

Generalizing subjective opinions: evidence from two classes of perspectival adjectives

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Adjectives called *predicates of personal taste* (PPTs, e.g. *fun*, *tasty*) express an individual's (typically the 1st-person speaker's) subjective perspective/opinion. However, recent semantic work [9,10] claims that PPTs go beyond a 1st-person perspective: "PPTs such as *tasty* are used to make statements about whether something is tasty to **people in general**, based on first person experience" [10]. This conflicts with [6]'s seminal work. Given this tension between 1st-person subjectivity vs. generalization to others, we conducted **Exp1** to empirically assess the robustness of PPTs' generalizing effect, and **Exp2** to compare PPTs to another class of subjective adjectives.

Exp1 manipulated the generic/episodic nature of the PPT sentence and whether it is a main clause or embedded under *think/find* (Table 2). People (n=48) read sentences (Table 1), and typed a number to indicate *how many aliens share the opinion* (30 targets, 51 fillers). Nonce words and aliens avoid bias from people's own opinions. Adjective choice was based on prior work.

We manipulated whether the critical sentence was **episodic/generic** (Table 2). **Hyp1**: Generic sentences involve generalization; PPTs in generics may thus be judged more generalizable (shared by more aliens) than in episodic sentences (generic>episodic). **Hyp2**: Alternatively, episodic sentences may be more generalizable: Generic sentences do not require the speaker to have direct experience or to agree with the statement [9,10], but episodic sentences with PPTs signal the speaker has direct 1st-person experience (and agrees with the sentence). These properties, together with results that direct experience has a stronger effect on attitudes than indirect information [3,11] and humans tend to assume that personal experiences generalize to others [4], predict more generalizability with PPTs in episodic sentences.

We also test whether **embedding PPTs under *think/find*** influences the level of generalization. **Hyp3**: Many aspects of the source person influence processing of attitudes [1]. If the source person explicitly affiliates themselves with an opinion, this may be seen as boosting their commitment and thus their reliability: Embedding should strengthen generalizability. **Hyp4**: Alternatively, anchoring an attitude to an individual may weaken generalizability: explicit mention of an individual's mental state can signal that it is *not* a general claim (Maxim of quantity [5]). This predicts PPTs in main clauses that do *not* mention the speaker are judged more generalizable.

Results: Fig.1 shows the mean number of aliens that people said share the opinion. Episodic sentences are more generalizable than generic ones, regardless of clause structure (Imer on z-scores, main effect, $p's < .02$). Clause structure also matters: PPTs in main clauses are more generalizable than PPTs under *think* ($p < .001$) or *find* ($p < .001$; *think* and *find* do not differ, $p > .2$, contra [12]). This holds for both episodic and generic conditions: *Explicit self-reference weakens the generality effect*. Also, 95% CIs suggest that when PPTs are *unembedded*, the number of aliens judged to share the opinion exceeds 50/100, but not in other conditions: PPTs in main clauses are interpreted as applying to over half of people/aliens, in line with [9,10].

Exp2: According to Hyp2, the generalization of episodic sentences stems from PPTs in episodic sentences implying 1st-person experience, unlike generic sentences which do *not* require 1st-person experience. Exp2 takes a closer look at this. We build on claims that PPTs differ from other subjective adjectives such as *healthy*, *intelligent* in that only PPTs require the judge to be an **experiencer** [2,7]. If Hyp2 is on the right track, we predict *no difference* in the generalizability of episodic vs. generic sentences with non-PPT, non-experiencer-referring subjective adjectives. Exp2 (n=48) tested this (same design as Exp1), with multidimensional adjectives replacing PPTs. The **results** (Fig.2) confirm our prediction: Self-reference weakens generality ($p's < .001$), but now there is **no** episodic/generic difference ($p's > .25$).

We provide novel evidence for PPTs being more generalizable (applicable to more people) in episodic than generic sentences. Non-PPT multidimensionals fail to exhibit this contrast, supporting our view that 1st-person experience is key for generalizability of subjective views.

Table 1. Exp1 example item in generic/main clause condition. (All targets had different adjectives)

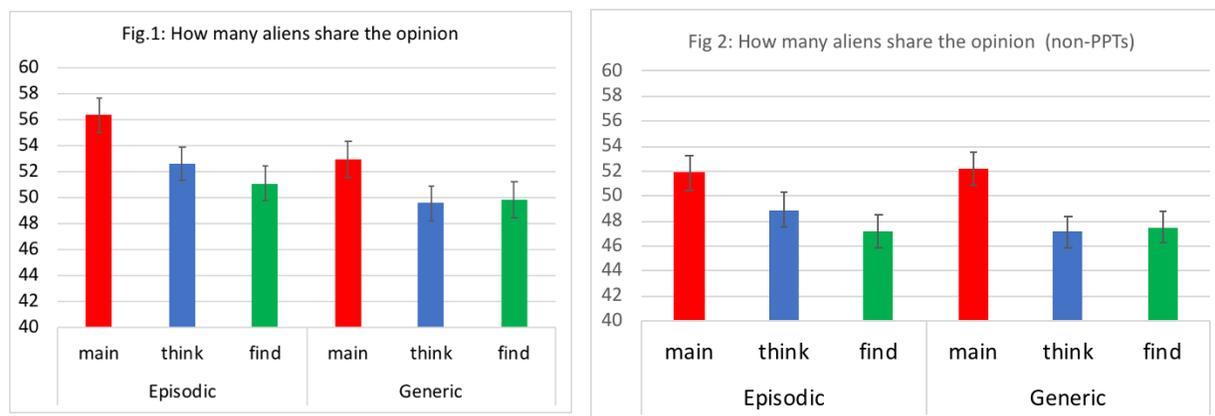
Context and critical sentence	We are visiting an alien planet. You overhear one of the aliens say: Hixes are fun.
Question	If we randomly select 100 aliens from this planet, how many of them do you think share this alien's opinion about hixes? <type a number>

(In episodic conditions, the question had the form "...share this alien's opinion about the hix?")

Table 2. Design of Exp1 (PPTs e.g. *fun*) and Exp2 (multidimensional non PPTs, e.g. *intelligent*)

	Main clause	Embedded under think	Embedded under find
Generic	(a) <i>Hixes are {fun/intelligent}.</i>	(b) <i>I think hixes are {fun/intelligent}.</i>	(c) <i>I find hixes {fun/intelligent}.</i>
Episodic	(d) <i>That hix was {fun/intelligent}.</i>	(e) <i>I thought that hix was {fun/intelligent}.</i>	(f) <i>I found that hix {fun/intelligent}.</i>

Figure 1. Results of Experiment 1 with PPTs. **Figure 2.** Results of Experiment 2 with non-PPT, multidimensional adjectives



(error bars show +/- 1 SE)

References

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