



About the lekton: Response to Max Kölbel

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► To cite this version:

François Recanati. About the lekton: Response to Max Kölbel. Ilse Depraetere; Raf Salkie. Semantics and Pragmatics: Drawing a Line, 11, Springer, 2017, Logic, Argumentation and Reasoning, 10.1007/978-3-319-32247-6_13 . ijn_01446367

HAL Id: ijn_01446367

https://hal.science/ijn_01446367

Submitted on 25 Jan 2017

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Metadata of the chapter that will be visualized online

Chapter Title	About the <i>lekton</i> : Response to Max Kölbel	
Copyright Year	2017	
Copyright Holder	Springer International Publishing Switzerland	
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	Particle	
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Abstract	<p>In earlier work on so-called moderate relativism, I distinguished three semantic levels: (i) the meaning of the sentence, (ii) the <i>lekton</i> (a typically ‘relativized’ proposition, true at some situations and false at others), and (iii) the Austinian proposition (the <i>lekton</i> together with a topic situation serving as circumstance of evaluation). The <i>lekton</i> can be construed as a property of situations or a type of situation. The Austinian proposition is true iff the topic situation is of the type corresponding to the <i>lekton</i>.</p> <p>In his contribution to this volume, Max Kölbel expresses a few worries about my framework. First, he finds the psychological considerations I offer in support of the intermediate notion (the <i>lekton</i>) insufficient: a properly semantic justification is needed, he argues (and he provides one). Second, he worries about my thesis that the <i>lekton</i> is ‘fully articulated’, because it conflicts with the contextualist claim (defended by myself in many writings) that ‘what is said’ is porous and hospitable to unarticulated constituents. Third, he discusses potentially unwelcome implications of my view in connection with faultless disagreement.</p> <p>In this response I consider the three issues raised by Kölbel, along with his suggestions for tackling them. I endorse Kölbel’s semantic argument for the <i>lekton</i> while dismissing his objection to the claim of full articulatedness. Regarding faultless disagreement, I attempt to make sense of it from a classical expressivist standpoint.</p>	
Keywords (separated by “-”)	Unarticulated constituents - <i>lekton</i> - Austinian proposition - Relativized propositions - Faultless disagreement	

Chapter 13

About the *lekton*: Response to Max Kölbel

François Recanati

Abstract In earlier work on so-called moderate relativism, I distinguished three semantic levels: (i) the meaning of the sentence, (ii) the *lekton* (a typically ‘relativized’ proposition, true at some situations and false at others), and (iii) the Austinian proposition (the *lekton* together with a topic situation serving as circumstance of evaluation). The *lekton* can be construed as a property of situations or a type of situation. The Austinian proposition is true iff the topic situation is of the type corresponding to the *lekton*.

In his contribution to this volume, Max Kölbel expresses a few worries about my framework. First, he finds the psychological considerations I offer in support of the intermediate notion (the *lekton*) insufficient: a properly semantic justification is needed, he argues (and he provides one). Second, he worries about my thesis that the *lekton* is ‘fully articulated’, because it conflicts with the contextualist claim (defended by myself in many writings) that ‘what is said’ is porous and hospitable to unarticulated constituents. Third, he discusses potentially unwelcome implications of my view in connection with faultless disagreement.

In this response I consider the three issues raised by Kölbel, along with his suggestions for tackling them. I endorse Kölbel’s semantic argument for the *lekton* while dismissing his objection to the claim of full articulatedness. Regarding faultless disagreement, I attempt to make sense of it from a classical expressivist standpoint.

Keywords Unarticulated constituents • *lekton* • Austinian proposition • Relativized propositions • Faultless disagreement

In *Perspectival Thought*, I distinguish three semantic levels: (i) the meaning of the sentence, (ii) the *lekton* (a typically ‘relativized’ proposition, true at some situations and false at others), and (iii) the Austinian proposition (the *lekton* together with a topic situation serving as circumstance of evaluation). The *lekton* can be construed

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as a property of situations or a type of situation. The Austinian proposition is true
iff the topic situation is of the type corresponding to the *lekton*.

