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ASSERTORIC COMMITMENTS*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the two kinds of commitment associated with assertive speech acts: the commitment to having justifications for the propositional content and the commitment to the truth of this content. It is argued that the former kind of commitment boils down to the monotonic commitment to the truth of the propositional content, and can be cancelled. The latter, by contrast, is non-monotonic, and is associated with all assertive speech acts, even those containing a reservation marker. These facts can be explained if one (a) endorses the ‘Direct Perception’ view, according to which every piece of communicated information goes, by default, into the hearer’s ‘belief box’; (b) defines the success of assertive speech acts in terms of the possibility to update the common ground with their propositional content.

1. Introduction

One finds in the literature both the view that asserting a proposition p imposes on the speaker (S) the commitment to the truth of p (e.g. Searle 1969; Alston 2000), and that asserting a proposition p imposes on S the commitment to having justifications or evidence for p (Brandom 1994; Williamson 1996). As we shall see briefly in section 2, both conceptions are reminiscent of Frege’s introduction of the assertoric sign into his logical language. Section 3 is devoted to the theories of Brandom and Williamson, who define assertion in terms of the commitment to having justification or evidence for the asserted content. We shall see that, under closer scrutiny, these two theories require assertion to be defined in terms of the commitment to having *demonstrative* justifications for p (*J-commitment*, henceforth). I shall argue that *J-commitment* is neither a necessary condition for an utterance to be interpreted as an assertion (as implied by Brandom’s position), nor a rule constitutive of assertion (as implied by Williamson’s position). In Section 4, the discussion will be extended to assertive speech acts, like conjectures and guesses, that are weaker than categorical, flat-out assertions. We shall see that, somehow paradoxically, even though S performs such a weaker assertive speech act, she remains committed to the truth of the propositional content. The fact that every assertive speech act imposes on S the commitment to the truth of the propositional content (*T-commitment*, henceforth) will receive an evolutionary explanation in Section 5. This account

relies to a large extent on the Direct Perception view (Millikan 1984: chapter 4, 2004: chapter 9; Gilbert 1993), following which every propositional content automatically goes into the hearer's (*H*'s) 'belief box', from which it can be rejected subsequent to revision and/or assessment. In Section 6, I shall formulate necessary and sufficient conditions for an utterance to be interpreted as an assertive speech act. The idea is that an utterance is assigned a direct and literal assertive force if, and only if, the common conversational background can be updated with its propositional content; empirical evidence will be adduced in favour of this definition. To wrap up, in Section 7, I shall show how my account of the origin of *T*-commitment and my analysis of assertive force assignation explain why categorical assertions seem to carry *J*-commitment, and allow us to understand why weaker speech acts still *T*-commit *S*. The main claim will be that while assertions commit *S* to the monotonic truth of the propositional content, the *T*-commitment associated with weaker speech acts is non-monotonic.

2. The legacy of Frege's assertoric sign

It is useful to start off by seeing how both sorts of assertoric commitment – *T*-commitment and *J*-commitment – can be traced back to Gottlob Frege's conception of the assertoric sign. Frege held that focusing one's mind on a *thought* – something that would rather be called a *proposition* today – amounts to realising that some (type of) state of affairs can make that thought true, but not to envisaging it as true. According to him, only thoughts that form the content of acts of *judgement* are entertained as true. Likewise, being aware that some sentence has a certain sense is not the same as knowing its truth-value; by contrast, asserting that sentence amounts to making a judgement on the corresponding thought (e.g. Frege 1972: 90-95, 1977: 5-8, 1979: 2-8, 185-187, 197-198; see also Dummett 1981: 298-299, 314-316). Accordingly, the assertoric sign '⊢' is introduced into the *Begriffsschrift* as a compound consisting of the content sign '–' and the judgement sign '|'; the former ensures that the content under its scope can be judged (hence can be true), whereas the latter marks this content as a judgement.

Frege's aim in introducing the assertoric sign was not merely to mark the truth-value of any proposition (Geach 1965). Frege restricted the use of the term *inference* to the derivation of *true* conclusions from *true* premises, that is to demonstrative inferences (e.g. Frege 1977: 72, 1979: 3; for a detailed discussion, see Green 2002). In that respect, the *Begriffsschrift* was intended as a means to express truth-preserving inferential moves from axioms to theorems. It was therefore justified to mark every such inferential step with the assertoric sign (Dummett 1981: 311-312). It also follows that reductions *ad absurdum* are ruled out from Frege's system: as they contain a false premise, they are valid,

but non-demonstrative. To sum up, in Frege's system, any assertion has a demonstrative inferential role, hence is true.

In the next section, we shall examine two contemporary theories of assertion that put special weight on the inferential role of assertion, rather than on the fact that asserted content is presented as being true.

3. Inference and assertion

3.1 *Brandom: justification and assertion*

Robert Brandom – one of the most famous champions of an inferential definition of assertion – claims, on the one hand, that every successfully asserted content follows from independent justifications, and on the other hand, that any such content is a potential justification for further assertions whose contents follow from it (Brandom 1983, 1994). Brandom (1994: 168) states explicitly that, in his system, this inferential role is a necessary (and perhaps sufficient) condition for an utterance to qualify as an assertion. It is important to emphasise that, this being a necessary condition, if S has no independent justifications for the content of her utterance, that utterance is not merely a *defective* assertion – it is *not an assertion at all*.

To be sure, acknowledges Brandom, there are cases, like (1), where S explicitly presents her assertion as being non-justifiable.

