

# *A Non-Ideal Theory of Assertion*

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I defend the thesis that what it is to say that *P* is to aim to say that *P*. I begin by providing preliminary motivation (§1). Next I compare the proposal to some competing accounts of assertion, ones which attempt to reduce the force of assertion to other intentional contents, and argue against those accounts on the basis of considerations from “non-ideal philosophy of language” (§2). Finally, I outline how those considerations motivate a connection between assertion and social convention (§3) and explore ways in which that connection can be accepted without reducing assertoric force to social convention (§4).

## **1 The Theory**

A speaker says that *P* in virtue of acting with the intention to say that *P*.<sup>1</sup>  
Generalizing: A speaker performs a certain speech act with content *P* in virtue of acting with the intention to perform the speech act with content *P*.

<sup>1</sup> McDowell 1998 page 41.

*Circular?* No. While the same words occur on either side of the “in virtue of,” the occurrences do not have the same referent.<sup>2</sup> Consider the analogous proposal, that someone is shutting the door in virtue of acting with the intention to shut the door.

<sup>2</sup> Frege 1960.

*The Concept Acquisition Regress* Yet, if McDowell’s proposal is correct, it is mysterious how someone could acquire the concept SAY; whereas, there is no mystery as to how one could acquire the concepts involved in intending to shut the door.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> McDowell 1998: “The notion of an intentional performance is more fundamental in this context than the notion of the intention to perform it” (42).

Suppose McDowell’s proposal is correct, and that there is at least one instance of saying. Then: if *acting with the intention to say that P require possession of the concept SAY*, then someone possesses the concept SAYING. Assuming that concept is not innate, there should be some account of how that person acquires that concept. Then: if *the story is the standard one, that the person acquires the concept by observing instances of sayings*, then there must be someone else in possession of the concept SAYING. And so on...

The second emphasized claim in the foregoing argument can be rejected in two related ways: (i) the very first sayer simply *came up* with the concept SAY, and (ii) people after can gain the concept by induction into a social practice. But there is also a related way of rejecting the first emphasized claim.

## 2 Against Force Reductivism

*Effectual* A speaker says that *P* in virtue of acting with the intention to instill in their addressee the belief that *P* (plus with the intention that the addressee recognize the former intention, plus...).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Grice 1957, 1969, Strawson 1964, Harris 2019a,b.

*Expressionist* A speaker says that *P* in virtue of acting with the intention to express (to the addressee) their belief that *P*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bach and Harnish 1979, Williams 2002, Owens 2006.

*Stalnakerian* A speaker says that *P* in virtue of acting with the intention to add *P* to the common ground between them and the addressee.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Stalnaker 1999, 2002.

*Commitment?* A speaker says that *P* in virtue of acting with the intention to become committed (to the addressee) to *P*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Based on Pierce 1934: "... to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth" (384). See also MacFarlane 2011, Geurts 2019.

*Content vs. Force Reductivism* The proposal I am defending agrees with those above in reducing the *content* of an assertion to a content the speaker has in mind. But I do not think that assertoric *force* can be reduced to the force of some mental attitude such as belief or acceptance.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> More McDowell 1998: "If we take it that the content of the intention made public in a speech act [...] essentially involves the concept of the kind of speech act in question (it is the intention, for instance, to say such-and-such), then we cannot hope for a reductive account of kinds of speech act in terms of the intentions of the performers" (42).

### 2.1 Implicating, Insinuating, and Soap Boxing

*Conversational Implicature* A professor agrees to write a reference letter for an underwhelming student. The letter consists only of the following.

- (1) So-and-so is punctual and has nice handwriting.

The professor thereby *says* something trivial about the student, but in addition *implicates* that the student is not good at philosophy.

*Realtor* A family is interested in buying a home. As it happens, the family is of an ethnic background different from the local majority of their chosen neighbourhood. Their realtor says to them,

- (2) Perhaps you would feel more comfortable locating in a more...transitional neighbourhood, like Ashwood?

In addition to asking an explicit question, the realtor insinuates that the family *ought* to feel uncomfortable in their chosen neighbourhood.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Camp 2018, 2022.

*Response* Perhaps any of the accounts above could add that an assertion has content constrained by the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered.

But assertoric content is not so constrained. Suppose you order a steak at a restaurant, and after the first bite exclaim,

- (3) This steak is raw!

Here it seems you asserted that the steak is undercooked.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Peet 2022.

