Mark Jary

Assertion

Palgrave Studies in Pragmatics, Language and Cognition

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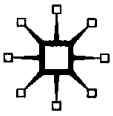

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Dedicated to the memory of Greta Hutchings

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Tables

1
Introduction

This book has two main aims. One is to bring together and discuss in a systematic way a range of perspectives on assertion: philosophical, linguistic and psychological. As far as I know, this has never been done before.[1] The other is to present a view of the pragmatics of assertion, with particular emphasis on the contribution of the declarative mood to the process of utterance interpretation. I hope that in laying the ground for the achievement of the second aim, I fulfil the first.

As with so many topics relating to linguistic meaning, the study of assertion starts with Frege. Before Frege, the distinction between the conceptual content conveyed by a statement – what Frege referred to as 'a thought', but today would be called a proposition – and the act of putting forward and openly committing oneself to that content was not adequately appreciated. Frege rectified this, and gave assertion a key role both in his philosophy of language and in his logical symbolism.

Reactions to Frege's insight have differed. It has been taken by some to provide the grounds for a use-based theory meaning. Brandom, for example, seeks to explain meaning in terms of the consequences of assertion, understood in terms of the practical and inferential commitments and entitlements taken on by asserters. Others, however, have chosen to play down the significance that Frege gave assertion. Indeed, in most analytical philosophy of language since Frege, the tendency has been to factor out the act and focus on the content. On this view, propositions, not assertions, are the fundamental bearers of truth conditions. When force is discussed in this framework, it is generally seen as something that can be bolted on to truth-conditional content, rather than something that is integral to that content.

Chapter 2 of this book looks at assertion from both these perspectives. It starts by looking at the approach to assertion in what I term

'traditional speech-act theory', as typified by the work of Searle and Bach and Harnish. On this view, assertoric force is just one force among many that can be attached to propositional content, and is awarded no higher theoretical status than, say, directive force. This contrasts with the approach I call 'speech-act fundamentalism'. One key characteristic of this view, championed by Brandom, is that assertion is the basic unit of analysis in the study of linguistic meaning. Other illocutionary forces are explained in terms of assertoric force, as, indeed, is conceptual content, though I do not go into that aspect of Brandom's work. Rather, I compare his framework with that of Barker, who also takes a fundamentalist approach to speech-acts and gives assertion a central role in the analysis of other forces.

Assertion is closely related to the notion of belief: assertions express beliefs. That is a platitude, but there is much more that can be said about the precise nature of the assertion-belief relationship, and this is far from platitudinous. First, there is the question of conceptual priority. Modern views on the pragmatics of linguistic communication might lead one to see belief as conceptually prior to assertions, for, due primarily to its Gricean legacy, modern pragmatics tends to view the interpretation of assertions as a matter of belief attribution. Add to this the widely-held view that linguistically encoded meaning radically underdetermines the content of our assertions, and one is easily led to the conclusion that assertions derive their content from the beliefs they express. However, if the question is considered from a perspective unburdened by consideration of the processes of utterance interpretation, the converse order of conceptual priority is possible. According to this view, as propounded by Dummett, assertion is conceptually prior to belief. Dummett's arguments to this effect are discussed in Chapter 3, where it is argued that this position is compatible with the linguistic-pragmatic view that assertoric utterances ultimately derive their content from the beliefs they express.

Despite Grice's influence, not everyone accepts that the interpretation of assertoric utterances is essentially a matter of belief attribution. While it is widely agreed that assertions express beliefs, there is less consensus about whether hearers, when interpreting utterances, necessarily treat assertions as expressions of belief. There are those who argue that assertions are first and foremost treated as sources of information about the world, and constitute a form of perception-by-proxy. Holders of this view, such as Dummett, Millikan and McDowell thus stand in opposition to Grice and his followers, such as Sperber and Wilson and Bach and Harnish, for whom utterance interpretation is belief attribution. These

positions and their motivations are also discussed in Chapter 3, where an ecumenical stance is advocated.