- (1) John is a liar. I can't tell you what makes me think so, but I'd bet my life on it.

Yet he objects that

such assertions are intelligible only as exceptions against a background of practices where [assertions] typically have the significance of claims whose authority *is* redeemable by demonstration of warrant. (Brandom 1994: 229, emphasis in the text)

In cases like (1), the assertoric force of the utterance would stem from S's social authority, which would substitute for an inferential warrant (Brandom 1983: 643, 1994). In other words, in order to preserve the assertive force of examples like (1), we are asked to allow for ineffable justification.

The question that arises naturally is what leads H to assume the existence of such a justification, and hence to interpret (1) as an assertion? Take an ironic utterance like (2), produced in a context where both S and H are looking at the pouring rain through the window.

- (2) The weather is very nice today!

Every theory of irony takes it for granted that (2) is not interpreted as having assertive illocutionary force (e.g. Recanati 1987: 228-229; Wilson 2006: 1736); neither should (2) be an assertion in Brandom's sense, for, in uttering (2), S does not present the content of (2) as being justified or as allowing further inferences. Yet, if (1) is a successful assertion, thanks to some non-inferential warrant, how are we to predict the ironic, i.e. the non-assertoric, reading of (2)? How can we explain that H will not decide that (2) is supported, much like (1), by some ineffable, social warrant, or that (2) is an assertion because it is uttered against a background of assertions that are justifiable?¹

At this stage, a very natural way out would consist in attributing a central role to the rationality of the corresponding belief: (2) is not a successful assertion because the belief with the same content cannot reasonably be ascribed to S. However, if an inferential theory of assertion is on the right track, such a move would imply that beliefs too have to be defined in terms of inferential justification. In any event, this is certainly Brandom's view:

One can perfectly well acknowledge that someone may count as *entitled* to a belief or judgment [...] without being able to offer *reason* or justification for it, while insisting that it can be thought of as a belief or a judgement at all insofar as it can serve as both a premise and a conclusion of inference, and so is liable to critical assessment on the basis of its relations to other beliefs and judgements. (Brandom 1996: 251; emphasis in the text)

It is crucial to get clear about what is meant by *inference* here. First, one can conceive inferences in a non-Fregean way, that is as operations that allow deriving conclusions (theorems) from premises (axioms) while preserving the truth-value (or the satisfaction value, in action logics) of the premises, *whatever that value is*. But under such a conception the literal content of (2) can serve both as a premise and a conclusion for an inference. Hence nothing can prevent (2) from being interpreted as a literal assertion that the weather is very nice today.

A second possibility is to assume that Brandom's necessary condition allows assertions to be justifiable in a non-demonstrative way. The claim would be that an utterance is interpreted as having the force of an assertion if S has some justification that the propositional content is true, even though this justification can prove insufficient on further inquiry. Recall that we are trying to explain why (2) cannot receive an assertive force owing to some ineffable justification. Now the content of (2) can certainly be justified non-demonstratively by S; it is sufficient to take only some of S's beliefs into account – for instance, S's belief that it is not snowing can, non-demonstratively, justify the proposition that the weather is nice. So, according to the quotation above, S would still be entitled to the belief that the weather is nice, since this belief can play a non-demonstrative inferential role with respect to other beliefs of S's.

What if the propositional content is required to be non-demonstratively justifiable with respect to the totality of S's beliefs? Such a position would amount to saying that (1) is an assertion because its content does not contradict the rest of S's beliefs, while (2) is not an assertion because its content is incompatible with some of S's beliefs. This is just equivalent to defining the necessary condition for a successful assertion that p in terms of p being presented as the content of a belief of S's, that is, in terms of S being committed to the truth of p with respect to her beliefs at the utterance time. In the next section and in Section 7, we shall see that such a commitment is also proper to weaker assertive speech acts, such as conjectures or assertions with reservation. But this commitment does not correspond to Brandom's necessary condition for asserting. According to him, by performing an assertion, S contracts a public commitment; she allows other speakers to reiterate her assertion, and to use it as a justification for further assertions. Imagine that I now believe that p , while admitting the possibility that it may turn out that $\neg p$. At this moment, p is non-demonstratively justifiable with respect to the totality of my beliefs. However, if I now tentatively say or conjecture that p , I do not, thereby, take the responsibility for further assertions that p by other speakers.

This leaves us with inferential relations restricted, *à la* Frege, to the demonstrative derivation of true conclusions from true premises. The speaker of (1) clearly takes the responsibility of the content of her utterance being used as a true premise by other people – as I understand it, this is what Brandom's appeal to 'social authority' amounts to. And, under such a view, (2) would be no assertion. S would not be entitled to the belief that the weather is very nice today, because this belief cannot play any inferential role with respect to the sum of her beliefs.

But if the necessary condition for an assertion is to trigger the commitment to p being capable of playing a *demonstrative* inferential role, we face another problem. Given that no false proposition can be a premise or the conclusion of a demonstrative, Fregean, inference, such a theory would simply rule out the existence of false assertions. Could we not claim that a speaker who unintentionally says something false believes that she is asserting, while in fact she fails to do so? But if the content of a successful assertion must be capable of entering into demonstrative inferences, it is also the case that lies are no assertions. So how are we to explain the blame that a liar can incur? It seems tempting, at a first glance, to respond that the liar pretends to assert, and that it is this pretending that is subject to blame. The problem is that, whichever definition of assertion one endorses, pretending to assert does not involve any commitment to the truth of the propositional content (e.g. Searle 1979: chapter 4; Dummett 1981: 310-311; Davidson 2001: 104-110), certainly because such speech activities, like irony or fictional discourse, bear their 'as-if' character on their sleeves. Yet, if her lie is discovered, the liar cannot defend herself by saying that nothing in her utterance was intended to make H think that the propositional content was true.

