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# The definition of assertion: Commitment and truth

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According to an influential view, asserting a proposition involves undertaking some “commitment” to the truth of that proposition. But accounts of what it is for someone to be committed to the truth of a proposition are often vague or imprecise, and are rarely put to work to define assertion. This article aims to fill this gap. It offers a precise characterisation of assertoric commitment, and applies it to define assertion. On the proposed view, acquiring commitment is not sufficient for asserting: To assert, commitment must be acquired by explicitly presenting a proposition as true.

## KEYWORDS

anonymity, assertion, commitment, linguistic normativity, speech act theory, truth

## 1 | DEFINING ASSERTION

What is assertion? The aim of this article is to define the act of *stating*, *claiming* or *affirming* that something is the case. As it is commonplace in the literature (e.g., Stainton, 2016), I will treat these terms as synonymous (at least in the sense of referring to the same illocutionary force),<sup>1</sup> and I will employ the term “assertion” to refer to this species of speech act.

Assertions are both ordinary and important: It is by making them that we share information, coordinate our actions, defend arguments and communicate our beliefs and desires. Given the crucial role that they play in everyday communication, it is not surprising that assertions

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the different connotations that these terms can have in ordinary language, and why these differences are not relevant to theorising about illocutionary force, see Searle and Vanderveken (1985, p. 183).

have been the object of investigation for a wide range of disciplines, both within and outside philosophy. Epistemologists are interested in the conditions under which it is rational to trust an assertion, and those under which a speaker is entitled to utter one (Adler, 2006; Goldberg, 2015). Ethicists and legal theorists have focused on the morality of deceptive and insincere assertions, trying to spell out the obligations one incurs in asserting something (as opposed, for instance, to merely implying it), and have written extensively on how assertoric speech can and should be regulated (e.g., Shiffrin, 2014). The normative consequences of assertions (especially false and insincere ones) have also been the focus of empirical work in experimental pragmatics and linguistics (Bonalumi et al., 2019; Kneer, 2018, 2021; Mazzarella et al., 2018; Rakoczy & Tomasello, 2009). Finally, linguists, philosophers of language and logicians rely heavily on the notion of assertion to theorise about meaning, truth and inferential relations. The goal of this article is to provide an intensionally accurate definition of this concept in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions,<sup>2</sup> and to describe the distinctive responsibilities that we undertake when we make an assertion.

Building on previous work, this article identifies two distinct components of assertoric commitment: *accountability* and *discursive responsibility* (DR). Section 3 argues that definitions based *solely* on the notion of commitment are incomplete, because they fail to make justice to the fact that assertions necessarily *present their content as true*. This problem can be solved by incorporating a further necessary condition into the definition. Section 4 shows that the resulting “mixed definition” provides an intensionally accurate definition of assertion, which illuminates assertion’s place within its family of illocutionary acts, and offers a fine-grained account of its distinctive normative consequences.

## 2 | ASSERTION AND COMMITMENT

According to a long tradition that traces back to Peirce,<sup>3</sup> the speech act of assertion can be characterised in terms of its distinctive normative consequences; specifically, asserting involves being “committed” to the truth of a proposition:

### (CB) Commitment-based account

To assert is to undertake commitment to the truth of a proposition.

But what is it exactly for a speaker to become “committed” to the *truth* of a proposition? Definitions of assertion in terms of commitment have been challenged for failing to answer this question satisfactorily (MacFarlane, 2005b, p. 318; Rescorla, 2009a, p. 114; Vlach, 1981, p. 368). The accusation is that unless one provides a clear and fine-grained characterisation of what exactly it is to be committed to the truth of a proposition, defining assertion in terms of commitment simply trades one obscure notion for another.

<sup>2</sup>It is customary for analyses of illocutionary acts to aim at identifying necessary and sufficient conditions. This approach, however, has known limitations (e.g., Gupta, 2015; Margolis & Laurence, 2019, sections 2.2 and 5.2; Rosch, 1978). While I share some reservations myself, I think that attempting to define assertion in this way can help us better understand this concept, laying some fundamental groundwork for investigating the nature of this speech act and its normative import.

<sup>3</sup>Peirce (1931; CP 2.315, 5.29–31, 5.43–5.47, MS 280.25–26, 517.42–44, 36.104–5), Searle (1969, 1975), Grice (1978, p. 126), Brandom (1983, 1994), Searle and Vanderveken (1985), Green (1999, 2000, 2007, 2017), MacFarlane (2011), Rescorla (2009a), Marsili (2015, 2021a), Marsili and Green (2021), Tanesini (2016, 2020), Peet (2021).