This analysis is more complex than the standard analysis which only distinguishes the meaning of the sentence and the (classical, unrelativized) proposition that it expresses. My analysis posits an intermediate level, the *lekton*. The *lekton* is referentially loaded, in contrast to sentence meaning, but it falls short of determining absolute truth-conditions. The *lekton* falls short of determining absolute truth-conditions because some determinants of truth-conditions are left unarticulated and are provided by the situation. The *lekton* itself is 'fully articulated': nothing is in the *lekton* that does not correspond to some element in the sentence. What is not articulated can still affect truth-conditions, but only via the topic situation (which serves as circumstance of evaluation for the *lekton*). So, in 'it is raining', the place and time are unarticulated (that's the difference with 'it's raining here' and 'it's raining now'), but they still affect truth-conditions via the topic situation: if the topic situation is the situation here and now, the utterance is true iff it is raining in that situation (here and now). So the truth-conditions of 'it is raining', 'it is raining here' and 'it is raining now' are the same, but the *lekta* differ: an element that is unarticulated in 'it is raining' is articulated and incorporated into the *lekton* in 'it is raining here' and 'it is raining now'. The difference has psychological significance, I argue, and it is missed by theories which only appeal to two levels (sentence meaning and absolute truth-conditions).

Although sympathetic, Max Kölbel expresses a few worries. First, he finds the psychological considerations I offer in support of the intermediate notion (the *lekton*) insufficient: a properly semantic justification is needed, he argues (and he provides one). Second, he worries about the idea that the *lekton* is 'fully articulated', because it conflicts with the contextualist claim (defended by myself in *Literal Meaning*) that 'what is said' is porous and hospitable to unarticulated constituents. Third, he discusses potentially unwelcome implications of my view in connection with faultless disagreement.

I am grateful to Kölbel for raising these issues and offering friendly amendments or extensions of my view for dealing with them. I will consider the three issues in turn, along with Kölbel's suggestions.

13.1 1.

Kölbel is not convinced by the psychological reasons I offer for distinguishing the *lekta* in 'it is raining' and 'it is raining now'. I say that the thought 'it is raining now' requires on the part of the subject an explicit representation of the time of thought, while the thinker of 'it is raining' may be 'temporally innocent' (i.e. not even able to entertain such representations). Kölbel objects that the subject who thinks 'it is raining' and the subject who thinks 'it is raining now' can *both* be credited with time awareness. I agree, but I think one should distinguish between different sorts of time awareness, and also distinguish between actuality and requirement.

What the thought ‘it is raining now’ requires of its subject is an explicit representation of the time of thought, contrasted with other times. Such an explicit and contrastive representation is objective in the sense that the present time is viewed as one particular time among others. The subject who thinks ‘It is raining now’ is implicitly contrasting the present time, a rainy one, with some other time(s): the property of being a time at which rain occurs is ascribed to the former in contrast to the latter. The idea that the thinker of ‘It is raining’ might be temporally innocent is a colourful way of saying that ‘It is raining’ does not *require* such an explicit, objective representation of time; that thought is available also to those subjects who lack the advanced conceptual ability to think about times *qua* elements of an objective chronology (e.g. animals), but who are nevertheless able to register the weather in their environment. Such subjects can still think ‘It is raining’. Their thought ‘concerns’ the time at which they occur but are not ‘about’ that time, in contrast to ‘it is raining now’, which is about the time of thought.

In his work on the self notion, Perry has insisted on the difference between primitive self-knowledge based on special, egocentric ways of gaining information and acting, and objective self-knowledge based on the ability to think of oneself also from a third-person point of view, as one person among others.¹ I agree with Perry: The distinction between the two kinds of representation is essential to the theory of indexical thought. The self is unarticulated in primitive self-knowledge, while objective self-knowledge rests on deploying a self concept (or a self file) which explicitly represents the subject of thought (Perry 1986). I agree with Perry that such a mental file requires ‘the capacity to pool the information I get in normally other-directed ways that happens to be about myself, with the primitive self-knowledge I have concerning myself’ (Perry 2014: 29). Because of that extra requirement, objective self-knowledge is more demanding than primitive self-knowledge, which it presupposes. Certain *de se* thoughts, which I call ‘implicit’, express primitive self-knowledge and are available to any subject endowed with primitive self-knowledge; other *de se* thoughts, which I call ‘explicit’, require possessing a self file based on the capacity Perry talks about: the capacity to pool first person and third person information about oneself. These two levels are similar to those we find in the temporal case. The time is explicitly represented only in ‘it’s raining now’ (and the place only in ‘It is raining here’). In ‘it’s raining’ it is left unarticulated, as Prior suggested.² Temporal or locational concepts are deployed in one case, not in the other.