To sum up, no *necessary* condition for asserting can be formulated on an inferential basis. A first possibility is that the justification invoked as being necessary for an utterance to be interpreted as an assertion is non-demonstrative or unconstrained as to the truth-value of the premises. The problem with such a view is that it seems impossible to predict that ironic utterances like (2) will not be interpreted as having the force of an assertion. But if the necessary condition for asserting is formulated using a Fregean demonstrative conception of inference – hence, with the exceptions of cases like (1), in terms of *J*-commitment – we have to accept that lies are not assertions. One natural move is to keep the Fregean, demonstrative conception of assertoric justification, but stop treating it as a *necessary* condition, in a way that allows the existence of false assertions. This possibility is explored in the next sub-section.

3.2 Williamson: knowing and asserting

Williamson (1996) does not define assertion directly in terms of *J*-commitment; he argues that the practice of asserting obeys the following constitutive rule: ‘Assert that *p* only if you know that *p*’. Note that this time there is no *necessary* condition. Williamson’s rule does not imply that every time *S* does not know that *p* (and knows that she does not know that *p*), no successful assertion of *p* can take place. Take chess, which is a stock example of an activity defined by constitutive rules: if I suddenly apply the rules of backgammon during a chess game, I will *eo ipso* stop playing chess; by contrast, if I cheat, I covertly break the rules of chess, and thereby keep presenting what I am doing as conforming to those rules, hence as belonging to the same game (Williamson 1996; see also Searle 1969). Likewise, the liar covertly violates the rule of assertion, but since she presents her utterance as conforming to the assertion rule, she can still be said to assert.²

Williamson (1997) argues that all and only knowledge is propositional evidence: all evidence is evidence for something, and, putting aside propositions that can be known essentially, there is evidence for every piece of knowledge. In combination with Williamson’s theory of assertion, this conception of knowledge implies that the rule constitutive of asserting is to present oneself as having deductive evidence for the propositional content, that is, as being *J*-committed.

Take a proposition of the form $F(x)$: imagine that *S* is unable to establish which propositions entail $F(x)$ (nor, for that matter, which propositions $F(x)$ entails). It follows that unless $F(x)$ can be known essentially, i.e. unless $F(x)$ is evidence for itself, an assertion that $F(x)$ by *S* would violate, by Williamson’s standards, the norm constitutive of our assertoric practice.

To see why this is a problem, consider the following examples.

- (3) The unconscious is structured like a language.
- (4) God is everywhere.

- (5) That girl has this sexy *je ne sais quoi*.
 (6) He is an honourable and upright member of the petite bourgeoisie.

I take it to be uncontroversial that the contents in (3-6) cannot be known essentially or *a priori*. I also take for granted that such contents can be very felicitously asserted, in the sense that speakers who uttered (3-6) in an obviously non-ironical and literal way would have performed a successful assertive speech act. And yet, as we shall see now, the very practice of producing such assertions excludes the possibility for the content to be warranted deductively.

The example in (3) was used by Sperber (1975) to illustrate the symbolic use of language. According to him, no speaker, not even Lacan himself, can assign an ‘analysed’ conceptual content to (3), for no one can determine the relations of entailment or incompatibility between (3) and other propositions, or define the encyclopaedic entry for *Lacanian unconscious*, be it by ‘invoking’ prototypes or necessary and sufficient conditions (for a precise definition of the notion of an ‘unanalysed’ concept, see Dominicy 1999, forthcoming). The same applies to (4): many people who believe in God acknowledge that they have no precise definition of Him (cf. Sperber 1975, 1985). As for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, it is a perfect illustration of the way experts rely on ‘unanalysed’ concepts when producing judgements: an expert can point to positive or negative instances of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but typically, she will prove unable to provide a clear-cut motivation of her choice (Sperber 1975; Delvenne, Michaux & Dominicy 2005).³ Finally, the example in (6) is given by Camp (2006) to show that the sense of many concepts cannot be explicitly defined, even if these concepts are not metaphorical.

To emphasise, I am *not* saying that the propositions expressed in (3-6) cannot be known. The point is that speakers of (3-6) cannot have demonstrative evidence for the content they are expressing, viz. that these contents cannot be known in Williamson’s sense. The only propositions that can deductively support a proposition $F(x)$ whose predicate F expresses an ‘unanalysable’ concept – i.e. from which $F(x)$ can be demonstratively inferred – will be of the form (7) or (8).

- (7) Expert E says that x is F
 (8) x is what E calls F .

But if there is any meaning at all to be assigned to *Lacanian unconscious*(x), *God*(x), *je-ne-sais-quoi*(x) or *upright and honourable member of the petite bourgeoisie*(x), it will precisely reduce to x ’s belonging to the extension of what the relevant experts call *Lacanian unconscious*, etc., in the context of conversation (or, more broadly, in the actual world).⁴ Therefore, the propositions of the form (7-8) are semantically equivalent to the corresponding propositions of the form $F(x)$.⁵

Not only do (3-6) violate Williamson's constitutive rule, but this violation is totally overt; in fact, this is the reason why such sentences are uttered in the first place.⁶ According to Sperber (1975, 1985, 1996), the cognitive role of examples like (3-6) consists in triggering a process of evocation in the mind of the interpreter. The input to evocative interpretation is precisely the failure of semantic 'invocation', i.e. the impossibility of defining relations of incompatibility or implication between the propositional content and any entry of the semantic-encyclopaedic memory. The focus of attention is thus displaced from the problematic 'unanalysed' concept to the source of the semantic failure – which foregrounds different elements of the semantic-encyclopaedic memory. It is important to emphasise that the gist of Sperber's theory is that there is no principled end to evocation, since the point of an evocative interpretation is not to find a conceptual interpretation for the problematic concept; on the contrary, symbolic behaviours tend to persist if the evocative process they trigger is rich and lengthy.

