

# What Is Assertion?

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To assert something is to perform a certain kind of act. This act is different in kind both from other speech acts, like questions, requests, commands, promises, and apologies, and from acts that are not speech acts, like toast buttering and inarticulate yodeling. My question, then is this: what features of an act qualify it as an assertion, and not one of these other kinds of act? To focus on a particular example: in uttering “Bill will close the window,” one might be practicing English pronunciation, asserting that Bill will close the window, or requesting that Bill close the window. What makes it the case that one is doing one of these and not another?

In pursuing this question, I will assume a distinction between the force and content of a speech act. To construe an utterance as a speech act is to redescribe it as a *Ving* with content *p*. Speech acts with the same force can differ in content, and speech acts with the same content can differ in force. This separation is methodologically useful, as it allows the theory of speech acts to focus on describing the types of illocutionary force. We should not assume, however, that a uniform notion of content will work for all speech acts. If we use the term “proposition” for the content of an assertion or conjecture, the content of a question is probably going to be a *set* of propositions (the possible answers to the question), not a proposition.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging this does not destroy the motivation for the force/content distinction.

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<sup>1</sup>See Hamblin (1973); Karttunen (1977); Groenendijk and Stokhof (1997).

An account of an illocutionary force-type  $V$  ought to help us understand both how  $V$ ings with different contents differ from each other, and how  $V$ ings differ from other kinds of illocutionary acts. And it ought to help us resolve disputed questions. For example, are utterances of “Joe might be in Boston” best understood as assertions or as speech acts of another kind? How can we distinguish between what is asserted and what is merely implied? Is anything asserted by metaphorical utterances? Is it possible to assert something unintentionally? Can one assert something by winking? And so on.

It seems to me that there are four broad categories of answers to our question in the literature:

1. To assert is to express an attitude.
2. To assert is to make a move defined by its constitutive rules.
3. To assert is to propose to add information to the conversational common ground.
4. To assert is to undertake a commitment.

In what follows I will distinguish these and discuss the motivations and advantages of each one, as well as the difficulties they face. My aim here is more exploratory than polemical: I want to see, among other things, how each view might account for the phenomena that motivate its competitors. I am not going to argue for any one of these views here.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Assertion as the expression of an attitude

Assertion is sometimes said to be the overt expression of belief. It is uncontroversial, I take it, that assertions often do express beliefs. But the thought I want to consider is that to assert that  $p$  just *is* to express the belief that  $p$  (and perhaps some other attitudes).

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<sup>2</sup>My interest in accounts of assertion is motivated in part by my view that a philosophically interesting notion of “relative truth” can be rendered precise and intelligible by embedding it in an account of assertion (MacFarlane, 2003, 2005).

Probably no one has ever held this view without qualification or refinement. For it is clear that many actions that are not assertions express beliefs. In reaching for the umbrella as I head to the door, I express my belief that rain is likely. Even *linguistic* acts that express the belief that  $p$  need not be assertions that  $p$ . In inviting you to go skiing with me, I may express my belief that you know how to ski. But I have not *asserted* anything; I have only issued an invitation. Similarly, in writing that a student has nice handwriting, I may express my belief that he is not a suitable job candidate. But I have only asserted that he has nice handwriting.

The proponent of an expressive account might bite the bullet here, and say that I have *indirectly* asserted that the student is not suitable, by (directly) asserting that he has nice handwriting. But this threatens to erase an intuitive and useful distinction between what is asserted and what is merely implied. If, later, someone reproaches me by saying “You asserted that this candidate was unsuitable,” I can justly reply: “No, I was careful not to commit myself to that; you drew that conclusion yourself.”

A different kind of response would be to insist that an assertion that  $p$  be made using a sentence that means that  $p$ .<sup>3</sup> But this seems overly restrictive. When Geoffrey Nunberg’s waitress says, “The ham sandwich left without paying,” she has not asserted that the ham sandwich left without paying (Nunberg, 1979). Nonetheless, she has made an assertion. (How else would you characterize the illocutionary force of her utterance?) Assertions need not be literal.

Besides, it is not clear that all assertions are linguistic acts. One can certainly make assertions using conventionalized gestures. (Think of the hand signals used by commandos to indicate the position of the enemy.) Perhaps one can even make assertions by means of improvised gestures that lack any conventional meaning. Stephen Schiffer describes a case in which a husband communicates to his wife that he is bored at a party by wiggling his ears (Schiffer, 1972, 126). Perhaps this is not an assertion, but if it isn’t one, it’s not merely because it lacks a linguistic vehicle. If it turns out that all assertions are linguistic, this ought to be the result of argument, not stipulation about the meaning of “assertion.”

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<sup>3</sup>So Williams (2002, 74): “A asserts that  $p$  where  $A$  utters a sentence  $S$  which means that  $p$ , in doing which either he expresses his belief that  $p$ , or he intends the person addressed to take it that he believes that  $p$ .”

So expression-based accounts of assertion have to walk a tightrope. On one side is the danger of counting too little as assertion, ruling out non-literal (and nonlinguistic) assertions altogether; on the other, the danger of counting too much as assertion, including non-speech acts and implicatures.

