



HAL
open science

Attitude Ascriptions, Mental Files, and Truth-Conditional Pragmatics

François Recanati

► **To cite this version:**

François Recanati. Attitude Ascriptions, Mental Files, and Truth-Conditional Pragmatics: Reply to Stojanovic and Villanueva-Fernandez. 2015. hal-01104727

HAL Id: hal-01104727

<https://hal.science/hal-01104727>

Preprint submitted on 26 Jan 2015

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Attitude Ascriptions, Mental Files, and Truth-Conditional Pragmatics

Reply to Stojanovic and Villanueva-Fernandez

François Recanati
Institut Jean-Nicod

Isidora Stojanovic and Neftali Villanueva-Fernandez (henceforth : I&N) think my approach to attitude ascriptions in *Mental Files* contradicts my earlier approach, presented in a number of works, including my two books *Direct Reference* and *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta* (Recanati 1993, 2000). I like the fact that they like my earlier approach and attempt to defend it. As a matter of fact, I like that approach as much as they do. (Perhaps even more – see sections 3 and 4.) But I don't think it needs to be defended, for it's not under attack, at least not from me. My new approach does *not* contradict my earlier approach, and I am surprised that they think it does. As I am going to argue, the view in *Mental Files* is nothing but an elaboration of the analysis of attitude ascriptions I presented in my former work.

1.

According to *Direct Reference*, singular terms make their normal referential contribution when they occur in the scope of an attitude verb, but a pragmatic process of 'quasi-singularisation' pairs the referent with a mode of presentation. Quasi-singularisation is a type of pragmatic enrichment which makes the singular proposition semantically expressed quasi-singular in the sense of Schiffer (1987). It has two important features : it is a primary pragmatic process which (like indexical resolution) affects truth-conditional content, yet it is 'free' rather than triggered by a free variable in logical form. Failures of substitutivity result from the fact that the pragmatic process of quasi-singularisation is sensitive to context. The singular term used by the speaker in reporting the belief is a crucial aspect of the context, which plays a role in determining which mode of presentation is pragmatically contributed (and whether or not a mode of presentation is contributed). In *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta* (henceforth : *OOOR*), the pragmatic enrichment is located in the attitude verb (following a suggestions by Richard and Forbes) rather than in the content clause, but the overall theory stays the same and, as I&N put it, it makes opacity phenomena 'a case study for Truth-Conditional Pragmatics' (p.5). Truth-Conditional Pragmatics is the view that free processes of modulation (not merely saturation) affect truth-conditions (Recanati 1993, 2004, 2010).

One (perhaps unfortunate) sentence in my book suggests to Isidora and Neftali that I have given up the pragmatic approach which has just been summarized. In *Mental Files* (p. 185) I say that

In transparent attitude ascriptions, [...] there is implicit existential quantification over the modes of presentation (mental files) in the ascriber's mind.

Isidora and Neftali take that sentence to mean that there is a variable for a mode of presentation in the 'logical form' (LF, presumably) of the attitude sentence ; a variable which is existentially quantified on the transparent reading and assigned a contextual value on the opaque reading. This is a different theory than the theory offered in *Direct Reference* and *OOOR*. It makes the provision of a mode of presentation a matter of saturation, not a matter

of enrichment, as the earlier view did. Opacity phenomena no longer provide a case study for Truth-Conditional Pragmatics.

But that is not how I myself interpret the sentence I&N quote from *Mental Files*. Singular belief is always under modes of presentation. That is a metaphysical fact. To ascribe a singular belief in the transparent manner is to ascribe the belief while not specifying the mode of presentation. Because belief is always under modes of presentation, this is *truth-conditionally equivalent* to existentially quantifying over the modes of presentation. The situation is exactly similar to that which I discuss at length in the chapter of *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics* which expands on my *Linguistics and Philosophy* paper on the sentence ‘It’s raining’ (Recanati 2007). There I discuss the impact of metaphysical facts (external to semantics) upon truth-conditions. For example, dancing always occurs at a location. That is a metaphysical fact. To say that Mary danced is therefore equivalent to saying that there is a location where she danced. But this does not mean that in the sentence ‘Mary danced’, there is a free variable for a location at LF (a level of syntactic description). The truth-conditional equivalence holds in virtue of a metaphysical fact, not a linguistic fact. The same considerations apply to belief sentences. To say that someone believes something of an object, without specifying the mode of presentation under which the object is thought of, is equivalent to saying that she believes it of that object under some mode of presentation or other. There is *truth-conditional equivalence* between the belief sentence understood transparently and the existentially quantified sentence. But no free variable for modes of presentation is posited at any level of linguistic description of the belief sentence. That is the point of distinguishing metaphysical facts and semantic facts. So I maintain that the provision of the mode of presentation in the opaque cases results from a *free* pragmatic process, rather than a process of saturation of a variable. I have not changed my mind in the least in these matters.