The examples in (3-6) do not show that (flat-out) assertions cannot be defined in terms of knowledge (and, to repeat, I would not claim that the contents in (3-6) cannot be known). However, the above discussion does reveal that the conception of knowledge used in the definition of assertion should not require demonstrative justification. For instance, one could take the semantic contents of ascriptions of knowledge, hence the conditions of successful assertability, to be sensitive to some contextual parameter (e.g. DeRose 2002). Because of the irreducible contextual instability thus introduced within the assertoric norms, the generated commitment cannot be described in purely deductive terms, but only with the help of some non-monotonic inferential apparatus. Owing to the notoriously *ceteris paribus* character of practical reasoning, the same conclusion applies if the evaluation of knowledge claims is made to be relative to some practical interests (cf. Hawthorne 2004: chapter 4).

To sum up this section, it appears that if asserting imposes on S the commitment to having justifications, these justifications are not always demonstrative. Nevertheless, it remains important to understand why we are under the impression that most assertions do *J*-commit S. This question will be answered in Section 7. Another important point is that being committed to having a non-demonstrative justification for *p* with respect to the sum of one's beliefs at the time of utterance amounts to committing oneself to the truth of *p* at the time of utterance, while admitting that *p* can turn out to be false. We have seen, in sub-section 3.1, that even weaker assertive speech acts impose this sort of commitment on S. I shall now discuss such speech acts in more detail.

4. Weaker assertive speech acts

Clearly, speech acts such as *asserting with reservation*, *conjecturing* or *guessing* are devoid of any *J*-commitment. However, as noted by Toulmin (1958: 47-53),

S's use of a reservation marker does not imply that S has no evidence to support her claim. What the utterance of the following examples makes manifest is rather that S's epistemic grounds are too weak for supporting the propositional content deductively.

- (9) John was probably there.
- (10) I guess/gather that John was there.

Faced with (9-10), it seems out of place to ask something like "How do you know that John was there?"; a question like "What makes you say/think/believe that John was there?" is more legitimate. Furthermore, (9-10) commit S to the truth of the content under the scope of the reservation markers: everything in the following quote applies to these examples.

[...] if I say 'It is probably raining' and it turns out not to be, then (a) I was mistaken, (b) I cannot now repeat the claim, and (c) I can properly be called upon to say what made me think it was raining. (Toulmin 1958: 55)

Finally, warily retracting *J*-commitment when uttering a sentence does not mean that the proposition expressed is presented as being only possibly true; compare (11) and (12-13).

- (11) It is possible that John was there and it is possible that he wasn't.
- (12) ? John was probably there, and John was probably not there. (cf. Toulmin 1958: 50)
- (13) ? I guess/gather that John was there, and I guess/gather that John was not there.⁷

The acceptability of (11) reveals that by uttering (14) S commits herself only to it being possibly true that John was there:

- (14) It is possible that John was there.

By contrast, the unacceptability of (12-13) shows that by uttering (9-10), S commits herself to the truth of the proposition *John was there*.

An anonymous reviewer objected that the unacceptability of (12) might be due to the fact that *probably* means *with a probability greater than 50 %*. This is, indeed, the source of the pragmatic oddness of (15):

- (15) ? John's presence is probable, and John's absence is probable.

However, the implication that if something is said to be probable, then the probability is greater than 50% is a cancellable one:

- (16) John's presence is probable, and/but his absence is equally probable/is probable (as well).

By contrast, replacing *and* by *but* does not improve (12) at all:

- (17) ? John was probably there, but he was (also) probably not there.

The deep reason for the discrepancy between (12) and (15) is that while *probable* bears on a constituent of the proposition expressed, *probably* bears on the whole proposition, so that utterances of the form *probably p* express two propositions: *p* and *the truth of p is probable* (Bellert 1977; for discussions of utterances that express several propositions, see Bach 1999; Potts 2005). For instance, while a question like (18) is acceptable, (19) is not, because, as Bellert (1977) points out, one cannot ask a question and assert a proposition all in one breath:

- (18) Was the presence of John probable?
 (19) ? Was John probably there?

Let us come back to (1) and (3-6). Obviously, the contents of these examples are presented as true, but, as the discussion in Section 3 has shown, these contents are not demonstratively justifiable. We see now that *T*-commitment is common to all assertive speech acts. The origin of the ubiquity of *T*-commitment will receive an explanation in the next section. It is also important to understand what opposes flat-out assertions and weaker assertive speech acts like (9-10). This will be done in Section 7; the fact that (9-10) express two propositions, *p* and *the truth of p is probable/the truth of p is not certain* will prove crucial.