It seems to me that Bach and Harnish's sophisticated version of an expressive account succumbs to the second kind of flaw. It defines assertion as follows (Bach and Harnish, 1979):

In uttering *e*, *S* asserts that *P* if *S* expresses:

- i. the belief that *P*, and
- ii. the intention that *H* believe that *P*. (42)

The second clause here rules out (for example) my umbrella case. It's not clear, though, why ordinary conversational implicatures aren't counted as asserted contents, on this definition. Why, when one implicates a candidate's unsuitability by stating that his handwriting is good, does one not express both a belief that the candidate is unsuitable and an intention that the audience come to believe this?

An answer is not to be found in Bach and Harnish's account of what it is to *express* an attitude:

For *S* to *express* an attitude is for *S* to R-intend the hearer to take *S*'s utterance as reason to think *S* has that attitude. (15)

To "R-intend" an effect is to intend to bring it about by means of the recognition of this very intention.<sup>4</sup> Surely in the handwriting case, one intends one's audience to take one's utterance as a reason to think that one believes the candidate unsuitable for the job (and that one intends to get them to believe this too), and to do so because of their recognition of this very intention. So

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<sup>4</sup>This reflexivity is what distinguishes illocutionary intentions, for which success is audience uptake, from perlocutionary ones: "In general, hearer recognition of perlocutionary intentions is incidental to the production of perlocutionary effects. ... What distinguishes illocutionary intentions, we suggest, is that their fulfillment consists in their recognition" (Bach and Harnish, 1979, 12-13).

Bach and Harnish's account seems to imply, wrongly I think, that one has *asserted* that the candidate is unsuitable.<sup>5</sup>

Presupposition presents similar difficulties. It seems that in asserting that Jane has not stopped beating her husband, one does not also *assert* (but only presupposes) that Jane has been beating her husband. But it is very difficult to see how one could R-intend the hearer to take one's utterance as a reason to think one believes Jane has not stopped beating her husband, without also R-intending the hearer to take one's utterance as a reason to think one believes that Jane has been beating her husband.

Another hurdle for expressive accounts is allowing for insincere assertions. Some proponents of expressive accounts view expression as the outward manifestation of an inner state. According to Williams (2002, 73–5) and Owens (2006), expressions of beliefs must be *caused* by the beliefs they express. Only sincere assertions can express beliefs in this sense, and Owens and Williams are forced to say that insincere assertions count as assertions in a parasitic sense. Bach and Harnish, by contrast, hold that all assertions, even insincere ones, are expressions of beliefs, which is why they gloss expressing an attitude as intending to give a reason for attributing it. This account is not unintuitive. We might naturally say of a con man who duped us by pretending to be lost that he “expressed great consternation,” and not just that he pretended to do so. Plausibly, he has expressed consternation because he has acted with the intention of giving us a reason to think him in a state of consternation.

It is not so clear, though, that Bach and Harnish's account leaves room for *openly* insincere assertion. In cases where it is common ground that the speaker lacks the belief being expressed, it is hard to see how the speaker can be intending to give the hearers a reason to attribute the belief. Bach and Harnish point out that a reason can be *pro tanto*, and need not be conclusive:

S's utterance is, and can be R-intended to be taken to be, a reason, despite the fact that it can be overridden by mutual contex-

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<sup>5</sup>Bach tells me (p.c.) that he and Harnish did intend to include such implicatures in the broad category of assertives. This is not obvious from their list of assertives: “affirm, allege, assert, aver, avow, claim, declare, deny, indicate, maintain, propound, say, state, submit” (Bach and Harnish, 1979, 42). For none of these verbs (except possibly “indicate”) does it seem correct to say that one *V'd* that the candidate is unsuitable for the job.

tual beliefs to the contrary. Even when defeated, a reason is a reason. (Bach and Harnish, 1979, 58)

And they offer a reformulation that does not assume that a defeated reason is still a reason:

Instead of saying that expressing an attitude is R-intending *H* to take one's utterance as reason to believe that one has that attitude, we can say that it is R-intending *H* to take one's utterance as sufficient reason, *unless there is mutually believed reason to the contrary*, to believe that one has that attitude. (Bach and Harnish, 1979, 291, emphasis added)

But this borders on unintelligibility. We can make sense of *intending that Jane take out the trash today, unless it is a holiday*, in a case where it might be a holiday. But when Jane knows that today is a holiday, and the speaker knows that she knows this, what is it for the speaker to intend that Jane take out the trash today, unless it is a holiday? Similarly, if it is mutually known that the speaker lacks an attitude, what is it for the speaker to intend for the hearer to take her utterance as a sufficient reason to attribute this attitude to her, unless there is mutually believed reason to the contrary?

A big selling point of an expressive account of assertion is the way it fits into a general, systematic account of all illocutionary acts. Bach and Harnish propose to understand *every* illocutionary act as the expression of some combination of attitudes—a strategy that is quite illuminating from a taxonomic point of view. I want to conclude this section by questioning these putative taxonomic advantages, by focusing on the speech act of *retracting* an assertion.