To complicate matters, different scholars have understood the notion of commitment in different (although not always incompatible) ways (for an overview, De Brabanter & Dendale, 2008). Two notions in particular are often bundled together under the label of “assertoric commitment”. The first is what I call “accountability”. In making an assertion with content  $p$ , a speaker undertakes responsibility for  $p$  being the case: They become liable to criticism if  $p$  is false. But asserting also involves a commitment to *act* in a certain way; more specifically, a responsibility to respond to appropriate challenges. I will refer to this second normative component as “discursive responsibility”. The difference between these notions has often been overlooked in the literature.<sup>4</sup> As a result, significantly different accounts of assertion have been misleadingly clumped together under the label of “commitment views”. I will argue that assertoric commitment is best defined in terms of *both* normative components. I will discuss these notions in turn, to flesh out their respective features and highlight how they differ from one another.

## 2.1 | Accountability

Many authors have pointed out that in asserting a proposition, the speaker becomes liable to social sanctions if the proposition turns out to be false. An early formulation of this idea is found in Peirce: “An act of assertion ... renders [the speaker] liable to the penalties of the social law (or, at any rate, those of the moral law) in case [the asserted proposition] should not be true, unless he has a definite and sufficient excuse” (CP 2.315).

Recurrent in Peirce’s writings on assertion is a legal metaphor, a parallelism between asserting and signing a contract (1903; MS[R] 454:5), or taking “a binding oath” (CP 5.546). The idea is that asserting is akin to signing a contract that “binds” you to the truth of the asserted proposition, making you liable to the “penalties of the social law” in case the proposition is false. We can thus understand the notion of accountability as one’s liability to be sanctioned if the proposition turns out to be false: If what you said turns out to be false, it is permissible for other members of the linguistic community to impose sanctions on you.

It would be helpful to identify which exact sanctions are connected to assertoric accountability. However, despite the fruitful analogy with legal contracts, the sanctions that we face for asserting false propositions are not codified by a precise and formalised set of rules, but rather by a complex and loose set of informal social practices. In this respect, assertoric accountability is like moral accountability: Moral accountability involves liability to social sanctions, but the nature of these sanctions is complex, somewhat obscure, and escapes formalisation (Watson, 1996, pp. 237–239). In both cases, one can only attempt to offer a rough characterisation of the sanctioning practices.

As a first approximation, it can be noted that false assertions typically warrant negative reactive attitudes towards the speaker. In asserting that  $p$ , a speaker “knowingly [takes] on the liability to ([lay] herself open to) blame (censure, reproach, being taken to task, being called to account), in case of *not-p*” (Alston, 2000, p. 55). More specifically, claiming something false comes with *reputational costs*: False assertions stain one’s reputation as a dependable informant, one whose testimony can be relied upon (Gawn & Innes, 2018; Sperber et al., 2010;

<sup>4</sup>With a few exceptions, such as Shapiro (2020), Tanesini (2020), Marsili (2021a); a slightly different distinction is in Green (2007, 2017), an altogether different one is Kissine (2008). For an approach that goes beyond *assertoric* commitment and that applies across the illocutionary board, see Geurts (2019).

Tebben & Waterman, 2016). Reputational costs need not be epistemic, and can take a variety of forms: They may affect one's social standing, face, perceived moral character, dependability and so forth. In all their variety, these costs play a central role in motivating speakers not to make false claims, ensuring that assertions maintain their role as a valuable tool for sharing and acquiring information (Graham, 2020; Green, 2007, 2009).

Since the sanctions that an assertor incurs are not heavily codified, for the purpose of defining assertoric accountability it will be convenient to rather appeal to the distinctive *source* of these sanctions. Here is a first attempt: We are dealing with assertoric accountability if and only if the speaker is liable<sup>5</sup> to social sanctions *if what they said turns out to be false*. I will come back to this characterisation shortly; for the moment, we can rest content with this first approximation.

