists will deem unacceptable the theories of truth needed in order to develop
a Davidson-style semantics. However, some of them have advanced the idea that certain non-
conservative truth theories may be deflationarily acceptable (and perhaps strong enough to
provide a reasonable semantic theory)—cfr. Horsten [8].
A good deal could (and should) be said about the kinds of proof procedures that warrant assertibility in mathematical contexts. However, what’s important for our purposes is that provability is relative to a deductive system or, more generally, to a set of deductive procedures. So, in reality, the norm should be: (MNA) For any \( S, x \): \( S \) ought to assert \( x \) only if \( x \) is provable (relative to \( \pi \)), where \( \pi \) is a set of proof procedures that the agent deems acceptable (and is justified in doing so).\(^{15}\)

Now, if (MNA) is to be acceptable from a deflationary perspective, then the notion of truth should not be presupposed by it in any important way. The problem, of course, is not whether the idea of a proof procedure can be characterized without recourse to truth-related notions. Indeed it can, for it is susceptible of a syntactic characterization. The problem is whether we can distinguish between good and bad, or acceptable and unacceptable, proof procedures without involving the notion of truth along the way (except when it plays a purely expressive role).

Let me sketch how an answer to this problem may go. The idea is to come up with something to fill the schematic principle:

\[
\text{the set } \pi \text{ of proof procedures is acceptable relative to a norm / policy / goal } n \text{ if } P(\pi),
\]

where \( P \) is a property that explains why \( \pi \) is acceptable relative to \( n \) (e.g., it promotes a good, successful practice, it tends to form the right kinds of beliefs, etc.).\(^{16}\) Then, we have to make sure that truth doesn’t enter into the explanation of \( P \) itself. For example, if we say that \( \pi \) is acceptable because it tends to generate beliefs with a desirable property \( Q \), then \( Q \) better not involve truth in any substantial way (for example, it better not be because it tends to promote true beliefs, if \( \text{true} \) here has a role that exceeds the expressive or generalizing one). Now, I’m confident this can be done to a great extent, but I won’t enter this particular fray at this point.\(^{17}\) All we need is the sketch of

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15 Don’t we get into “deep waters”? Justification is assessment-sensitive too...  
16 That the property \( P \) in question explain the acceptability of \( \pi \) (relative to \( n \)) seems to be a strong requirement. What I have in mind is the following. An epistemic norm, policy or goal will determine (possibly loose) conditions that a proof procedure has to meet in order to be in accordance with that norm, policy or goal. Property \( P \) will then be a factual property of proof procedures that tends to promote accordance with said norm, policy or goal. [The connection should be clearer.]  
One example of this is provided by a Tarskian truth theory. It is a well-known fact that the addition of compositional axioms for truth to a system of first order Peano Arithmetic (\( PA \)) yields a non-conservative extension of \( PA \) capable of proving \( \text{Con}_{PA} \), the canonical consistency statement for \( PA \). Well, then, is this extension acceptable? The obvious answer is: It depends. More explicitly, it depends upon an epistemic norm, policy or goal we are committed to, and a factual property that said norm, policy or goal determines as relevant for the purposes of evaluation. In this case, the factual property of the compositional axioms for truth could be that they yield a non-conservative extension of \( PA \). This property, by itself, doesn’t make this extension acceptable or unacceptable: It just provides the basis for such an evaluation, in the light of an epistemic norm, policy or goal. For example, we could have the epistemic policy of not allowing proof procedures that allow us to prove global reflection principles for provability, such as \( \forall x (\text{Prov}_{PA}(x) \rightarrow \text{Tr}(x)) \)—maybe because we consider such principles to be beyond warranted assertion. Then, this extension will be unacceptable, but only relative to such a policy.  
17 I do so in my [2]. The key idea is that a proof procedure is acceptable in the light of an epistemic norm or policy just in case it passes a “reflective equilibrium test” in the sense of Goodman [7], but that also encompasses that norm or policy, further epistemic norms and policies, and epistemic and practical goals more generally.
the account, in order to develop a deflationary account of an external norm for assertion.