To retract an assertion (that is, a particular *act* of asserting) is to “take it back,” rendering it “null and void,” the way a retracted offer is null and void. So, if asserting is expressing a belief and an intention to instill that belief in one's audience, then one might expect retracting to be a *taking back* of one's earlier expressing of these attitudes. But what sense can we make of this? How does one take back the expression of an attitude? If I am hurt and express my pain by grimacing, can I “take back” my expression of pain?

Bach and Harnish's account of expression in terms of reason-giving does not help here. If asserting is R-intending to give someone a reason to ascribe

an attitude to one, then retracting or “unasserting” would presumably be R-intending to take away this reason. One might try to do that by doing something that undermines or “defeats” that reason—saying, for example, “I take that back.” But what one does later in retracting an assertion should not undermine the reason the assertion gave for taking one to have had the relevant attitude *at the time it was made*. (“I take that back” is different from “I didn’t mean that.”) Moreover, Bach and Harnish are committed, by their account of openly insincere assertion, to the idea that “a defeated reason is still a reason.” So even if a retraction undermines the reason offered earlier for ascribing an attitude, it can’t make it the case that no reason was offered earlier, and thus it can’t count as an “unexpressing” of the attitude. (At best, it would move the earlier assertion into a category with openly insincere assertions.)

It’s not surprising, then, that when Bach and Harnish offer an account of retraction, they take it to be the expression of an attitude, rather than an “unexpression.”

In uttering *e*, *S* retracts the claim that *P* if *S* expresses:

- i. that he no longer believes that *P*, contrary to what he previously indicated he believed, and
- ii. the intention that *H* not believe that *P*. (43)

But this isn’t quite right. One can, without any insincerity, retract an assertion of something one still believes. One might do this, for example, because one realizes one can’t adequately defend the claim, or because one doesn’t want others relying on it. Indeed, it is possible to retract the assertion while avowing the belief: “I retract that, as I can’t defend it. But I still believe it.” This does not seem insincere in the way that “I assert that *p*, but I don’t believe it” does. So it does not seem right that retraction expresses lack of belief. Nor does it express an intention that one’s audience not believe what was asserted—one may be quite happy to let them continue to believe this, if they have their own independent grounds.

This view of retraction could perhaps be patched up. (ii) could be amended to “the intention that *H* not believe that *P* on the basis of *S*’s previous assertion.” And (i) could be changed to “that he no longer holds *P* to be adequately grounded” or “that he no longer wishes to be committed to *P*.” But

there would be no clear sense in which retraction, so conceived, “undoes” an assertion, *as it is conceived on the expressive model*—and no clear sense in which the account of retraction can be derived from the account of assertion. Moreover, the notions of epistemic groundedness and commitment that are invoked here are foreign to the expressive account, and seem in fact to point to two of the other approaches we will consider.

Finally, assertion is not the only speech act that can be retracted. One can retract a question or a command or an apology. A good account of retraction ought to have sufficient generality to account for this. Bach and Harnish’s clearly isn’t intended to. Indeed, they nowhere talk about retraction of non-assertive speech acts. It is tempting to think that the difficulties fitting retraction into their taxonomy of speech acts points to a fundamental problem with that taxonomy.

## 2 Assertion as a move defined by rules

The second approach I want to consider conceives of assertion as a move in a language game, defined by the rules that govern it. As Timothy Williamson puts it: “On this view, the speech act [of assertion], like a game and unlike the act of jumping, is constituted by rules” (Williamson, 1996, 489).

It is crucial to this approach that there is a distinction between the “constitutive rules” that define the move of assertion and other kinds of norms. We can make such a distinction in the case of other game moves. For example, the rule of chess that says you can’t castle if the king is in check is partially constitutive of the move of castling. A move that was not subject to this rule would not be castling.<sup>6</sup> Other norms involving castling—for example, strategic norms about when you ought to castle—are not constitutive rules, since one could still count as castling without being subject to them.

Since castling is nothing more than a move in chess, one can say what castling is by articulating all of the constitutive rules for castling: castling is the move that is subject to these rules. Similarly, the thought goes, to give an account of assertion, it is sufficient to articulate all of its constitutive rules.

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<sup>6</sup>This is different from saying that a move that does not *obey* this rule would not be castling. A move may be subject to a rule either by obeying it or by being in violation of it.



The most well-known view of this sort is Williamson's "knowledge account of assertion." On Williamson's account, assertion is the unique speech act-type  $V$  whose unique rule is the knowledge rule:

KNOWLEDGE RULE: One must:  $V$  that  $p$  only if one knows that  $p$ .

Other accounts of this form have also been defended; these vary in replacing the knowledge rule with the truth rule, the reasonable-to-believe rule, or something similar:<sup>7</sup>

TRUTH RULE: One must:  $V$  that  $p$  only if it is true that  $p$ .

REASONABLE-TO-BELIEVE RULE: One must:  $V$  that  $p$  only if it is reasonable to believe that  $p$ .

(For the record, I find the truth rule the most plausible of these. Williamson's arguments for the knowledge rule can, I think, be resisted.<sup>8</sup> But my discussion in what follows will for the most part be neutral between all three versions.)