## 2.2 | Discursive responsibility

On top of making you liable to criticism, asserting commits you *to act* in a certain way: to make some steps in the conversation, if the relevant conditions arise. These “discursive responsibilities” have been modelled in different ways within different frameworks (Brandom, 1983, 1994; Hamblin, 1970a, 1970b, Chap. 8; MacFarlane, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, pp. 227–229, 2011; Searle, 1969; Toulmin, 1958; Rescorla, 2009b). The shared underlying idea is that if you assert that *p*, you are expected<sup>6</sup> to defend your claim in response to *legitimate challenges* (e.g., by providing reasons to believe that *p* is true, or by deferring responsibility to someone on whose testimony you are relying), or else take back your assertion (thereby annulling your discursive commitment to *p*). Extant accounts of DR differ depending on how they define challenges and responses, and depending on which standards must be met for a challenge to be deemed legitimate and a response satisfying.

Let us start by considering what counts as a challenge. Authors like Brandom have a very narrow conception: Challenges must be assertions that are incompatible with what the speaker said (1994, pp. 178, 238, Wanderer, 2010). In this sense, (2) and (3) are challenges to (1), whereas (4) and (5) are not *stricto sensu* challenges:

- (1) Prospero has brought some Prosecco.
- (2) He did not.
- (3) No, Prospero brought a bottle of Chianti.
- (4) How do you know?
- (5) Is that true?

I take this view to be unduly restrictive (cf. Rescher, 1977, pp. 9–11, Rescorla, 2009b; Toulmin, 1958). All these utterances—both (2–3) and (4–5)—put into question the speaker's

<sup>5</sup>This means that other members of the linguistic community are *permitted* (not obliged) to criticise the speaker for the falsity of their claim. In the rest of the article, I will sometimes talk of someone being *entitled* to criticise the speaker, of a criticism being *permissible* or *warranted*. These expressions are all meant to track the fact that the criticisms are permissible, given the norms governing the speech act of assertion.

<sup>6</sup>By “expectation”, I mean a normative requirement to act in a certain way, comparable to the ones generated by other illocutionary rules. Illocutionary norms are not explicitly agreed-upon rules (unlike the rules of chess or traffic rules), but they are nonetheless implicitly understood, followed and enforced by competent speakers. I elaborate on the status of illocutionary norms and the expectations they generate in Marsili (2023a).

claim that Prospero brought the Prosecco, creating a (defeasible) expectation that the speaker defends their claim. Indeed, while in (4) and (5) there is a clear, detectable expectation that the speaker reply by providing adequate grounds for their claim, this is not equally obvious of (2) and (3). Since I am attempting to identify an unambiguous criterion to single out assertions, I will take the availability of the latter challenges (questions that challenge the veracity of the claim, rather than statements that contradict it) as an indicator that the speaker is *discursively responsible* for a proposition.

Challenges also vary depending on *what* they challenge. Consider the difference between:

- (a) What makes you think that?
- (b) Is that true?
- (c) Do you really know that?

A question like (a) challenges the speaker's doxastic and epistemic grounds for making the assertion. Not the same for (b), which challenges the truth of the proposition itself (independently of the speaker's grounds for making it). Finally, (c) targets both components: It questions both the veracity of the claim and the speaker's grounds for making it.

What is distinctive about assertions is that they create an expectation that the speaker respond when the veracity of their claim is challenged—that is, in response to challenges like (b) and (c). A comparable expectation is not present with weaker speech acts. To appreciate this point, compare the guess (G) with the assertion (A):

- (G) I guess that Luca kissed Mara when they went back home last night.
- (A) Luca kissed Mara when they went back home last night.

In response to (G), it is perfectly appropriate to challenge the speaker with (a), and to expect the speaker to address (even if only summarily) the challenge. By contrast, responding to (G) with (b) or (c) is somewhat odd. The speaker could appropriately dismiss both challenges by replying that they do not know if it is true that Luca and Mara kissed—they merely think it is possible, perhaps likely. By contrast, since assertions create stronger normative expectations, this kind of reply is unavailable to the speaker of (A) in response to (b) and (c). If you assert that *p*, you cannot dismiss a challenge to the veracity of *p* with the same ease.

Since (unlike guesses and weaker assertives) assertions characteristically involve an expectation to respond to challenges to the veracity of the proposition, I will henceforth use “challenges” to refer to replies—like (b) and (c)—that put into question the veracity of the challenged claim (cf. Goldman, 1994). Given this characterisation, I will assume that a response to a challenge is satisfying to the extent that it shows<sup>7</sup> that the asserted proposition is true.

I mentioned that assertors are only expected to respond to *appropriate* challenges (MacFarlane, 2003; Rescorla, 2009a). This is because the veracity of a claim is sometimes so transparent that putting it into question would be gratuitous, and therefore conversationally inappropriate. Consider (6):

- (6) I am uttering a sentence.