*Soap Boxing* “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 interview and interviewee? Doesn’t that ignore their status as public statements? Finally, what about assertions that play a role in multiple, largely disjoint conversations?”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> MacFarlane 2011 89, emphasis added. See also Lewis forthcoming.

## 2.2 A Principled Argument

In general, what does it mean for some bodily movements to count as the intentional performance of some action type? Answer: the way the one acting conceptualizes their movement.<sup>12</sup> Just as someone counts as shutting the door in virtue of acting with the intention to shut the door, so too with speech acts.

<sup>12</sup> Anscombe 1957: “What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer I shall suggest is that they are the actions to which a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’ is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting” (§5).

*A Principle* Someone is (intentionally) *A*ing in virtue of either (i) that person acting with the intention to *A*, or (ii) that person acting with the intention to *B*, where *A* is an obvious consequence of *B*ing.

If (ii) can be ruled out in the case of asserting, then my proposal follows from that principle.

*Objection 1* The principle is false because more is required to be *A*ing than to act with the intention to *A*. Elmar is not becoming dictator-for-life of Iceland simply by charging the Althing, even if he sincerely intends to succeed.

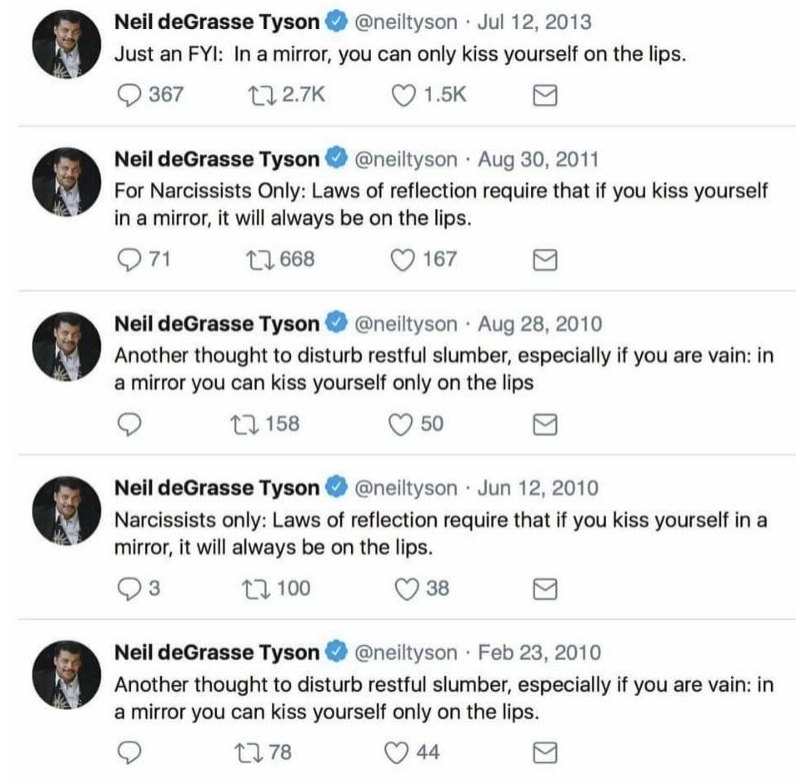
In response, I think my use of “in virtue of” is consistent with there being additional necessary conditions. But if additional necessary conditions must be added, McDowell’s proposal could be revised accordingly. Or, while there may be additional necessary conditions for other action types, there are not for asserting.

*Objection 2* The (only) way in which (ii) could hold for asserting is if *force conventionalism* about assertion is true.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Searle 1969: “... utterance acts stand to to propositional and illocutionary acts in the way in which, e.g., making an “X” on a ballot paper counts as voting” (24, emphasis added.) See also Austin 1962.

### 3 An Observation about Commitment

*Public Speech* Anyone not able to convince themselves that Neil deGrasse Tyson's claim here is true would be permitted to ask him to elaborate.



*E-Mail* You send an e-mail to one of your esteemed colleagues, whose seminar you are sitting in on. You say that you will be leaving an hour early during the next class. You know your colleague, the addressee, is awful with e-mail. So you are unsure when you show up to the class whether they have read it. Nonetheless, if they have read it, they are permitted to expect you to leave, even without you double checking with them whether they read it. Moreover, anyone else who happens to see the e-mail—e.g. your colleagues assistant—can similarly have that expectation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Based on a case from Harris 2019a.