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<sup>7</sup>For a defense of the truth rule, see Weiner (2005). Dummett's suggestion (Dummett, 1959) that assertion is governed by the convention that one should assert only what is true might be an early version, though Dummett aims to illuminate truth rather than assertion. For a defense of versions of the reasonable-to-believe rule, see Lackey (2007) and Douven (2006), though neither defends the simple formulation given here.

<sup>8</sup>Williamson gives three main arguments. First, he claims that there are other speech acts, such as conjecturing, that are governed by the truth rule. But this is far from clear. If conjecturing were governed by the truth rule, it would be irresponsible to make conjectures one didn't have strong reason to think were true, and it isn't. Perhaps Williamson is moved by the fact that one must retract conjectures whose contents have been shown to be untrue. But does that entail that one must *make* conjectures only when their contents are true?

Second, he argues that the truth rule can't explain why we shouldn't assert of a lottery ticket that it won't win. But it can—together with the principle that one ought not believe  $P$  when one knows that one doesn't know  $P$ . (This is a principle Williamson himself should accept, since he takes *belief* to be governed by a knowledge rule.) We take ourselves to know that we don't know that the lottery ticket won't win. So, by this principle, we ought not believe that it won't win. It follows that we ought not believe we would be satisfying the truth rule in asserting that it won't win. (It doesn't follow that we ought not assert that it won't win, but only that we would be unreasonable in doing so—but this weaker conclusion is strong enough to explain the intuition that there is something wrong with asserting that the lottery ticket won't win.)

Third, Williamson argues that the knowledge rule can explain the oddity of sentences

It is not clear to me whether any of the proponents of these accounts intend them as explications of the illocutionary force of assertion. Williamson says that he has given an *individuating* account of assertion, but an individuating account of something might not be very illuminating. For example, one can pick out king's-side castling as the unique move *M* in chess governed by the unique constitutive rule:

KING'S-SIDE CASTLING RULE: One must: *M* only when (i) the king and the king's rook have not been moved previously, (ii) there are no pieces between the king and the king's rook, (iii) the king is not in check and would not be in check in either of the two squares between it and the king's rook.

But knowing this about castling does not tell you what it is to castle; one could know this rule and have *no idea* how to move the pieces in such a way as to castle. Similarly, it seems to me, one could know the knowledge rule or the truth rule and have no understanding of what kind of act assertion is, or of how to make an assertion.

One might object that the king's-side castling rule, as I have stated it, is incomplete, and thus not the "unique" constitutive rule governing king's-side castling. Isn't it also a rule that one castles on the king's side by moving one's king two squares towards the king's rook, and moving the king's rook two squares towards the king? Not all constitutive rules, after all, are rules of permission, stating the conditions under which a move is permissible. Some rules tell you how the move in question changes the board position or the "score."

But if this is right—and I think it is—can't a parallel objection be made to Williamson's account of assertion? Let's grant, for the sake of argument, that the knowledge rule (or, if you prefer, the truth rule) really is a constitutive

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like "*P*, but I don't know that *P*." But so can the truth rule. For any asserter can come to see, with a bit of apriori reasoning, that she doesn't know *that P* and that *she doesn't know that P*. Given the principle we invoked above, the asserter ought not believe this proposition. So she ought not believe that she would be satisfying the truth rule in asserting it.

So it seems that, in conjunction with other principles that Williamson ought to accept, the truth rule can explain everything the knowledge rule does. (Bach (2008, §5) makes the related point, in defense of the belief rule, that we can derive the knowledge norm for assertion from the knowledge norm for belief and the belief norm for assertion.)

rule for assertion. Why should we suppose that it is the only such rule? Can you think of any other move in any other game whose *only* constitutive rule is a rule for when it can be made? (Even rules for “time out” in games like football include not just rules for when a time-out may be taken, but for how long it can last, and how it affects the score.)<sup>9</sup>

One might counter that assertion should be *expected* to be different from other kinds of moves in games. After all, didn’t Austin originally classify assertion as “constative,” as opposed to “performative”? Perhaps assertions are distinguished from other kinds of speech acts precisely by the fact that there are no constitutive rules governing their *effects*, only rules governing when they may be made. Imagine adding to chess a move, boogling, which is governed only by the rule:

BOOGLE RULE: One must: boogle only when the opponent’s king is next to a knight.

Imagine players of this enhanced form of chess saying, periodically, “I hereby boogle!” Boogling would have no direct effect on the game, so what would be the point? Well, perhaps boogling could be a way of communicating information—calling attention to a recurring feature of the board position. Boogling would be a constative, not a performative, chess-move.

All of this suggests that we should be wary of the objection that accounts like Williamson’s don’t tell us directly about what it is to make an assertion. Perhaps assertion is like boogling: all there *is* to say about what it is to make the move is when it is okay to make it.

An account like this would explain why assertions are apt vehicles for the expression of beliefs. Normally we expect players of games to try to conform to the rules. Hence in castling, one normally does something that gives others reasons to think that one believes that one’s king is not in check; that is, one expresses one’s belief that one’s king is not in check. Similarly, in performing an act governed by the truth rule or the knowledge rule, one normally expresses one’s belief that the proposition one asserts is true. However, assertions express belief only when the general presupposition that the

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<sup>9</sup>The chess-move of saying “check” is *almost* an example, but the constitutive rule that governs it has a slightly different form; it says not when the move *can* be made, but when it *must* be made (whenever one’s move puts the opponent in check). Thanks to Matthew Benton for discussion.

asserter is trying to “play by the rules” is in effect. This presupposition is cancelled when the assertion is openly insincere, and that is why (*pace* Bach and Harnish) openly insincere assertions do not express beliefs.