4.2 An External Norm of Assertion

As a general account of assertion, the one presented in the previous section won’t do, since we are concerned with assertions that are not susceptible of formal proof, such as “Apples are tasty”. However, the main ingredients of the norm we’ll need are already present in the account of mathematical assertion we’ve offered. What we need is a generalization of the notion of proof.

Here is a principle in the spirit of (MNA):

(RENĄ) For any \(x\), \(S\): \(S\) ought to assert \(x\) only if \(x\) is acceptable relative to \(\alpha\), where \(\alpha\) is a set of acceptance procedures that the agent finds acceptable (no pun intended), and is justified in doing so. As acceptance is intended to be a generalization applicable to different areas of discourse, the nature of \(\alpha\) varies according to the area of discourse to which \(x\) belongs. In the case of mathematical statements, \(\alpha\) will be a set of mathematically acceptable proof procedures. Scientific statements may be required to comply with certain complex inductive procedures. Philosophical theses may admit of less rigorous inferences. Perceptual sentences may require only the presence of certain perceptual experiences, and so on.

Now, in order for any of these acceptance procedures to be deflationarily acceptable, their explanation better not involve the notion of truth. The crux is to show that the idea of an acceptable set of acceptance procedures may be cashed out in deflationarily acceptable terms. That is, we have to show that there is a way of understanding what it is for a set \(\alpha\) of acceptance procedures to be itself acceptable, without involving the notion of truth in any substantial way in the process.\(^{18}\) As could be expected, this is a task that is to be accomplished piecemeal, since the variation in \(\alpha\) is indeed wide. In the next section, when we deal with the rationality of assertion in truth-relativistic domains, we’ll examine one such acceptance procedure. What is important now is to notice that we can formulate deflationarily acceptable norms of assertion (provided we can give a suitable account of the acceptability of acceptance procedures), both in their internal and external renditions.

One final remark is that we are now in a position to rehabilitate expressions such as true relative to a standard and, more generally, true relative to a perspective, for such locutions may be cashed out in terms of acceptance relative to a norm, a policy, a goal, a standard, etc.

\(^{18}\)One worry that we may have at this point is the following: If the acceptability of our most general procedures for forming beliefs (our “acceptance procedures”) is to be assessed somehow, it must be assessed according to some epistemic norm, policy or goal, for that is indeed how acceptability behaves. But, what makes these norms, policies or goals acceptable, in turn—or at any rate, good ones to endorse? It seems that we never hit rock-bottom here, that the assessment of acceptability is norm-dependent “all the way down” (according to the metaphor we choose). And I think this is correct. But this inescapable relativity is not to be feared, for it is an ineliminable feature of our epistemic lives, once we renounce to the idea that there are objectively correct epistemic norms and policies, and objectively worthy epistemic goals. This is not the place to advocate for this view. For more details, see Field [5] and my [2].

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5 Assessment-Sensitive Evaluation

It's time to take a closer look at Evans' and García-Carpintero's objections against truth relativism. In [3], Evans raises two worries concerning assessment-sensitive correctness conditions. First, assessment-sensitive correctness cannot provide guidance in choosing what to say and in interpreting the remarks of others. This is so because it’s not clear to what should we aim in making assertions—whether to correctness in all possible circumstances, correctness in our own circumstance, and so on. After all, if I aim at correctness at my own circumstance, my assertion may be deemed incorrect by others. And crucially, I have no control over that. Second, if correctness indeed provides a guide, then it must have a once-and-for-all character. That is, if we know at what to aim, then that aim is the yardstick by which to measure the correctness of the assertions we make. Briefly, if I aim at correctness at all possible circumstances, then my assertion is correct just in case it is correct at all possible circumstances, if I aim at correctness at my own circumstance, then it is correct just in case it is correct at my own circumstance, and so on.