Views on the relationship between assertion and belief have a bearing on views of the force-form relationship. For those who assign assertion a fundamental explanatory role in their theory of linguistic meaning, the notion of a format specified for assertion is crucial. This is because, for those taking this position, there must be a type of behaviour whose tokening counts as asserting, no appeal to a more basic meaningful entity, such as belief, being possible. For these authors, the sign of assertion is the declarative mood, and the production of this sign under the right conditions is constitutive of assertion. Those who see assertion as case of belief attribution, by contrast, are able to posit a much looser link between mood and force, and even to deny that there is any special relationship between the declarative and assertion. In Chapter 4, I look at arguments that have been made to this effect, and show that cases of non-assertoric use of the declarative are actually straightforwardly explained by the assumption that the declarative is indeed specified for the performance of assertions. This Chapter focuses heavily on Dummett's claims concerning the assertion-declarative relationship, highlighting the crucial distinction he draws between the question of whether the positing of an assertion sign is necessary to explain what assertion is, and the question of whether an assertion sign is required in order that hearers can recognise the speaker's assertoric intentions.

Up to and including Chapter 4, the book examines assertion from a primarily philosophical perspective. However, as stated above, a key aim of the book is to provide an account of the mechanics of the interpretation of assertions, with particular emphasis on the role of the declarative mood in this process. From a philosophical point of view, it is sufficient to say that the declarative is a sign of assertion. From a linguistic perspective – especially one concerned with the pragmatics of utterance interpretation, this is not enough. Rather, one needs to identify the features of the declarative that make it apt for the making of assertions. This can only be done within a theoretical framework, the features assigned to the declarative being part of the vocabulary of that framework. Chapter 5 provides a bridge from the philosophical to the linguistic. It deals with Stalnaker's common-ground view of assertion, a philosophical account that has provided the basis of a number of linguistic accounts of the declarative mood. These accounts, and others, are discussed in detail in Chapter 6, where formal-semantic accounts of mood are contrasted with varieties of speech-act accounts.

Within linguistics, assertion is thought of not only in terms of truth-commitment, but also in terms of information structure. It is common to find asserted information identified as that which is the main point of the utterance. This aspect of assertion is discussed in Chapter 7, where it is shown that main-point status and assertion do not always coincide: main points need not be asserted by the speaker and what is asserted need not have main-point status. This Chapter also discusses the relationship between assertion and presupposition, a topic raised in Chapter 5 on Stalnaker. Following Stalnaker, presuppositions are commonly regarded as propositions treated as having common-ground status. I defend an alternative approach, on which presuppostional characteristics are indicative not necessarily of common-ground status, but of a particular functional role in the interpretation process. This view of presuppositional phenomena is found in the work of Sperber and Wilson, and it is their Relevance Theory framework which is employed both in this chapter and Chapter 8.

Chapter 8 presents a novel account of the role of the declarative mood in the interpretation of assertions, and also puts forward an account of its non-assertoric uses. Because it is grounded in the notion of relevance, this account has the advantage of providing an explanation of why we attend to assertions: they come with the presumption that they will be relevant to us. However, this assumption is conveyed by all utterances, so what sets assertions apart? The claim I make is that assertions, unlike directives and questions, present the proposition expressed by the utterance as relevant in its own right. The role of the declarative is to mark the proposition expressed as potentially relevant in this manner. Non-assertoric uses of the declarative are explained in two ways: either the proposition is presented as relevant in its own right, but in an embedded context that represents, say, the content of a fiction or supposition; or it is relevant in its own right in a basic context that represents the actual world, but witnessing the performance of the act is sufficient grounds for accepting that proposition. If witnessing the act is sufficient grounds for acceptance, then the utterance does not count as an assertion for, as is explained in Chapter 8, assertion is characterised by certain cognitive and social safeguards that come into play when there is a possibility of the hearer being misled or deceived.

Analysing assertion in terms of relevance has the further advantage of shedding light on the relationship between assertoric force and main-point status. On the account presented in Chapter 8, an assertion is a case of a proposition being presented as relevant in its own right to an individual. For a proposition to be relevant to an individual, in

the technical sense employed in Chapter 8, it needs to be true. Thus the truth requirement on assertions follows from their special claim of relevance. Main-point status is also analysable in terms of relevance: the proposition communicated by an utterance that makes the greatest contribution to the overall relevance of the utterance is its main point. On this view, assertions often have main-point status because their point is to present the proposition expressed by the utterance as relevant to the individual. Under certain conditions, however, assertion and main-point status diverge. This is explained in Chapter 8.

Chapter 8 also returns to issues raised in Chapter 3 concerning the relationship between assertion and belief. In Chapter 3, I argue that the interpretation of assertions need not necessarily involve belief attribution. In Chapter 8, I show that, of a range of possible relevance-driven utterance interpretation strategies, only the more sophisticated require belief attribution. This observation has a number of implications. One is that the case made by Sperber and Wilson for a pragmatics module is greatly weakened. Another is that, *pace* Sperber and Wilson, utterance interpretation is often a relevance-maximising, rather than relevance-optimising, procedure.