I now want to turn to the issue of retraction. I argued above that the belief-expression view did not have a good explanation of the speech act of retraction, or of why assertion should come with a correlative act of retraction. How does Williamson’s account fare in this respect? Suppose that assertion is a “move” constituted by a single rule, the knowledge rule. How should we think of retraction? Presumably, retraction is another move, constituted by its own rules. What should these rules look like?

If we had thought of assertion as a move that consisted in part of changing the game’s “board position” or score, then it would be natural to think of retraction as a way of undoing that change. But on the present account, we are thinking of assertion as a move whose only constitutive rule concerns when it should be made; there are no rules dictating its effect on the score or the course of the game. Presumably, then, retraction should also be conceived as a move that is constituted by rules governing when it may be made. Two natural candidates are

RETRACTION RULE 1: One must: retract a previous assertion *A* *only when* one knows *A* to have been made contrary to the knowledge rule.

RETRACTION RULE 2: One must: retract a previous assertion *A* *when* one knows *A* to have been made contrary to the knowledge rule.

The first of these seems too weak, on its own; according to it retraction is sometimes permitted, but never required. It seems odd to *forbid* retraction of an assertion one knows to have been correct, while leaving it permissible *not* to retract an assertion one knows to have been incorrect.

The second rule seems better in these respects. But it also seems wrong as a description of the norms of retraction. Suppose that yesterday I asserted that it would be sunny today, not knowing that it would be. My assertion violated the knowledge rule. But, since it is sunny today, it seems wrong to say that I must retract my earlier assertion. One need not retract assertions whose contents one now knows to have been true.

More plausibly, then,

RETRACTION RULE 3: One must: retract a previous assertion *A* when one knows that one performed *A* and that the content of *A* was untrue.

This requires retraction when it should be required, while permitting it even in cases where the asserted content has not been shown to be untrue. Similarly, if one endorses the truth rule instead of the knowledge rule for assertion, the natural retraction norm is

RETRACTION RULE 4: One must: retract a previous assertion *A* when one performed *A* and *A* was untrue.

On this account (in either the truth or the knowledge version), retraction is *required* in precisely the same circumstances where it is *permitted* to assert that one performed *A* and that the content of *A* is untrue.<sup>10</sup> This suggests a pattern for deriving retraction norms for other speech acts that are defined in terms of constitutive rules for performing them: one must retract a speech act of type *T* precisely when one satisfies the norm for asserting that, in performing this act, one violated the constitutive rules for *T*s.

### 3 Assertion as a proposal to add information to the common ground

On Robert Stalnaker's influential account, an assertion is a proposal to add its content to a "common ground" of propositions taken for granted for purposes of a conversation.<sup>11</sup> Equivalently, one can view the common ground

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<sup>10</sup>This account permits, but does not require, retraction in cases where an assertion has been shown to have been groundless without being shown to have been untrue.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Stalnaker (1999, 10-11): "I suggested that an assertion should be understood as a proposal to change the context by adding the content to the information presupposed. This is an account of the *force* of an assertion, and it respects the traditional distinction between the content and the force of a speech act. Propositional content is represented by a (possibly partial) function from possible worlds to truth-values; assertive force is represented by the way in which any such function is used to change the context that the speaker shares with those to whom he is speaking."

as the set of possible worlds left open as candidates for actuality; in this case, an assertion is a proposal to *cut down* the common ground by removing those worlds in which the asserted proposition is not true. A reduction in candidates for actuality is an increase in information.

Both Stalnaker's view and Robert Brandom's view, which will be discussed in the next section, are influenced by David Lewis's suggestion that we can think of speech acts in terms of the way they alter a shared "conversational score" (Lewis, 1979). Stalnaker takes the score to be the common ground of accepted propositions; Brandom takes it to be a collection of normative statuses. From a certain point of view, then, Brandom's and Stalnaker's views go together; here, though, I am emphasizing a different way of categorizing them.

Stalnaker's account of assertion differs from the two accounts we have examined so far in focusing neither on what is expressed by an assertion nor on the norms for when an assertion may be made, but on what he calls the "essential effect" of an assertion. As an answer to the question "what is it to make an assertion," this is attractively direct. It has the form: "to assert is to  $\Phi$ ."

Moreover, this account helps us understand what seemed right about the others. It is easy to see why a proposal to add to the set of presupposed propositions would generally express belief, since in normal circumstances, one does not want to rule out possibilities one regards as genuine candidates for actuality. There are, however, exceptions, and Stalnaker's account explains why they are exceptions. Sometimes one will "play along" with the presuppositions of a conversation, even if one rejects them, and this may lead one to assert things one believes to be false. When this is patent to one's hearers, one's assertions will not express beliefs.