<sup>7</sup>I am using “show” in a figurative sense, as a shorthand for something like “provides reasons that are good enough to settle that the asserted proposition is true, given the epistemic standards currently accepted in the conversational context”.

Clearly, asking (4) (“How do you know?”) or (5) (“Is that true?”) in response to (6) would be rather odd, since the truth of (6) is already a settled issue in the conversation. Given that the veracity of (6) is self-evident, the speaker is not expected to defend it from this sort of challenges. Shall we conclude that (6) is not an assertion? Before we draw this conclusion, we should first consider what makes a challenge conversationally acceptable.

Challenges can be inappropriate for different reasons, and not always their inappropriateness indicates that the speaker is not discursively responsible for the challenged proposition. If a challenge is inappropriate *because its answer is already a settled issue in the conversation*, its inappropriateness is no evidence that DR does not obtain—it is rather evidence that the speaker's responsibility to show that the proposition is true has already been discharged. By contrast, whenever a challenge is inappropriate for other reasons (most notably, when a challenge is inappropriate because the speaker is not expected to defend the veracity of what they said in the first place), we can reasonably infer that the speaker is not discursively responsible for the challenged proposition. Let us call the former kind of inappropriate challenges *redundant*, and the latter *illegitimate*. It is when challenges are inappropriate because illegitimate (rather than inappropriate because redundant) that we can infer that DR is not satisfied.

To better grasp this distinction, compare (6) with speech acts other than assertion, like the command:

(7) Eat the damn cake!

It would be odd to challenge (7) with questions like (4) or (5). But this is not because it is already a settled issue in the conversation that what the speaker said is true. Here the challenge is inappropriate because the speaker is not expected to defend the veracity of any particular claim: Challenging the truth of (7) is *illegitimate*, so that DR is not satisfied. By contrast, challenges to (6) are unavailable because the truth of (6) is already settled in the conversation: They are *redundant*, because the speaker has already discharged their discursive responsibilities.

To recapitulate, being discursively responsible for a proposition *p* amounts to being responsible *to show that p is true*, if *legitimately* challenged.<sup>8</sup> And only if there is no legitimate way to challenge a given utterance, we can infer that that utterance is not an assertion (cf. Section 4.2 for some qualifications).

One might still wonder if the expectation to answer legitimate challenges exhausts the range of activities that one is committed to doing in virtue of having asserted a proposition. Perhaps in stating that *p* you also accept some further obligations: Arguably, you should not make statements that blatantly contradict *p* (Hamblin, 1970b), nor behave in a way that is sharply at odds with accepting *p* as true (Geurts, 2019).

While assertions do seem to generate these additional responsibilities, incorporating them into the definition of assertion would be unnecessary, since adding them would not affect the range of propositions captured by it. Whenever the speaker is “discursively responsible” and “accountable” for a proposition, the further conditions mentioned above are always satisfied, since it would be inappropriate for the speaker to contradict themselves (in action or in speech).

<sup>8</sup>The problem of defining which challenges are appropriate is an independent issue in the literature on discursive commitment (for an overview, see Rescorla 2009b). Here, I endorsed the view that a challenge to an assertion is *appropriate* only if it is conveyed by a felicitous question, and that a question felicitous only if its answer is not a settled issue in the conversation. This solution represents a novel approach to a longstanding problem in argumentation theory.



If this is right, there is no need to build the extra conditions into the definition. To define assertion, it is enough to identify the simplest criterion that tracks assertoric commitment. For this purpose, answerability to legitimate challenges and accountability, as defined above, should suffice.

## 2.3 | Twofold commitment

Now that the notions of “accountability” and “discursive responsibility” have been fleshed out in sufficient detail, “the act of committing oneself to  $p$ ” can be defined as follows:

**Committing to  $p$ :** A speaker  $S$  commits to a proposition  $p$  being the case *iff*  $S$  performs an act by means of which  $S$  becomes (a) “accountable” for  $p$ , and (b) “discursively responsible” for  $p$ .

Is the definition redundant? Perhaps (a) entails (b): If you are accountable for  $p$ , then you are also responsible to defend  $p$  against legitimate challenges. But this is not quite right. If an assertor risks facing sanctions (such as staining their reputation) for being proven wrong about  $p$ , it is in their interest to show that  $p$  is true whenever  $p$  is challenged. Hence accountability creates a *subjective* reason to engage in the behaviours required by DR: It is typically desirable for an assertor to do so, since doing so allows you to defend your reputation as a reliable informer. But making it *desirable* for speakers to respond to challenges falls short of establishing an *obligation* (or expectation) that they do so. So accountability alone does not create an *inter-subjective expectation* to respond to legitimate challenges (Rescorla, 2009a, pp. 114–116; Shapiro, 2020),<sup>9</sup>—it merely creates an incentive to do so.