2.

Isidora and Neftali mention ‘another point where Recanati seems to have radically departed from his old views on the subject’ (p. 5). That is the status of transparent readings for attitude sentences. The earlier approach gave pride of place to such readings, I&N say : ‘The dominance of transparent readings was an asset of Truth-Conditional Pragmatics’ (p. 7). The primacy of transparent readings comes from the fact that the opaque readings result from enriching them (by adding the modes of presentation).¹ There is an asymmetric dependence relation between them. This is how I interpret this sentence from *OOOR* which Isidora and Neftali quote : ‘In its pure form, *oratio obliqua* is transparent’. The idea is that pragmatic enrichment superimposes an extra layer of meaning over a semantically basic *de re* interpretation. At the ‘basic’ level, singular terms contribute their referent and nothing else.

Isidora and Neftali object to the ‘new proposal’ they detect in *Mental Files*, on the grounds that it makes the *opaque readings* dominant. In *Mental Files*, indeed, I say that purely transparent readings of attitude sentences are marginal. I&N think this contradicts the earlier view. But it doesn’t. There is an equivocation on ‘dominance’ in I&N’s paper. Opaque readings are dominant in a quasi-statistical sense. There is (almost) always some constraint or other on the modes of presentation under which the reportee is assumed to think of the object the belief is about. This is due to the fact that certain presuppositions hold in the common ground : the worlds in which the object is thought of under radically deviant modes of presentation (as in contextualist examples à la Travis or Searle) are presuppositionally

¹ Or rather : opaque readings result from enriching the minimal readings, and transparent readings are cases in which the minimal reading is not enriched and stays as it is.

excluded from the domain of worlds among which the assertion is supposed to select the worlds that will remain in the common ground after the assertion has been accepted. So it is very hard to find attitude sentences (uttered in a reasonably determinate context) that are purely transparent (Crimmins 1995). This is perfectly compatible with the fact that transparent readings are dominant in another sense: the opaque readings asymmetrically depend on them, so they are the ‘basic’ readings for the purposes of semantics. I see no conflict here, and I don’t see why it is important to decide which of the transparent and the opaque should be the ‘default’, in some absolute sense.

I&N provide an independent argument against my claim that purely transparent readings are marginal. They say that iteration pushes toward transparency. That seems right, and I welcome the observation. Such cases, like cases in which one quantifies over believers, suggest that *there are* transparent readings, indeed, corresponding to these special cases with multiple iteration and/or collective belief. I don’t object, but I maintain that such readings are a restricted class of cases. In general, it’s rather hard to force a belief report (in a fleshed out context) to be fully transparent. Multiplying iterations is the sort of thing you have to do to prevent contextual constraints on modes of presentation from affecting truth-conditions. (See end of section 4 for more on this topic.)

3.

I&N offer more direct criticism of the approach to attitude sentences in terms of indexed files I put forward in the book: they say that ‘the puzzles and problems’ that arise in that area are still in need of a solution, and regret that the theory in *Mental Files* does not address them. ‘Whether indexed files may or may not turn out to be useful tools in providing an account of attitude reports is impossible to evaluate in the absence of such basic elements of the proposal’ (p. 9). But this is the same misunderstanding again. I&N wonder how the new proposal (which they think contrasts with my earlier view) handles the puzzle cases which the earlier view dealt with in a pragmatic framework. They don’t find the answer in *Mental Files*. But the framework I work with in the book *is* the framework laid down in my previous work – the work I&N themselves refer to. I have not changed my mind on these topics.