For the same reason, one can see why a proposal to add to the set of presupposed propositions would generally be governed by something like the truth rule or the knowledge rule. We expect others to help us get closer to the truth, so we expect them not to assert things unless they have good grounds for thinking them true. Again, there are exceptions, and Stalnaker's account explains why they are exceptions. If I know that you are just "going along" with the conversational presupposition that Ted and Sue are married, I will not censure you for asserting that Sue bought a car for her husband—something you know to be false. You have proposed to modify the common

ground in a way that makes sense, given the purposes of the conversation.

So, Stalnaker's account gives a direct account of illocutionary force and explains both why one might be tempted to say that assertion is the expression of a belief and why one might be tempted to say that assertion is governed by the truth rule or the knowledge rule. What's not to like? I want to raise four concerns.

First, this account assumes that assertions have their significance within the context of a single conversation, involving a group of inquirers with a mutual "common ground." While this is certainly the *usual* setting for assertions, it seems dangerous to *define* assertion in terms that are applicable only in this setting. Couldn't one stand in the street and assert something to oneself, or to whoever is listening? In this case it's hard to get any grip on the notion of a "common ground," since a common ground requires a definite group with mutual expectations. And what about assertions made in the context of a television interview? Are we to understand them as proposals to add information to the common ground between interviewer and interviewee? Doesn't that ignore their status as public statements? Finally, what about assertions that play a role in multiple, largely disjoint conversations? I am sure that a Stalnakerian can give *some* account of what is going on in these cases, but they do put pressure on the idea that the "essential effect" of assertion is to add information to a common ground.

Second, not all assertions seem to be aimed at reducing the common ground. Some epistemic modal claims, for example, seem to be aimed at *increasing*, rather than decreasing, the set of open possibilities. If we have all been assuming that the telescope we are looking through is functioning properly, and I say, "But the spot we're seeing might be a scratch on the lens!", the point of my speech act is apparently to add certain possibilities to the common ground, not to cut them out. A Stalnakerian can deny this, and say that my speech act is just an assertion about what is ruled out by what the group knows, but I don't think this is a promising line to take.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, a Stalnakerian can say that my speech act is not an assertion, but some other kind of speech act. That approach, too, has its difficulties (MacFarlane, forthcoming, §4). An account of assertion that allows us to understand epistemic modal claims as assertions has substantial advantages of economy.

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<sup>12</sup>For this kind of line, see DeRose (1991). For criticism, see MacFarlane (forthcoming).

Third, as Stalnaker (2005) points out himself, there may be non-assertoric speech acts that change the common ground in the same way as assertions, but differ in other respects (for example in how they are assessed). Stalnaker mentions two: agreeing to accept something for purposes of the conversation, and stipulating a fact in a court proceeding. We'd be reluctant to call acts of these kinds assertions, but they *are* proposals to change the common ground by adding information.

Fourth, Stalnaker's story offers no obvious way to think about retraction, and no clear explanation of why assertion should have a correlative act of retraction. Intuitively, retracting is something like "unasserting," or withdrawing one's assertion. And one can certainly withdraw a proposal to change the context—but only before it has been accepted, and the context changed. Once an assertion has been accepted and its content integrated into the common ground, and a few more assertions have been made and accepted, it's no longer obvious how one could "undo" the assertion. Compare an ordinary proposal. I say, "Let's go to the beach!" You all agree, and we pack up beach towels, surfboards, and picnic baskets. We get to the beach and start swimming and lying on the sand. Then I say: "I withdraw my proposal that we go to the beach." What sense does this make?

One might, alternatively, think of retraction not as the withdrawal of a proposal to change the context, but as a new proposal to undo the changes that were made. Since an assertion is a proposal to *add* some information to the common ground, the correlative retraction would presumably be a proposal to *subtract* that information. (Retractions, on this approach, would naturally be expressed using epistemic modals. An earlier assertion of "Joe is in Boston" could be retracted by saying, "Joe might not be in Boston after all.") This idea is not easy to integrate with a representation of the common ground as a set of possible worlds: clearly, subtracting a proposition from such a set does not amount to taking the *union* of the proposition and the set. But if we represent the common ground as a set of propositions, we can view the effect of retraction as simple subtraction.



## 4 Assertion as a commitment

The fourth kind of account I want to consider has its roots in Peirce, who said that “to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth” (Peirce, 1934, 384). Versions of the same idea can be found in Searle (1969, 29), Searle (1979, 12), Brandom (1983), Brandom (1994, ch. 3), Wright (1992), Watson (2004), and MacFarlane (2003, 2005). Like Stalnaker’s approach, this approach defines assertion in terms of its “essential effect.” But it regards this essential effect as the alteration of a normative status—the acquisition of new commitments or obligations.