With respect to implicit *de se* thoughts, Lewis’s theory applies: the thinking subject serves as ‘circumstance of evaluation’ for the *de se* content, construed as a property which the subject self-ascribes (Lewis 1979). But explicit *de se* thoughts are a different matter: when a self file is deployed, the thought is explicitly about the sub-

¹For a recent statement of Perry’s view, see his Romanell lecture (Perry 2014).

²“Tensed propositions are understood as directly or indirectly characterising the *unmentioned* time of utterance” (Prior 1977: 30).

ject, who is incorporated into the *lekton*. The self occurs ‘as object’ in the thought, while in implicit *de se* thought it merely occurs ‘as subject’ (Wittgenstein 1958).

Be that as it may, Kölbel offers a *semantic* justification for holding that ‘it is raining’ and ‘it is raining here’ (or ‘it is raining now’) carry distinct *lekta*. The indexicals ‘now’ and ‘here’ are rigid and their reference cannot be shifted by circumstantial operators. In the case of ‘it’s raining’, the place of evaluation can be shifted: ‘it is raining’ is typically evaluated at the place of utterance, but in ‘somewhere, it is raining’ the place of utterance drops out of the picture: it does not survive the shift induced by the operator ‘somewhere’. Following Dummett, Evans, Lewis and others, we can use that criterion to distinguish the *lekton* (Dummett’s ‘ingredient sense’; Lewis’s ‘semantic value’) and the full assertoric content (the Austinian proposition, in my framework).³ The assertoric content of ‘it’s raining’ and ‘it’s raining here’ are the same, these authors argue, but their *embedding profiles* are different. If we prefix ‘it is raining’ with ‘somewhere’, the place of utterance no longer affects the truth-conditions. It does not survive operator-shifting, so it must be left out of the *lekton*. Not so with ‘it is raining here’: the place of utterance is fixed by the indexical as an element of content that survives operator shifting (‘somewhere it is raining here’). As Kölbel points out, the unshiftability of indexicals provides ample justification for including the reference of indexicals in the *lekton*. In ‘It’s raining’, the place affects the truth-conditions via the topic situation (the situation here and now). In ‘it is raining here’ it is a constituent of the *lekton*.

I fully endorse Kölbel’s semantic criterion. My three-level framework is inherited from Kaplan, whose ‘contents’ are relativized to time and world. Kaplanian contents contrast both with sentence meaning (which is referentially unloaded) and full assertoric content (what we get when we specify the circumstance with respect to which the content is to be evaluated). Now the main justification adduced by Kaplan for his intermediate notion of content is the rigidity/unshiftability of indexicals, whose referential content survives operator-shifting. I agree with Kölbel that that property is fundamental, and I think it is instantiated also in the realm of thought.

Indexical *concepts* are unshiftable, in the sense that if you deploy such a concept in thinking a counterfactual thought or holding a counterfactual attitude, the reference of the indexical concept survives the shift away from the actual world induced by the counterfactual attitude. In the counterfactual attitudes, the reference of indexical concepts is fixed by actual world relations, yet the referents may be rationally ascribed properties incompatible with their standing in such relations (Ninan 2008). That means that the individuals found in the actual environment are transported in imagination into possible worlds where these very individuals may or may not instantiate the environmental properties which make it possible for us to think about them in the first place.

³See Dummett (1973: 446–47; 1981: 572–74; 1993: 47–50), Evans (1979) and Lewis (1980).

13.2 2.

150

I say that the *lekton* is fully articulated, and Kölbel concludes that what I called 'what is said' in previous writings should not be equated to the *lekton*, despite the fact that '*lekton*' means 'what is said' in Greek. The reason why the *lekton* cannot be equated to what is said is that, according to my earlier account, what is said is 'non-minimal'—it is affected by *modulation processes* such as free enrichment—while, according to *Perspectival Thought*, the *lekton* cannot contain any 'unarticulated constituent'. Whatever unarticulated constituents there are are constituents of the complete content, or Austinian proposition: they are aspects of the circumstance of evaluation. So it seems that my earlier 'what is said' should be equated to the Austinian proposition rather than to the *lekton*. Or, Kölbel suggests, perhaps it should be equated to the utterance's truth-conditions, which correspond to an equivalence class of Austinian propositions.