Now, as far as providing guidance in uttering and in interpreting others is concerned, it seems to me that the norms of assertion provide such a guidance, even if we take the truth predicate involved in their formulation to be assessment sensitive. Guidance for selecting what to utter is simple: the asserter has to select a sentence that is true (i.e., acceptable) relative to her own circumstance. As for guidance with respect to interpretation, in deciding how to interpret others, all she has to attribute to the utterance she's interpreting is correctness with respect to the utterer's circumstance—that is, truth (i.e., acceptability) according to the utterer's perspective. Nothing mysterious or problematic on how this ends the practice of making and evaluating assertions goes.

The second part of Evans' worry, that correctness, if it provides a guide at all, must be a once-and-for-all feature of utterances, seems to rest upon an idea we've already mentioned in section 2: that the aim of assertion (sc., what guides us in making assertions of our own and in interpreting the assertions of others) determines how we should evaluate assertions. However, this isn't necessarily so: I want to claim that, in truth-relativistic contexts, this link is severed.

The practice of making and evaluating assertions is a complex one. It has two distinct sub-practices—not surprisingly, the sub-practice of making assertions, and the sub-practice of evaluating them. It is conceivable that these practices are guided by different (yet closely related) norms. This is what happens in truth-relativistic domains. In making assertions, the asserter aims at correctness according to her circumstance. In interpreting the utterances of others, she aims at correctness according to their circumstances. However, in evaluating the utterance of another person, she does so according to her own standard, not according to the utterer's. And this is characteristic of the practice of evaluating assertions in truth-relativistic domains: Norms for assertion and norms for evaluation come apart. Crucially, then, recognizing asserter-oriented correctness as part of the norm of assertion doesn't impose upon us the acceptance of asserter-oriented evaluations.

We can formulate both internal and external norms for evaluation:

(INE) In evaluating an utterance $u$,

1. accept $u$ only if $u$ is true,
2. reject \( u \) if \( u \) is false.

\((\text{ENE})\) In evaluating an utterance \( u \),

1. \( S \) ought to accept \( u \) only if \( u \) is true relative to \( S \)'s perspectives,
2. \( S \) ought to reject \( u \) if \( u \) is false relative to \( S \)'s perspective.

Again, \textit{true} in \((\text{INE})\) must be thought of as assessment sensitive. Also, notice that we use the recently rehabilitated talk of truth relative to a perspective in \((\text{ENE})\). \((\text{INA})\) is the norm that the agent follows in evaluating, and \((\text{ENE})\) provides the description of that injunction from a third person perspective.

Together with the norms of assertion \((\text{INA})\) and \((\text{RENA})\), they give rise to the following practice: In asserting, a speaker tries to say something that is true from her perspective; in interpreting others’ claims, she attribute to those claims truth relative to their utterers’ perspectives; and in evaluating them, she assesses their correctness according to her own perspective. This practice is what underlies exchanges like:

\[(2) \quad \text{A}: \text{Apples are tasty.} \]

\[
\text{B}: \text{No, they are not; they have a horrible texture.} \\
\text{A}: \text{That’s exactly why they are tasty, unlike oranges.} \\
\ldots
\]

\(A\) and \(B\) could go on forever, or until one of them gets bored and gives up.

Thus, we can put Evans’ worry to rest: relative truth provides a suitable aim for assertion, and doesn’t force upon us an asserter-bound practice of evaluation. However, it is not clear that this practice of making and evaluating assertions is a rational one. For indeed, these ideas, when applied to time-neutral or location-neutral sentences give rise to an incoherent practice of communication. This is García-Carpintero’s take on the problem. Consider, for example, a sentence like:

\[(3) \quad \text{It’s raining,} \]

which is (we stipulate) neutral with respect to a given location.