About opacity phenomena, I&N say that ‘no adequate solution has arguably been proposed and accepted widely’ (p. 8). But there is a widely accepted theory which, I believe, provides adequate solutions to the puzzles and problems. That is the view descended from Schiffer (1977) and argued for by Crimmins and Perry (1989) and many others. It is a version of this view which I defend in the books I&N refer to. The only serious objection faced by views of this kind is Schiffer’s objection that we do not know what modes of presentation are. My book attempts to answer that question, by arguing that (singular) modes of presentation are mental files. As far as the semantic analysis of belief sentences goes, I assume the theory laid down in previous work, and I add a few elements to it, such as indexed files. The theory of indexed files is not in competition with the views on the market, as I&N assume, it is a fragment of one such view: the pragmatic analysis of opacity, recapitulated in the first section of this paper, to which it adds elements which gives the framework more expressive power. The distinction between regular files and indexed files, and the linking relations between files, make it possible to capture readings of attitude sentences that the standard frameworks are not equipped to even represent: cases of indirect linking, partial merging, etc. ‘The enhanced explanatory power of the mental-file model’ (as Imogen Dickie puts it) rests on such cases, which is why I focus on them. More standard sort of cases were already taken care of in my previous work.

Let me provide my own authoritative summary of the approach to attitude reports I defend in the book:

- Singular thought ascriptions typically bring into play two modes of presentation of the object the ascribed thought is about, the mode of presentation under which the speaker thinks of that object (a regular file) and the mode of presentation under which the ascriber thinks of that object (an indexed file). When an ascription is 'opaque' (the general case), the indexed file is tacitly ascribed to the attitude holder and affects the ascription's truth-conditions. This is a matter of pragmatic enrichment, as per the earlier approach. (See the first section on 'quasi-singularisation'.)
- The speaker may refer to the object the ascribed thought is about either through the regular file or obliquely through the indexed file s/he simultaneously ascribes to the attitude holder. We know how the speaker refers (via a regular file or via an indexed file) because the linguistic meaning of the singular term encodes a constraint on the mental file through which reference is achieved.
- The linking relations between regular files and indexed files account for the truth-evaluability of attitude sentences in which the singular term in the content sentence is referentially empty. In pseudo-singular attitude ascriptions (my name for this type of case), the indexed file associated with the singular term cannot be used to refer because it is not linked to a regular file in the ascriber's mind. It is used in a purely metarepresentational manner, to specify the mode-of-presentation ingredient of the thought-*vehicle* ascribed to the attitude holder. This is a variant of Frege's reference-shifting account of attitude sentences : in certain contexts a singular term does not contribute its ordinary referent (an object) but its ordinary sense (a mental file). In contrast to Frege, however, I think the reference-shifting analysis only applies to ascriptions of *pseudo*-singular attitudes (and kindred cases, like negative existentials), that is, only to cases in which the mental file associated with the singular term is a free-wheeling indexed file. In ascriptions of genuine singular attitudes, as Loar (1972) first pointed out, the singular term in the 'that'-clause keeps its normal referential function: it refers to the object the attitude is about.

In this framework, one can address the central question singled out by I&N :

The question, to put it as simply as possible, is to explain how a sentence of the form 'NP believes that S', as used in such-and-such context, may, or should, be assigned such-and-such truth value.

My take on this is as follows. Interpretation consists, for the hearer, in pairing the sentence with a conceptual representation of the topic situation (the situation the sentence is used to talk about). That representation is built up by enriching the semantic content of the sentence, in light of the topic situation and background facts. When the topic situation involves agents holding attitudes, all sorts of (typically linked) modes of presentation can be picked up by the participants in understanding the situation, and used to enrich the semantic content via quasi-singularisation. Typically, speech participants are aware both of the modes of presentation under which they think of the objects the attitude is about, and of the modes of presentation (indexed files) under which the attitude holders presumably think of these objects. If there is a conceptual representation of the situation that is available to both the speaker and the hearer, involving modes of presentation tacitly ascribed to the attitude holder(s), the speaker can produce a sentence that will evoke that representation in the hearer's mind and thereby manage to convey an enriched semantic content.

What about truth-value? The content of the conceptual representation (which the utterance inherits) can be modeled as a type of situation which is used to classify the topic

situation. In this framework, inspired by Austin and situation semantics, the utterance is true if and only if the topic situation is of the relevant type.

4.

In conclusion, I will address I&N's specific worries and answer their questions in dialogue form.

It would help to see what sort of semantic content is assigned to a belief report in a simple, toy example, and to see which kind of semantic and pragmatic mechanisms are at play in assigning the semantic content to a given sentence in a given context. Unfortunately, (Recanati 2012) leaves its readers figure out by themselves how the pieces of the proposal fit together. But that is a difficult task.

Response: I leave the work to the reader, indeed, but that's not such a difficult task, given that details are given in my previous works and this type of view is well-known.