Kölbel objects to all this, on the grounds that, for various reasons, the *lekton* should play the roles which I ascribe to 'what is said' (input to the inferential process of implicature generation, content of the attitudes and of speech acts etc.); so it is unfortunate that they wind up not being the same thing. If we fix the theory so that they come out identical, as Kölbel suggests we should, then, given my insistence that the *lekton* is fully articulated, we arrive at a position strikingly different from that which I defend in *Literal Meaning*. According to the position we arrive at, Kölbel says, the Austinian proposition is non-minimal (it contains unarticulated constituents) but the *lekton* just is the minimal proposition which I deride in *Literal Meaning* as having no psychological reality and no interesting role to play in the theory. To sum up, there is, to say the least, a significant tension between *Literal Meaning* and *Perspectival Thought*.

I deny that there is any such tension. I agree with Kölbel that the *lekton* should be equated to what is said for all the reasons he gives. Indeed their being identical is one of the reasons why I use that term '*lekton*' which means 'what is said' (and additionally conveys the suggestion of semantic incompleteness, due to the use of the term by Stoic logicians in connection with tensed propositions). But how can they be identical if one of them is minimal and the other one not?

Well, I never said that the *lekton* was minimal, and I don't think it is. The *lekton* is the rich 'what is said' of *Literal Meaning*. How, then, can I maintain that the *lekton* is fully articulated, that whatever is in the *lekton* must correspond to some constituent in the sentence that expresses that *lekton*? Is not free enrichment, the paradigmatic modulation process, the provision of unarticulated constituents?

No it is not. In free enrichment some aspect of meaning is contributed in a top down manner by the context. This is often interpreted as the provision of 'unarticulated constituents', but that is not my interpretation. Free enrichment typically corresponds to a process of *specification*, through which we make the contextual meaning of a lexical item more specific than its literal (conventional) meaning. Is this a matter of providing unarticulated constituents? No. The contextual meaning,

resulting from free enrichment, is not unarticulated, because it corresponds to something in the sentence, namely the lexical item whose meaning has been made contextually more specific.

Consider a sentence like ‘he opened the door’. This is understood in context as a particular kind of opening—the standard kind rather than an opening of the door with a scalpel (as when we open a wound). In context the opening may be taken to involve a particular instrument (as in ‘he took out his key and opened the door’). The kind of opening at stake, the instrument etc.—all these contextual aspects of the interpretation result from modulating (more specifically, ‘enriching’) the lexical meaning of ‘open’ by providing further specifications. That process of free enrichment is optional and context-driven, in contrast to saturation, which is linguistically mandated; yet the contextually specific content contributed by the word is articulated, by definition, since it is the contextually specific content *contributed by the word*. My claim that the *lekton* is fully articulated is therefore compatible with its being non-minimal, i.e. affected by free processes of modulation.⁴

13.3 3.

I discuss faultless disagreement in *Perspectival Thought*, but the conclusions I reach are very tentative. I start from the idea that agreement and disagreement are over the *complete* content (involving the *lekton* and the situation of evaluation). If two people entertain the same *lekton* but evaluate it with respect to distinct situations, they don’t disagree even if they ascribe opposite truth-values to the utterance:

I call you on the phone, and commenting upon my situation I say ‘It is raining’. If you say ‘No, it isn’t’, meaning that there is no rain in your situation, there is misunderstanding rather than genuine disagreement. Or, adapting Barwise’s example, suppose that Holmes says ‘The salt is left of the pepper’, and Watson, speaking from his own perspective, replies ‘No it is not’. Clearly, there is no substantive disagreement here. If each of them is talking about his own perspective, there is misunderstanding rather than genuine disagreement. The same considerations apply to the temporal case. At time *t*, you say ‘It is raining’. Later, when the sun is shining again, you say ‘It is not raining’. You cannot conclude ‘so I was wrong’. Here, as Richard points out, genuine disagreement can only be about temporally specific contents. (Recanati 2007: 90–91)

Faultless disagreement seems to be a counterexample: people who disagree about e.g. matters of taste seem to evaluate the same *lekton* (e.g. the relativized proposition that vegemite is tasty) with respect to their respective standards of taste, and end up with distinct truth-values when the standards are sufficiently different. Thus vegemite is tasty to you, but not to me. You say ‘Vegemite is tasty’; I respond: ‘No,

⁴The claim of full articulatedness amounts to a ban on so-called ‘topmost modulation’ (see Recanati 2010: 22–23). For a recent argument that *there is* topmost modulation (hence that the *lekton* is not fully articulated), see Cohen and Kehler [forthcoming](#).