It’s a fact about sentences like “It’s raining” that they are (normally) used to convey information about the weather in a specific place. Now, suppose that indeed utterance truth is assessment sensitive. Then, it seems that \(A\) may assert that it’s raining with the intention of conveying the information that it is raining in Athens, while \(B\), being in New York, will be perfectly entitled to assess \(A\)'s utterance with respect to her own (\(B\)'s) circumstance, and hence in deeming it false, since (we can suppose) it’s not raining in Athens. If this were so, we wouldn’t know how to make correct assertions pertaining rain and, moreover, we wouldn’t know how to begin in order to communicate such information. The same holds, mutatis mutandis, for temporally-neutral sentences, if there are any, such as “Socrates is sitting” (as in Evans’ example), and for agent-neutral sentences, if there are any, such as “I promise to go to the airport” (as in García-Carpintero’s example).

Now, it seems to me that this objection is warranted only to the extent to which we are willing to apply relativism to domains such as weather talk.
And I cannot see any reason for doing so: As we’ve already mentioned (fn. 6), relativism is not a global thesis, but a local one. Hence, we are not obliged to extend the model of assertion it gives rise to, to domains not suitable for such an extension.

Two further points have to be addressed. The first is how should we proceed in providing a general account of assertion. Thus far, we’ve claimed that we can formulate norms of relativistic assertion. But what about the integration of these norms with those governing non-relativistic assertion? For the internal norm, there is no problem, since the formulation is the same in every case. However, the same doesn’t hold for (RENA), since (ENA) involves an absolute (meta-language) truth predicate, while (RENA) involves the notion of acceptability. Here we have two options. On the one hand, we could demarcate truth relativistic domains of discourse from non-truth-relativistic ones, and hold that each domain is governed by different rules—(RENA) and (ENA), respectively. On the other, we could subsume (ENA) under (RENA) by holding that acceptance relative to $\alpha$ coincides with absolute truth for non-truth-relativistic domains. At this point, both ways seem to be notational variants of the same insight: That correctness in non-truth-relativistic domains is objective, whereas, in truth-relativistic domains, it’s not a fully factual matter (more on this in the final section).

The second point we should address is the utility (hence the rationality) of having a practice of making and evaluating assertions like the one that arises in truth-relativistic domains. Here, my opinion is essentially the same as MacFarlane’s ([CITATION]): The point of having such a practice, as far as tasty goes, is to allow for the coordination of preferences and actions. A brief look into the philosophical grammar of predicates such as tasty reveals that they have a special function in language. They do not aim to describe an objective feature of the world (of the object in question): For that function, we have terms such as sweet, bitter, etc. Neither do they aim to describe our subjective inclination towards an edible thing: For that function, we have expressions such as I like it or It tastes well to me. Expressions such as tasty do not merely describe how things are, they have a certain performative dimension: In uttering a sentence such as “Apples are tasty”, we are not merely conveying that we like apples, but we are also recommending them to others. Trivial as it seems, this performative aspect of expressions such as tasty is essential to the coordination of preferences and actions within groups.

6 Deflationism and the Relative Truth

[Deest]

about truth. This lack of clarity results, partly, from the lack of agreement on how to characterize the views in question, and partly from the non-systematic nature of the extant literature on the issue. Even relative to a particular way of understanding the views involved, the question itself remains unsettled.\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\)Burgess and Burgess [1] provide a brief state of the question. Horwich [10] thinks that the views are not compatible. Field [5] thinks that they are. However, these positions haven’t been developed to an extent to which the question can be satisfactorily answered, even relative to a particular characterization of what deflationism and relativism are.
compatible is to ask whether a deflationist can make sense of the idea that the correctness conditions of certain utterances are assessment sensitive. A negative answer requires showing that she can’t do so in deflationarily acceptable terms. A positive answer requires showing how she can. I think that she can, but to show so will require some argumentation.

References


\footnote{Horwich [10] doesn’t take this route. Rather, he thinks that the disquotational nature of truth forces upon us an absolute truth predicate, and hence that the very idea of truth relativism is incoherent. We’ll take issue with this interpretation of the effect of the disquotational nature of truth in the next section.}