5. The origin of *T*-commitment

In this section, we shall attempt to get a better understanding of the central place of *T*-commitment. To this end, I shall adopt what can be called the 'Direct Perception' view of utterance interpretation, according to which, in normal cases, the retrieval of the information that speech may convey about the world is as direct as the visual perception of distal states of affairs. When you see that there is a barn in front of you, you do not perceive the proximal stimuli, such as the light stimulation of the retina, which constitute your visual experience; similarly, when told that *p*, you directly form the belief that *p* without any Gricean reasoning about the speaker's intentions and/or extra-linguistic contextual information.

This view has received a vigorous defence in Millikan (1984: chapter 4, 2004: chapter 9; see also Recanati 2002), and here is not the place to go into every detail. Let me just mention (after Millikan) that the claim that every

utterance content p directly ‘feeds into the belief box’ receives support from Gilbert’s (1993) ‘Spinozan’ view of belief acquisition, according to which any encountered bit of information p results in a belief that p , which can, of course, be subject to subsequent (and, under normal circumstances, easy and almost automatic) revision and reassessment (compare with De Sousa 1971). Gilbert provides experimental support for his claim by designing elegant experiences where participants are distracted during their exposure to information, tagged as true or false, by another task (like discriminating tones). Since the distracting task prevents the participant from revising the received information, Gilbert’s prediction is that every bit of received information will remain intact in the belief box. This expectation is borne out, for participants massively report both false and true information as true, but not true information as false, independently of whether the experimenter announced that a bit of information was false (or true) before or after the participants were exposed to it. Actually, such a result should not come as a surprise, given the well-attested paucity of conscious control that we can exert on our mental states, be it at the level of inhibition or production of an action or during the evaluation of an event, a person or an object (for a review, see Bargh & Chartrand 1999). It might be objected, at this point, that in the experiments reported by Gilbert, the participants were presented with information which was not blatantly false. A reasonable prediction would be that, if the Direct Perception model is correct, blatantly false information should lead to a decreased performance in the distracting task. If any information goes directly into the ‘belief box’, blatantly false information should provoke a conflict, and hence a time-and-energy-consuming revision process. As far as I know, this empirical question is still open. Incidentally, if confirmed in this way, the Direct Perception view would provide an explanation for the social unacceptability of producing ironic, hence blatantly false, utterances in stressful conditions, where the cost of undertaking the rejection of the propositional content from the ‘belief box’ is too high and is not counterbalanced by other advantages – e.g. increased social cohesion – that irony carries in normal situations.

It is universally agreed within the contemporary neo-Darwinian paradigm that cooperative behaviour, and even altruism to some extent, is more often than not advantageous for reproductive success. For that reason, members of the human species – and also members of many lower ones – seem to be prone to cooperate, to detect cheaters and to exclude them from further interactions. Models of cooperative behaviour presuppose the existence of a ‘policing’ mechanism, which ensures that the failure to respect cooperative conventions may lead to exclusion from the social group, with all the disastrous consequences this may entail (e.g. Axelrod & Hamilton 1981; Dawkins 1989; Cosmides & Tooby 1992; Kitcher 1993; Dennett 1995, 2003; Cummins 1996; Ridley 1996; Nesse 2001; De Waal 2006). The Direct Perception view predicts that any utterance with the content p leads the hearer H to form the belief that p . To be sure, such hearsay beliefs can be reassessed; however, belief revision has

a certain cost, especially when it takes place after a certain amount of time, thus casting doubt on other beliefs and plans of action. We may surmise that our social practices (and perhaps their genetic underpinnings) evolved so as to exclude from interaction individuals who convey information that requires revision – and more often than not, being ostracised in this way has disastrous consequences. For this reason, when expressing the proposition p S is committed to the truth of p .

Contrast, in this perspective, the Direct Perception view with a ‘Cartesian’ model, according to which a piece of information enters the ‘belief box’ only after it has been assessed. On the latter view, the cost of receiving false information would be lesser, for prior to assessment – the costly bit – the propositional content has no role to play in practical or theoretical reasoning. It follows that such a model has to introduce an independent factor to explain why the T -commitment seems to be automatic and uncancellable, for it would be, in a sense, H ’s responsibility to decide to assess the propositional content, and to let it into her belief box or not.⁸

6. From distal signs to assertive speech acts

On the Direct Perception model, (grammatically declarative) utterances are just distal signs of their propositional contents. When we see some state of affairs q , we form the belief that q ; our visual experience is a distal sign of q . Exactly in the same way, when we hear an utterance with the content p , we form the belief that p (cf. Millikan 2004).

However, we do not treat every utterance endowed with a propositional content as an assertive speech act – irony is a case in point. Clearly, there is more to an assertive speech act than the mere expression of a proposition. This section is an attempt to formulate an account of the attribution of an assertive force to utterances which is both empirically viable, and allows us to answer the questions raised above.

6.1 *The conversational background and assertive force*

The conversational background (C) is usually conceived of as the set of those, and only those, possible worlds where every presupposed proposition is true (Stalnaker 1978). A proposition q is presupposed if it is mutually accepted by S and H : i.e., if S and H accept q as true, and S and H know that S and H know, ... that S and H accept q as true (Stalnaker 2002). In more intuitive terms, C amounts to all the ways the actual world could be, given what S and H mutually assume to be true, or, to employ Sperber & Wilson’s (1995) terminology, given what is mutually manifest to S and H .

According to Stalnaker (1978), an assertion that p is typically an attempt to update the conversational background in such a way as to keep only those

worlds where p is true. But not all assertive speech acts have such a point. We have seen that in cases like (9-10) the use of a marker of reservation makes it mutually manifest to S and H that S does not know for sure whether the content p under its scope is true. Given such a state of C, the possibility exists for the set of presuppositions to include $\neg p$; consequently, it is impossible to update C with p .