It is important to see how the commitment approach differs from “constitutive rules” approach we considered above. Both describe assertion in essentially normative terms. But, while the constitutive rules approach looks at “upstream” norms—norms for *making* assertions—the commitment approach looks at “downstream” norms—the normative *effects* of making assertions. In principle, the two approaches could be combined, but I will consider them here separately.<sup>13</sup>

I’ve characterized the commitment view as the view that assertion should be understood as the (overt) undertaking of a certain kind of commitment. What kind? Searle talks of “a (very special kind of) commitment to the truth of a proposition” and Peirce of taking responsibility for the proposition’s truth. This talk needs explication; at the very least, it must be made clear what actions would honor or violate a “commitment to truth.” But even without doing that, we can see some structural advantages to the commitment view:

1. Unlike the constitutive rules approach, it gives a direct description of what it is to make an assertion—not just a specification of the norms for making one.
2. Unlike the expressive approach, it has no difficulty accounting for the possibility of openly insincere assertions. Belief is one thing; commitment to truth another. (Indeed, Bach and Harnish (1979, 59) note that

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<sup>13</sup>Alston (2000) is perhaps an example of a combined view. Alston holds that asserting that *p* is a matter of “taking responsibility for its being the case that *p*” (7, 120), which he glosses as “subjecting [one’s] utterance to a rule that, in application to this case, implies that it is permissible for [one] to utter *S* only if *p*” (60).

a driver pulled over by a police officer might express attitudes he does not have “to avoid admitting something or committing himself.” So they too must think that assertion is the undertaking of a commitment.)

3. Unlike Stalnaker’s approach, it has no trouble explaining the significance of solitary assertions, or of assertions that cross conversations. And it allows speech acts whose normal use is to *expand* the set of open possibilities to count as assertions.
4. It offers a simple and natural account of retraction, as the act of backing out of a commitment to the truth of the asserted proposition. This account helps us see why assertion should have a correlative act of retraction, and it generalizes to other kinds of speech acts that can be explained as alterations of normative status.

Pagin (2004) has argued that assertion can’t just be a matter of undertaking commitment to the truth of a proposition, because if it were, one could assert that  $p$  by saying

(\*) I hereby commit myself to the truth of  $p$ .

Pagin thinks it is intuitively clear that

(1) in uttering (\*), one (typically) commits oneself to the truth of  $p$ ,

and that

(2) in uttering (\*), one does not assert that  $p$ .

I agree with him on (1), but I don’t think he has argued compellingly for (2).

His first argument is that it doesn’t intuitively seem that uttering (\*) is a way of asserting that  $p$ . I don’t share this intuition, but I think it can be explained why people have it. Normally, one asserts that  $p$  by *saying that*  $p$ , and in uttering (\*) one does not say that  $p$ . But we have already rejected the idea that one can only assert that  $p$  by saying that  $p$ —recall the ham sandwich example, and the examples of assertions by means of nonlinguistic and nonconventional signs. It seems to me that if we wanted to settle, for

example, whether Nunberg's waitress had asserted that a *sandwich* had left, or that a *person* who ordered a sandwich had left, we might ask which (if either) of these propositions she meant to commit herself to. To answer this question is to settle what she asserted.

Pagin's second argument is that none of the going accounts of indirect speech acts allow us to see how an utterance of (\*) could be an indirect assertion that *p*, in addition to a (real or merely apparent) assertion that the speaker is committing herself to the truth of *p*. But here his arguments beg the question at issue. Here is what he says about the Lemmon/Recanati "self-verification model of explicit performatives":

According to this model, the speaker who utters an explicit performative does two things. He describes himself as doing something, and his own utterance fits the description, thus making the utterance true. ... This model does apply, since on this model I commit myself to the truth of *p* by means of saying that I do, and that is to perform an indirect act, but it is not the act required, i.e. the assertion. It is only the making of a commitment (851).

Of course, this can't be an *argument* against the claim that to assert that *p* is to undertake a certain sort of commitment.

Third, Pagin argues that the commitment account fails the "inferential integration" test. The idea is that explicit performatives that count as assertions ought to be able to take the place of assertions in inferences. Thus, for example, we have no trouble understanding an inference with an ironic premise:

A If 73 is a prime number, we cannot share the stones equally.  
73 is nicely divisible. [ironic]  
So, we cannot share the stones equally.

However, Pagin claims, (\*) cannot take the place of an explicit assertion that 73 is prime in an inference (851):

B If 73 is a prime number, we cannot share the stones equally.  
I hereby commit myself to the truth of the proposition that 73 is a prime number.  
So, we cannot share the stones equally.

In this case, Pagin notes, we perceive a gap: “to get the desired conclusion [in (B)] in a truth preserving way, a further premise (such as ‘If I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number, then 73 is a prime number’) would have to be added” (852). Pagin concludes that (\*) does not itself count as an assertion that 73 is prime.

This is an interesting argument, but it is hardly conclusive. Notice first that the intuitive differences between (A) and (B) disappear if one thinks of them as instances of one’s own reasoning. (B) seems gappy only when we think of it being used in the context of persuading others. But we can explain why (A) and (B) should differ in such a context even if (\*) in (B) is being used to assert that 73 is prime. In uttering “73 is nicely divisible” in (A), the speaker performs a *single* speech act (an assertion that 73 is prime). So a listener who is skeptical whether 73 is prime would have to categorically reject this premise. But according to the commitment account, in uttering “I hereby commit myself to the truth of the proposition that 73 is a prime number” in (B), the speaker performs *two* speech acts, an assertion that 73 is prime and an assertion that she commits herself to the proposition that 73 is prime. A listener who is skeptical whether 73 is prime could reject the former while accepting the latter, and would then regard the argument as needing a further premise connecting the speaker’s commitment with the primeness of 73. But in fact this extra premise is only needed when one rejects the second speech act, the assertion that 73 is prime. So the fact that (\*) cannot always be substituted for a straight assertion that 73 is prime in (B) can be nicely explained on the hypothesis that (\*) is used to assert *both* that 73 is prime and that one is undertaking a commitment to that effect. It does not show that uttering (\*) is not a way of asserting that 73 is prime.