it is disgusting'. The disagreement here seems genuine, but there is no complete content which the discussants share and over which they disagree. They only share the *lekton* (that vegemite is tasty) but evaluate it with respect to their respective standards. The complete contents of their respective thoughts are therefore different: subject A evaluates the *lekton* with respect to A's standards of taste (and ends up with the value 'true'), while B evaluates the same *lekton* with respect to B's different standards (and ends up with the value 'false'). So what is going on? What explains the difference between the 'it's raining' case, in which there is no genuine disagreement, and the vegemite case, in which it seems that there is?

In my framework 'vegemite is tasty' expresses a relativized proposition, whose truth or falsity is relative to a judge (a standard of taste). The judge (the person for whom vegemite is tasty) is incorporated into the *lekton* in 'vegemite is tasty to me', but in 'vegemite is tasty' it is left unarticulated and is contributed at the Austinian proposition level. There is another difference between 'vegemite is tasty' and 'vegemite is tasty to me', however. 'Vegemite is tasty' has an objective flavour (in many contexts at least)⁵ while 'vegemite is tasty to me' or 'I find it tasty' are more subjective. According to *Perspectival Thought*, what accounts for the objective flavour of 'vegemite is tasty' is the fact that the relevant judge is the *community* to which both the speaker and the hearer belong. What exactly counts as 'the community' is a highly context-sensitive matter, however, and this gives us a good deal of flexibility in the analysis of particular examples.

This leaves many possible options for analysing alleged cases of faultless disagreement. First, when A says 'vegemite is tasty' and B responds 'it is not', A may be *wrong* in presupposing that her standard of state regarding vegemite is shared by the community. B's dissenting voice suggests that the standard may actually not be shared. If that is so, then A is at fault (and must retreat to the subjective statement 'I find it tasty'). Second, A is free to maintain his statement regardless of B's dissension, by suitably adjusting 'the community' and excluding B from it. For example, A may judge that B departs, by his bad taste, from the standards of the community. If this is true, then, from A's point of view, B is at fault. However we interpret the case, the disagreement is not faultless.

Kölbel points out an implication of my view: whenever A wrongly presupposes that her standard of taste is shared by the community, she *fails to express a complete Austinian proposition*, for the consensual standard of taste she invokes, and against which she evaluates the *lekton* as true, does not actually exist. As he writes,

The context of utterance fails to determine a situation of evaluation. It's like uttering 'it is raining', intending to say something concerning Cockaigne (a mythical place where, when it rains, it rains cheese). (Kölbel, p. 19)

⁵There are exceptions. In episodic uses referring to a particular experience ('it was tasty') the judge is the experiencer rather than any community.

On that basis Kölbel raises the following objection:

According to Recanati's account, we cannot, when talking to one another, correctly assert that the picture is beautiful. For if we do so we commit a failure of presupposition similar to that of someone who asserts that it's raining intending to say something concerning Cockaigne. But no such failure seems to be involved. We take it to be quite normal to have diverging views on the beauty of pictures, but do not think that this prevents us from successfully asserting to one another that pictures are or are not beautiful. On Recanati's view, our assertions will lack a semantically complete content. So at the very least Recanati's account would have to allow that when we are talking about matters of taste, failing to assert something with a semantically complete content is not in any way a linguistic failing. For this type of situation seems to be absolutely standard. (Kölbel p. 20)

I find the objection interesting and worthy of a detailed response, based on a distinction between three types of case.

As Kölbel must admit, there are cases for which the notion of failure straightforwardly applies. The speaker often retreats to a weaker position (the subjective statement 'I find it tasty') when she discovers that the hearer dissents. That retreat reveals that the speaker considers herself to have been at fault when she made the stronger, objective claim.

On my account, however, presupposition failure (hence lack of determinate content) is only *one* option, corresponding to the case where A is at fault. 'Adjusting' the target community so as to make B's dissension irrelevant and rejecting his standard of taste as faulty (i.e. contrary to the community's standard) is another option, which need not involve any failure on the speaker's part. Of course, if the speaker is right, it is the hearer who is now at fault.

I agree with Kölbel that there are also cases of a third type: cases of 'faultless disagreement' such that *no failure whatsoever* is involved on the part of either speaker or hearer. The protagonists may enter an episode of sustained disagreement in which both parties (re)affirm diverging views without ever retreating to a weaker, subjective statement of their taste.