I shall consider that for an utterance expressing proposition p to count as an assertion, C must be *updatable* with p . In other words, an utterance expressing the proposition p , is interpreted by H as being an assertive speech act, if, and only if, the set of propositions that are mutually assumed to be true by S and H is not incompatible with p , and does not already contain p (for a broader discussion, and other applications of this account of illocutionary force attribution, see Kissine 2008, forthcoming).

It is worth emphasising that it does not follow from the fact that C is updatable with p that it is possible to add p to the presupposition set. Imagine that it is mutually manifest that H believes that $\neg p$, and will never change his mind, and that S believes that p . Neither p nor $\neg p$ belong to what is mutually taken for granted; consequently, C contains at least one possible world compatible with p , and hence is updatable with p . So, faced with such a counter-suggestible, inflexible H, S can still assert that p , if only ‘for the record’.

Let me assess briefly the implications of this definition. First, it correctly predicts that ironical utterances are not (literal) assertive speech acts. Imagine that S utters (20) in a context where it is mutually manifest that she has an extremely low opinion of John’s paper.

(20) I found John’s paper very inspiring.

Since it is mutually manifest to S and H that S believes that John’s paper was really bad, H knows that C cannot be updated so as to include the proposition expressed by (20), viz. *S found John’s paper very inspiring*.⁹

Second, imagine that S utters (21) when S and A are both outside in the rain.

(21) It’s pouring.

In such cases, which exemplify what Jakobson (1971) called the *phatic* function of language, C cannot be updated with the propositional content p , because it is mutually manifest, prior to the utterance time, that every world of C includes p . Accordingly, A is likely to accord importance not to the utterance content (or to implications that can be drawn from it) but to the fact that S uttered it (see Žegarac & Clark 1999).

Before proceeding further, I should like to consider two potential objections (suggested by an anonymous referee) against the definition of the attribution of the assertive illocutionary force I have just offered.

Objection 1: The condition invoked is not necessary because people assert things that, after extensive calculation, turn out to contradict what was mutually taken for granted at the utterance time.

Response: Hearers can be wrong about what C is; the point is that if they think that C is updatable with p , they will attribute an assertive force to the utterance. Now, what happens once they realise that they were wrong? Either they understand that, at the utterance time, S thought that C was not updatable with p or it turns out that S was also wrong about C. In the former case, H failed to grasp the discursive point of the utterance. But, in the latter case, do S and H have to agree that the utterance was not a successful assertive speech act after all? I must admit that my own intuitions go somewhat fuzzy here, but it seems plausible that, even in such a scenario, the utterance was a successful speech act at the utterance time – and the only claims I am making relate to the attribution of assertive force by hearers when they receive the message.

Objection 2: The condition invoked is not sufficient. Imagine that I suppose that p for the sake of argument, and that, as it happens, C is updatable with p . Nevertheless, my supposing that p for the sake of the argument is not a literal assertive speech act.

Response: When we say things for the sake of the argument, we ask our audience not to take C into account, and to build up a fictional C*. But the point of supposing things for the sake of argument is precisely to produce utterances that, with respect to this fictional C*, are successful assertions. (Note that the Direct Perception view predicts that, even in such cases, the propositional content goes into the hearer's belief box and has to be extracted from it. The corollary empirical prediction is thus that under pressure, when no time is left for revision, such contents will be kept among the hearer's beliefs.)

6.2 Empirical evidence

It emerges from the foregoing that there is a twofold cognitive underpinning to our attributions of an assertive force to utterances. First, one needs to be able to reason non-monotonically, i.e. to contemplate alternative possibilities of how the world could be; this is needed to decide whether a proposition can be true in a possible world. Second, one has to be able to attribute higher-order (i.e. at least second-order) beliefs, i.e. beliefs about what is mutually manifest; this is needed to conceive a possible world as belonging to the *common* conversational background. In this sub-section, I should like to adduce some empirical evidence to support this point of view.

On the one hand, autistic patients and persons with Asperger's syndrome exhibit strong and pervasive deficiency in tasks requiring a stable goal-oriented strategy, especially ones involving shifts from one strategy to another (Wisconsin Card Sorting Test) and selection between different potential moves (Tower of Hanoi) (Ozonoff 1997; Ozonoff, Pennington & Rogers 1991; Ozonoff, Rogers & Pennington 1991). However, autistic subjects seem to have

no problems with selective attention to less salient aspects of the stimulus (as tapped by the Stroop Colour-Word Test). More precisely, whereas the general inhibitory capacity seems intact in autistic people, it is the specific ability to shift cognitive sets that is massively impaired, this pattern being specific to autism (Ozonoff 1997). It seems very likely that autism entails a deficit in the cognitive capacity to reason non-monotonically, that is, to represent several alternative states of the world (Russell 2002; Proust 2002; Stenning & van Lambalgen 2007; van Lambalgen & Smid forthcoming).¹⁰

On the other hand, there is a pervasive, and rapidly growing body of evidence that people with autistic spectrum disorders show significant pragmatic deficits such as the inability to adjust one's conversational contribution and prosodic contour to conversational expectations, difficulty in constructing a coherent narrative discourse, deriving implicatures and respecting conversational maxims, including the Maxim of Politeness, and difficulty in detecting and avoiding faux-pas (Baron-Cohen *et al.* 1999; Kaland *et al.* 2002; Lord & Paul 1997; Surian, Baron-Cohen & Van der Lely 1996; Baltaxe 1977). In particular, children with autism show an abnormal tendency to produce utterances concerned with the immediate physical context and with their own volitive states, in comparison with utterances – such as explanations – that involve an intra-personal interaction (Ziatas, Durkin & Pratt 2003). A legitimate way to look at these data is to say that people with autism see utterances as mere signs of states of affairs, and not as assertive speech acts, because their difficulty in reasoning non-monotonically prevents them from representing a proposition as being true (or false) in a possible, non-actual world.