*Eavesdropper* You tell your one flatmate that your favourite band is The Beatles. That flatmate, the addressee, is entitled to ask you, "What's so great about The Beatles!?" But imagine further your other flatmate, in the next room, overhears you. This other flatmate is also able to hold you accountable for that assertion. Suppose the next day you tell the eavesdropping flatmate that your favourite band is Pink Floyd. They are entitled to say, "Hey! I thought..."

*What is Assertoric Commitment?* A sayer of  $P$  is *responsible* for  $P$ 's truth: they must justify  $P$  if challenged. They are also *accountable* for  $P$ 's truth: liable if  $P$  is false.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Marsili 2023.

*The Observation* The commitment a speaker has to saying what they did is something *social* or *public*—not *joint* between the speaker and an addressee (even if there is an addressee.) So, contrary to what is suggested by a number of recent discussions on the matter,<sup>16</sup> assertoric commitment arises from *collective* intentionality, not joint intentionality.

<sup>16</sup> Carassa and Colombetti 2014, 2015, Geurts 2019, Harris 2019b.

## 4 Commitment and Convention

Pierce 1934: "... to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth" (384).

Geurts 2019: "Every speech act  $S$  addressed by  $a$  to  $b$  causes a commitment  $C_{a,b}P$ " (7).

### 4.1 Which Comes First, Commitment or Assertion?

*Constitutive Rules* Something counts as, e.g., a pawn in a game of chess, or a homerun in a game of baseball, in virtue of us collectively accepting certain rules of the form:  $X$  counts as  $Y$  (in context  $C$ ).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Lewis 1979, Searle 1995.

*Refinement 1: Force Reductive* A speaker becoming committed to a proposition  $P$  counts as the speaker saying that  $P$ .

*Refinement 2: Force Eliminativist* A speaker doing such-and-such counts as the speaker becoming committed to  $P$ .

*Refinement 3: Neither!* Saying that  $P$  counts as becoming committed to  $P$ .

*Another Observation about Commitment* Suppose you meet Neil deGrasse Tyson, and (given your lack of imagination/grasp of folk physics) you incredulously ask him to demonstrate the truth of his claim from the tweets above. Suppose he responds that the claim is in fact false, but that's no problem for him, since he did not intend to say that when he wrote the tweets.

If McDowell's account of saying is correct, plus refinement 3, then Neil deGrasse Tyson's response here should be sensible. Yet there is something strange about it, beyond its seeming suspicious.

*Refinement 4?* If a speaker could reasonably be taken to have said that  $P$ , then the speaker is committed to  $P$ .

## 4.2 Lewis' Middle Way

*Lewis on Score* Lewis famously distinguished two sorts of accounts of phenomena such as a baseball game's score.<sup>18</sup> The first appeals only to the mental lives of the particular participants of the game: *a game's score at a certain time is just what the players believe the score to be at that time*. The second appeals to society at large: *we all collectively accept certain constitutive rules that specify that such-and-such happenings count as the score being such-and-so*.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis 1979.

But Lewis suggests a middle way, one for explaining "conversational score."

"It may be best to adopt a third approach—a middle way, drawing on both the alternatives previously considered. Conversational score is, by definition, whatever the mental scoreboards say it is; but we refrain from trying to say just what the conversationalists' mental scoreboards are. We assume that some or other mental representations are present that play the role of a scoreboard, in the following sense: what they register depends on the history of the conversation in the way that the score should according to the rules... The rules specifying the kinematics of score are to some extent constitutive, but on this third approach they enter only in a roundabout way in the definition of score" (346).

*Voting Analogy* Suppose someone goes to their regional voting station and goes through all the motions of voting: registers with the person at the door, waits in line, puts an "X" in one of the boxes, ...

Now a puzzle. It would be odd for the person to say after, "Throw out my ballot, I did not have the intention to vote while I was there!" Yet there is something that would amount to the person not actually voting: they for instance were sleep walking, or hand trembling they marked the wrong box.

There is a similar puzzle with assertion. While Neil deGrasse Tyson's response above is odd, it is nonetheless possible for such a tweet to not be an assertion.

*Final Proposal* We collectively accept various constitutive rules such as the following: someone intentionally going through such-and-such motions counts as them intending to vote; and a speaker doing intentionally going through such-and-such motions counts as that speaker intending to say that *P*.

## 5 Conclusion

In sum, I wish to defend the following collection of theses. (A) To say that *P* is to intend to say that *P*, and (B) we collectively accept the constitutive rules that saying that *P* counts as being committed to *P* and (C) intentionally going through such-and-such motions counts as intending to say that *P*. And the truth of (B) and (C) can help resolve the regress problem identified earlier that arises for (A).

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