Such cases raise a problem for my framework, Kölbel says. Each protagonist vacuously refers to a communal standard that is being negotiated and is not yet established. It follows that no determinate Austinian proposition is expressed (this is like referring to Cockaigne). For that reason, the utterance is, or should be, neither true nor false. But this conclusion—that judgements of taste in situations of sustained disagreement do not have a complete content and fail to determine a truth-value—seems incompatible with the observation that such cases are 'absolutely standard' and involve no linguistic failing.

But I don't think the conclusion and the observation are actually incompatible. Following Kölbel's own suggestion, I want to 'allow that when we are talking about matters of taste, failing to assert something with a semantically complete content is not in any way a linguistic failing'. I agree that sustained disagreement is faultless—it involves no failing of any sort. It is faultless because no standard of taste is antecedently *given* as the standard of the local community formed by the protagonists; it is up for grabs (up for negotiation) what the communal standards are. Each protagonist tries to impose his or her standards, to *make them* the standards

of the local community. Each protagonist is entitled to do so, so there is no 'failure' (no 'fault') when one does. Still, I suggest, the utterances of the protagonists lack absolute truth-conditions.

I propose that, in sustained disagreement about matters of taste, the interlocutors's moves and countermoves ('vegemite is tasty', 'no, it is disgusting') are (i) neither true nor false, yet (ii) perfectly felicitous (involving no 'failure'). That conjunctive property—truth-valueless yet felicitous—is not unheard of: *imperative utterances also have it*. The lack of truth and falsity entails infelicity for assertions, which aim at truth, but it does not entail infelicity for other speech acts. So it is worth asking which speech act is performed by the utterances at stake.

In sustained disagreement the interlocutors *negotiate the standards* for the local community they form. I propose that their utterances (e.g. 'vegemite is tasty') are not assertions but *prescriptions*, inviting the hearer to adopt standards with respect to which the *lekton* is true. The speaker offers her own standards as the coordinative standard for the community. A counter-proposal by the hearer is a fully legitimate move: the hearer may resist the speaker's invitation and offer his own standard as the one they should adopt. So the disagreement persists and it is faultless.⁶

I conclude that 'vegemite is tasty' can be either an assertion (in which case disagreement cannot be faultless) or a prescription (in which case it can be). If it is an assertion, the context must determine a topic situation with respect to which it can be evaluated. The typical lack of such a determinate situation in episodes of disagreement about taste, where the communal standard is unsettled, is a problem if the utterance is an assertion; but it raises no problem if the utterance is a prescription. (We can also, and presumably should, accept that there are mixed cases, indeed a whole continuum of cases with an assertive and an prescriptive component; but I will ignore this complication here.)

When the utterance is a prescription the content of the speech act is a relativized proposition (*lekton*): that vegemite is tasty. The speaker tries to get the hearer (and the local community more generally) to adopt standards which make that *lekton* true. The *lekton* has truth-at conditions (it is true at certain standards and false at others) but it carries no absolute truth-conditions in these circumstances, for lack of a communal standard accepted by all parties. The conversation aims at establishing such a standard. Until it is settled, no determinate, stable situation of evaluation is provided to turn the *lekton* into a full Austinian proposition. The speech act is nondefective, however. It has a determinate force and a determinate content (the *lekton*) but, like orders, it does not allow for truth-evaluation.

I think this proposal, of the classical expressivist variety, fares better than Kölbel's. Kölbel thinks cases of faultless disagreement are cases in which A and B cannot accept the *lekton* endorsed by the other (from their own perspective) without changing their mind. But that characterization fails to exclude cases of misunderstanding like the example I gave earlier: I call you on the phone, 352

⁶This is similar to MacFarlane's suggestions regarding 'context coordination' (see *Perspectival Thought*, fn. 35 pp. 93–94).




and commenting upon my situation I say ‘It is raining’; you respond ‘No, it
 isn’t’, meaning that there is no rain in your situation. In that example, there is
 misunderstanding rather than genuine disagreement; but that is *also* a case in which
 the interlocutors cannot accept the *lekton* endorsed by the other (from their own
 perspective) without changing their mind.⁷

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⁷This paper benefitted from support from the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche under grant agreement n° ANR-10-LABX-0087 IEC and grant agreement n° ANR-10-IDEX-0001-02 PSL.

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