The book ends with a short concluding chapter.

Before starting on the book proper, both a note on terminology and an apology for a glaring omission are in order. In the literature on mood, the form associated with assertion is sometimes referred to as 'the indicative mood', and sometimes as 'the declarative mood'. The former is most common among philosophers, but linguists are prone to object that the indicative is, strictly speaking, a verbal inflection rather than a clause type. I have used the term 'declarative' pretty much throughout this book, to refer to both embedded and unembedded instances of the form standardly associated with assertions – as opposed to commands and questions – in traditional grammars. The glaring omission is the almost complete absence of any discussion of the importance of intonation in relation to assertion. This is particularly important in languages, such as Spanish and Italian, where interrogative sentences are not marked syntactically or morphologically and are hence syntactically identical to declaratives. Clearly, when I make claims about the function of the declarative in relation to assertion, I mean when it is uttered with the appropriate intonation contour.

2
Assertion in Speech-act Theory

2.1 Introduction

Although, as we will see later in this book, the notion of assertoric character is employed, tacitly or otherwise, in the study of inference and representation, assertion is first and foremost an *action*. Accordingly, we do well to start with an overview of assertion as it has been viewed in speech-act theory. This will serve a number of purposes. First, it will highlight issues relating to assertion to be discussed in later chapters, such as the relationship between assertion, truth and belief. Second, it will allow discussion of certain fundamental issues in some depth. One of these concerns which features of assertion – informativeness, truth-commitment, belief expression, explicitness – are central to its analysis. Another is whether assertion should be analysed as a sister of other illocutionary acts, or whether it is more fundamental, and therefore correctly seen as a superordinate species of act.

The chapter begins by distinguishing two types of speech-act theorist. Their two approaches are then discussed, and the work of major players in each camp compared and contrasted in some detail. I end the chapter by highlighting the points raised in this chapter that will be important in the remainder of the book.

2.2 Two types of speech-act theorist

Meaning theorists with an interest in speech acts tend to fall into two camps. For one, speech-act theory is a component of a theory of linguistic meaning, one that is designed to work in conjunction with a truth-conditional account of some notion of 'core meaning'. As we will

see, such approaches tend to treat the proposition as this core element of meaning, viewing assertion as being just one of the many things that speakers can do with it. For these theorists, the key question concerning assertion tends to be how this act is to be distinguished from others such as ordering, promising and questioning. Probably the best known member of this group is Searle, who is justly considered one of the founders of speech-act theory, so we'll call this camp the 'traditional speech-act theorists'.

But of course, while a founder, Searle is not the father of speech-act theory. That mantle rests with Austin (1962/1975), who, like Wittgenstein (1958), argued that philosophers of language had placed too much emphasis on the descriptive – or propositional – element of declarative sentences, with the result that they ignored the uses to which sentences of all types were put and hence failed to take into account a crucial social element of linguistic meaning. For those in the second camp, this social element of meaning is not merely crucial, but central: rather than viewing speech act-theory as a bolt-on to truth-conditional accounts, they argue that linguistic meaning should be explained in terms of the uses to which linguistic forms are put. Detailed and well articulated theories of this type have been proposed by Brandom, Alston and Barker. Because they see speech acts as fundamental to linguistic meaning, we'll call them 'speech-act fundamentalists'.[1] They are of particular interest here because, unlike the traditionalists, they tend to give special status to assertion, claiming (in the case of Brandom and Barker, though not Alston) that other sentential illocutionary acts must be understood in terms of assertion.

We begin by looking at the traditionalists.

2.2.1 Speech-act traditionalists and assertion

2.2.1.1 Individuating assertion: truth, belief and informativeness

The view of assertion as a sister, rather than the mother, of other illocutionary acts has its roots in Austin's rejection of the distinction he introduced, at the start of *How to Do Things with Words*, between constative and performative utterances. Austin first suggested that utterances might usefully be divided into two types, depending on whether they can be aptly judged true or false. Those that can, he termed 'constatives'. Those that cannot, he suggested, have their meaning in the acts that they can be used to perform, hence the term 'performative'. Examples of these included explicit performatives such as (1) and (2), which share with constatives declarative word order, and acts performed using