Is there an argument-slot for the indexed file in the logical form of the attitude-reporting sentence, as Recanati's take on transparent readings appears to suggest, that "invites" a specific indexed file into the semantic content?

Response: Not at all – see the first sections of this paper.

Or do indexed files break into the semantic content out of their own will, like *dei-ex-machina*, whenever they are needed to deal with opacity?

Response: Indeed, they break into the content quite freely. This is pragmatic enrichment. But I find the derogatory term 'deus ex machina' used by I&N a bit surprising, given their general approval of the pragmatic approach in the rest of the paper.

Is there a separate indexed file for every expression that occurs in the 'that'-clause of the attitude ascription? Or do indexed files only kick in for singular terms?

Response: In the book I only consider singular files. But I do think there are other types of file, and there is no reason why the regular file/indexed file distinction should not extend to them.

And how many indexed files do we get when we look at cases in which an attitude is ascribed not only to a single, specific subject, but e.g. to a group of subjects, as in "Many philosophers believe that Montague was French"? Do we have a separate indexed file for each and every of those many philosophers? Or a single, shared file that is somehow indexed to the noun-phrase 'many philosophers'?

Response: There are many possible interpretations for such a sentence, depending on the context and shared presuppositions. Here, no context is provided. To be sure, if Isidora, in a nearby context, were to tell Neftali 'I know some philosophers who believe that Montague was French', she would presumably ascribe to them, collectively, a surprising belief regarding Montague-the-logician. I would analyse the utterance, thus understood, as existentially quantifying over the indexed files in the minds of the philosophers, and constraining them to be of the MONTAGUE-THE-LOGICIAN type. As both Schiffer and Forbes pointed out, ascribed

modes of presentation need not be referred to; they can be quantified over and contextually restricted. This is intermediate between the ‘single file’ option and the ‘individual indexed files’ option. The individual indexed files are quantified over, but they all fall under the MONTAGUE-THE-LOGICIAN type, which is contextually provided. (NB. It is easy to imagine contexts in which that type drops out of the picture and all that’s required is that the philosophers think of the individual Montague under some mode of presentation or other. For example, a philosopher who has Montague for neighbour might mistake him for a French visiting professor; in such context one might say that the philosopher ‘believes that Montague is French’ even though he has no idea that his neighbour is a logician. The reading would not be fully transparent, though, because radically deviant modes of presentation would still be ruled out.)

Last but not least, when it comes to nested reports (briefly touched upon at the end of sect. 3), how is the proposal supposed to work?

Response: If I&N are right, the more nesting there is the more transparent the report becomes. But transparency can only be assessed against a reasonably determinate context of utterance, so the sort of algorithm that I&N seem to be looking for for generating the modes of presentation relevant to the interpretation of arbitrary sentences is not to be found. Again, the topic situation makes available all sorts of mode of presentation that can be picked up. The indexed files multiply as the nesting increases. If there is a conceptual representation of the situation that is available to the speaker and the hearer, involving possibly many such modes of presentation tacitly ascribed to the attitude holders at various levels, the speaker can produce a nested belief sentence sentence that will evoke that representation in the hearer’s mind and thereby manage to convey an enriched semantic content. But the more nesting there is, the more we are discouraged – for performance reasons – to actually imagine the topic situation so as to enrich the semantic content. This partly accounts for the phenomenology of transparency which characterizes the multiply nested belief sentences used by philosophers in artificially impoverished contexts.

References

- Crimmins, M. (1995) ‘Notional Specificity’. *Mind and Language* 10: 464-77.
Crimmins, M. and Perry, J. (1989) ‘The Prince and the Phone Booth’. *Journal of Philosophy* 86: 685-711.
Dickie, I. (2014) ‘Singular Thought’. Class handout.
Loar, B. (1972) ‘Reference and Propositional Attitudes’. *Philosophical Review* 81: 43-62.
Recanati, F. (1993) *Direct Reference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Recanati, F. (2000) *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press/Bradford Books.
Recanati, F. (2004) *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Recanati, F. (2007) ‘It is raining (somewhere)’. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30: 123-46.
Recanati, F. (2010) *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Recanati, F. (2012) *Mental Files*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Schiffer, S. (1977) ‘Naming and Knowing’. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2: 28-41.
Schiffer, S. (1987) ‘The ‘Fido’-Fido theory of belief’. *Philosophical Perspectives* 1: 455-80.
Stojanovic, I. and Villanueva Fernandez, N. (2014) ‘Mental Files, Blown up by Indexed Files’. *Inquiry*, this volume.