Another reason to worry about Pagin’s arguments (noted by Pagin himself) is that if they are compelling, they would also seem to refute the widely-held (and very plausible) view that one can assert that  $p$  by saying, “I hereby assert that  $p$ .” So it is reassuring that the arguments can be resisted in their full generality. However, as I now want to suggest, special cases of Pagin’s style of argument will make it difficult to develop the commitment view in a satisfactory way.

If the commitment approach is to compete successfully with the other accounts we have been considering, it ought to be able to explain the things those accounts purport to explain. For example: why is it that assertions,

viewed as commitments to truth, should be apt vehicles for the expression of beliefs? Why should they be useful in transmitting information? Why should knowledge, truth, or sincerity be a norm for making assertions? In order to answer these questions, we would need to say something more definite about what “commitment to truth” involves. Indeed, that is something we should want to do anyway, since the notion of “commitment to truth” is otherwise obscure.

To start with an obvious fact: some explications of “commitment to truth” would *not* predict that overt undertakings of commitments to truth should express belief, communicate information, or be bound by a knowledge or truth norm. Suppose that to commit oneself to the truth of  $p$  is to commit oneself to saying “Rats!” if  $p$  is shown to be false. Speakers could be expected to undertake such a commitment rather freely; indeed, it is not clear what would be wrong, on such an account, with undertaking simultaneous commitments to the truth of contradictory propositions. Of course, it could be that, as a contingent matter of sociological fact, people are strongly motivated to avoid saying “Rats.” But this won’t be enough to vindicate the claim that assertion, by its very nature, is apt for the expression of belief, or subject to the truth or knowledge norm.

It is not surprising, then, that those who have tried to explicate “commitment to truth” have done so in epistemic terms. For example, on Brandom’s account, in asserting that  $p$  one undertakes a commitment to vindicating one’s entitlement to  $p$  when challenged, and entitles others to assert  $p$  on one’s authority (Brandom 1983, 641, Brandom 1994, ch. 3). It is easy to see why assertion, so conceived, should be subject to something like a knowledge norm. If we think of vindicating one’s entitlement to  $p$  as tantamount to establishing that one knows that  $p$ , then something like a knowledge rule follows directly from a general prescription not to undertake commitments one is not in a position to honor. (Actually, the rule would be stronger than the knowledge rule, since one can satisfy the latter without being in a position to *establish* that one knows. One might worry that it would be too strong.<sup>14</sup> But this stronger norm would explain the same phenomena as the

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<sup>14</sup>Watson (2004, 68–9) notes: “We would be hard pressed actually to defend many of the things we are prepared to assert. Some of us are less than articulate in our ability to justify our beliefs, and yet we often persist (sometimes reasonably) in our commitment to their defensibility.” He proposes that assertoric commitment is just commitment to the *defensibility* of the asserted content, not commitment to *defending* it. But if we wanted

knowledge norm.)

We can also explain why assertion, so conceived, generally expresses belief. One would not normally undertake a commitment to vindicate entitlement to a proposition one does not believe is true. Of course, in some cases we know that the speaker does not intend to honor the commitment, or is a dialectically skillful skeptic who can vindicate claims she does not believe—but these are cases in which assertions won't express beliefs.

So this explication of assertion has a lot to recommend it. Here, though, Pagin's objection seems more compelling. For suppose I hire a lawyer to defend me in a criminal trial. I might ask her to sign a contract that commits her to vindicating my innocence in the face of challenges. It seems to me that she can sign this contract, and do so overtly, without having asserted that I am innocent. When she is at home with her family, she might assert to them that I am guilty, and she would not be subject to criticism for having asserted contradictory things.

Here, then, is where we stand. If the commitment account is to explain what the other accounts explain, it needs to understand "commitment to truth" as involving some kind of vindicatory commitment. But it had better involve something else in addition, or Pagin's objection kicks in. What else? Perhaps Brandom's authorization of others to reassert the asserted content, deferring to one for its vindication. That is presumably not something the lawyer does when arguing in court. There's more to say, but I'll stop here.

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an explication of "commitment to truth" because we were unclear what would count as honoring or violating this commitment, we should have the same worries about "commitment to defensibility." Nor is it clear that Watson's observation is incompatible with Brandom's account. Vindications need not be elaborate or articulate. If Joe says, "There's a hornbill on that tree," and I ask, "How do you know?", an adequate response to my challenge might be: "Come here and look!" If I then raise legitimate doubts about whether the bird in view is a hornbill, and not, say, a kingfisher, an adequate response would have to address them, and this might require more elaborate discourse, or deferral to experts. But it seems to me that a speaker who cannot address the challenge *should* then retract or weaken the assertion, on pain of being a bad player of the assertion game. It does not matter whether we are in the seminar room or on the veldt.

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