There is indisputable evidence that, in opposition to subjects with autistic spectrum disorders, very young normal children, who are still unable to attribute beliefs to other minds, tune their conversational contributions and their interpretation processes to the context (e.g. O'Neill 1996; Reeder 1978; for reviews, see Papafragou 2002; Bara, Bosco & Bucciarelli 1999). It is also clear that the capacity to represent different alternative states of the world is in place in normal children from 18 months. At that age, pretend-play makes its appearance, and children manifest the capacity to imagine solutions to new problems, without getting through a series of trial-error sequences (Astington 1993). (By contrast, spontaneous pretend play is never observed in children with autism (Leslie & Roth 1993).) One is entitled to conclude that young children around 18 months interpret utterances as assertive speech acts, but they do so with respect to what they deem to be the possible states of the world. Such a representation of the conversational background does not take the speaker's beliefs into account until the children are able to attribute beliefs to others, that is around 3:8 years.

Attempting to deceive requires an ability to predict the behaviour of some other person in a way discrepant with one's own knowledge, that is to imagine alternative states of the world (cf. Proust 2002). It has been shown by Newton *et al.* (2000) that 3-to-4-year-olds master a wide range of deceptive strategies

independently of their failure on the belief attribution tasks; however, these deceptive attempts are rarely successful because the same children fail to take into account the epistemic states of the person they are trying to deceive. By contrast, autistic children prove incapable of verbal and non-verbal deception, even if they can use complex ‘sabotage’ strategies to block other persons’ actions (Sodian & Frith 1992; Baron-Cohen 1992). This is consistent with their inability to reason non-monotonically.

It therefore seems plausible that the capacity to reason non-monotonically is required in order to assign an assertive force to utterances. To be sure, this capacity is not sufficient. Even if the propositional content p is false, if C is updatable with p , the utterance can nevertheless be an assertive speech act – a mistaken or a deceitful one. And, if C is not updatable with p , the utterance will not be an assertive speech act, as, for instance, when S is being ironical. But, take an H who, like children before the age of seven (Perner & Winner 1985), cannot attribute to S second-order beliefs, i.e. beliefs about other beliefs. Such an H is unable to construct a representation of a common conversation background C , since he cannot attribute to S beliefs about what H deems to be true. (Of course, H can still interpret the utterance with respect to his own beliefs, or, if he can attribute first-order beliefs, with respect to S ’s beliefs.) Imagine, now, that H is faced with an utterance whose content he knows/believes to be false; since he cannot assess the absence or the presence of an assertive force in this utterance with respect to a C built on the basis of what is mutually taken for granted, he cannot tell whether this utterance is ironical, hence non-assertive, or whether it is a deceitful or a mistaken assertive speech act. As expected, there is massive evidence that the capacity to attribute second-order beliefs is required in order to distinguish jokes, or ironical utterances, from lies or mistaken assertions (Happé 1993; Leekam & Prior 1994; Martin & McDonald 2004).

7. Monotonic and non-monotonic grounds for assertive speech acts

Let us take stock. In Section 5, I have claimed that any proposition p expressed by an utterance and grasped by H automatically goes into his ‘belief box’. This is the reason why speakers are committed to the truth of any proposition expressed by their utterances. In the previous section, I have adopted the view according to which the attribution of an assertive force to the utterance by H depends on the possibility of updating what H deems to be the common conversational background C with the propositional content p . In this concluding section, we shall first see that the combination of these two views explains why assertions seem to impose a demonstrative J -commitment on S . Next, we shall get back to the examples (9-10) of Section 4 in order to understand what differentiates such weaker assertive acts from assertions.

Imagine that S produces a categorical, successful assertion with the content *p*; at the utterance time, C is updatable with *p*. The Direct Perception view predicts that *p* will automatically go into H's 'belief box'. It is also reasonable to assume that H will assume that S will assume... that *p* gets into H's 'belief box'. For reasons exposed in Section 4, S is committed to the truth of *p*. Another way to put it is to say that in asserting that *p* S presents herself as believing that *p*. Consequently, from the fact that it is mutually manifest that *p* is added to H's beliefs, it follows that *p* is added to what is mutually presupposed, by S and H, to be true. Since, in normal cases, what is presupposed is taken to be true in the actual world, as a result of S's assertion, *p* becomes, from H's point of view, metaphysically necessary, that is, true in every possible world compatible with the propositions that are true in the actual world. In other terms, S is committed to the persistent truth of *p* – to *p* being true no matter how the world turns out to be –, because her assertion has the effect not only of inserting *p* into H's belief box, but also of making H believe that *necessary(p)*, the necessity operator quantifying over all the worlds consistent with what H takes to be true in the actual world.¹¹

That a proposition *p* is metaphysically necessary (from S and H's point of view) does not mean that *p* can play a non-trivial inferential role. Of course, most propositions can get into semantic relations with other propositions. When such propositions are taken to be metaphysically necessary, they become available, *eo ipso*, as premises (or conclusions) of deductive inferences. However, some propositional contents, like those of (3-6, repeated below), in spite of being asserted flat-out, i.e. presented as being persistently true, cannot be conclusions of deductive inferences.

- (3) The unconscious is structured like a language.
- (4) God is everywhere.
- (5) That girl has this sexy *je ne sais quoi*.
- (6) He is an honourable and upright member of the petite bourgeoisie.

In sum, it is not the case that every flat-out assertion imposes *J*-commitment on S. However, in asserting that *p*, S becomes responsible for the persistent truth of *p*.

In Section 4, we have seen that some utterances express, in addition to the proposition *p*, a proposition like *the truth of p is only probable* (9), *the truth of p is not certain* (10).

- (9) John was probably there. [repeated]
- (10) I guess/gather that John was there. [repeated]

The Direct Perception view predicts that *p* goes into H's belief box. This explains that, as we have also seen in Section 3, S remains committed to the truth of *p*. The second proposition expressed, viz. *the truth of p is only*

probable/the truth of p is not certain also goes into H's 'belief box'. The integration of this second proposition into H's belief box makes it impossible for H to believe that *p* will be true no matter how the world turns out to be; however, it does not cancel the *T-commitment* contracted with respect to *p*. S remains committed to *p* being true with respect to what she takes to be true at the utterance time only. By contrast with assertions, the content *p* of weaker assertive speech acts is presented as being non-monotonically true, for *p* is augmented with information about the possibility of its revision. In (9-10), S presents the proposition *John was there* as being derived from a set of beliefs and/or knowledge which is sufficient to warrant the truth of this propositional content, but from which it cannot be deduced. In all these cases, the conclusion that *John was there* is thus warranted with respect to a certain domain only (cf. Hempel 1965; Dominicy 1993). One can perform an assertive speech act with the content *p*, by relying on evidence or warrant *G*, while acknowledging, simultaneously, that *G* could be replaced with *G'*, from which $\neg p$ follows deductively.

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Notes

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¹ Incidentally, it is experimentally established that no specific intonation contour is either necessary or sufficient for irony detection (Winner & Leekam 1991; Bryant & Tree 2005).

² This amounts to saying that, according to Williamson, the necessary condition for successful assertions is to present oneself as knowing the content of the utterance.

³ See Jimenez (1997: 60-75) on such uses of *je-ne-sais-quoi* in aesthetics. According to Delvenne, Michaux & Dominicy (2005) and Dominicy (forthcoming), the 'unanalysed' concepts that correspond to lexical items like *je-ne-sais-quoi* have the cognitive function of gathering occurrences of individuals or events, while other lexical items allow us to form categories whose members can be defined intensionally or, at least, by reference to a prototype.

⁴ Without the relativisation to the context or the actual world the counterfactual "If Mary had this sexy *je-ne-sais-quoi*, we would have been friends" would be compatible with "It is possible that Mary has this sexy *je-ne-sais-quoi*".

⁵ The meaning thus ascribed to *Lacanian unconscious*, etc. is not descriptive exactly for the same reasons that such a descriptive meaning cannot be assigned to proper names (Soames 2002: 43-47); but even if it were, the semantic equivalence would persist.

⁶ What about genuine ‘deferential’ concepts? Imagine that S uses the word ‘synecdoche’ without being able to give a precise definition of this word but trusting that some experts (this time in Putnam’s (1975) sense) know it. Here ‘synecdoche’ has a full-fledged intension – the intension it has for the relevant experts (cf. Recanati 1997). Therefore, when S utters “Cicero’s prose is full of synecdoches” it is not *a priori* impossible for her to have propositional and deductive evidence for the propositional content. For a discussion of the inadequacy of Recanati’s (1997) deferential treatment of unanalysed concepts see Dominicy (1999, forthcoming) and Sperber (1997).

⁷ The conjunction of sentences like (12-13) with a statement that *possible*($\neg p$) introduced by *but*, as in (i-ii), is more acceptable, but only reveals that the content of the first conjunct is not known by S; cf. (iii).

- (i) John was probably there, but it is possible that he wasn’t there
- (ii) I guess/gather that John was there, but it is possible that he wasn’t there.
- (iii) ? I know that John was there, but it is possible that he wasn’t there.

⁸ An explanation of *T*-commitment that gained some popularity recently makes appeal to the Handicap Principle. The Handicap Principle predicts that certain physical characteristics that appear to disadvantage the individual – such as a disproportionately large tail – ensure a higher social status (being, for instance, the indication of the capacity to escape predators, in spite of the handicap), and hence enhance the reproductive success of this individual (Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). Dessalles (2000) argues that communicating true (and relevant) information does not directly benefit the speaker, but is a way to ensure a higher social rank, hence to gain long-term evolutionary advantage. This model implies that providing false information is not in the interest of the speaker, for it would entail a loss of social prestige, hence decreased evolutionary fitness. The problem is that someone who does not communicate eagerly, would, on this view, undergo the same penalty (see Hurford 2007: 292-293).

⁹ Note that the absence of an assertive illocutionary force is not a sufficient condition for irony (see, for instance, Grice 1989: 53-54; Sperber & Wilson 1981).

¹⁰ On this view, the impairment in the ability to reason non-monotonically underlies the difficulties that people with autism experience in the so-called ‘false-belief’ tasks.

¹¹ What if H knows/believes that S is lying? If S is lying, she assumes that H does not know that S does not believe that *p*, i.e. that H does not know that what C actually is like cannot be updated with *p*. Therefore, H can still take S to be committed to the persistent truth of *p*.

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