To see that accountability does not entail DR, consider an example where (a) is satisfied while (b) is not. Suppose that during a dinner between co-workers I publicly suggest that Maria and Luigi did not come because they are having an affair:

(8) I bet that they are in bed together right at this moment.

Rather than an assertion, (8) is a guess. Accordingly, I am not discursively responsible for the truth of its content: If a colleague challenged me (“How do you know that they are having an affair?”), it would be perfectly appropriate for me to dismiss the question by replying that I do not in fact know that Maria and Luigi are having an affair—I only made a reasonable guess.

Note, however, that I may nonetheless be accountable for my suggestion. Suppose it later turns out that I never invited Maria to the dinner, and that I begged Luigi to remain in the office to handle some paperwork for me. Despite being aware that they had non-romantic reasons for being absent, I maliciously suggested otherwise. It would seem appropriate here to

<sup>9</sup>For similar reasons, neither accountability nor DR entails that the speaker is obliged to be sincere, or to follow any putative norm of assertion (Rescorla, 2009a): While both kinds of commitments create an agent-dependent reason to be truthful (to avoid sanctions, to be able to meet expectations when challenged), none creates an agent-independent reason to do so. To highlight the difference, MacFarlane (2011) distinguishes between *upstream normativity* (norms that constrain which actions you are entitled to perform—in our case, which assertions you are entitled to make) and *downstream normativity* (obligations and entitlements that result from your action—in our case, those falling under the label of “commitments”). It should be noted, however, that some authors (Alston, 2000, Chap. 8; Milić, 2015; Reiland, 2020, section 6) hold that there is a tighter connection between norms of assertion and commitments—for these authors, downstream normativity can be reduced to upstream normativity.

criticise me for communicating something false; similarly, my reputation as a sincere speaker might suffer from what I have said. The example shows that condition (a) can be met when (b) is not—at least in some cases involving weak assertives, like *guesses*, *hypotheses*, or *suggestions* (cf. Oswald, 2022).

What about the opposite direction of entailment? Can (b) be satisfied when (a) is not? The answer is once again positive. Being responsible to defend the truth of a proposition does not entail that you are criticisable if that proposition is false. It is possible to engage in rational argumentation while making it clear that the thesis that you aim to argue for is false, as it happens in competitive debating or (more mundanely) in ordinary conversations in which a false premise is granted purely for the sake of discussion. Say, for instance, that (à la Swift, 1729) I agree to argue in favour of the thesis that it is commendable to eat children. I proceed to make a number of claims that I take to be defensible but false. In this context my interlocutors are entitled to challenge my claims, and expect me to provide arguments in support of their truth: I am discursively responsible for each of these claims, as required by (b). Nonetheless, it would be inappropriate to blame me or criticise me for their falsity: Condition (a) is not satisfied. The example shows that (b) does not entail (a), and that satisfying (b) is not sufficient to make an assertion. More generally, condition (a) and (b) can come apart: Each one identifies a different component of the distinctive responsibilities engendered by assertions.

### 3 | A “MIXED” DEFINITION OF ASSERTION

#### 3.1 | Explicitly expressing a proposition

The account developed so far does not yet distinguish assertions from other ways of becoming committed to a proposition. Assertion is generally regarded as an explicit, open and direct speech act, as opposed to indirect acts, like merely implying (or conveying) that something is the case (Alston, 2000; Borg, 2019; Gluer, 2001; Pagin, 2014, section 2; Searle, 1969; Stainton, 2016).<sup>10</sup> Defining assertion as acquiring commitment to the truth of the proposition will not make justice to this intuition, for it would rule in implicatures, presuppositions and propositions that are deductively entailed by the speaker's previous assertions.

A simple solution is to require that the speaker becomes committed to a proposition *p* by uttering a sentence (or an elliptic sub-sentence—I will use the term “expression” to cover both) whose content (relative to the context of the utterance) is *p*, rather than by uttering a sentence that merely presupposes or implies *p* (Alston, 2000, pp. 117–121; Cull, 2019; MacFarlane, 2003, fn. 12; Marsili, 2015, 2021a; Searle, 1969). Given the lack of consensus between scholars as to how semantic content is best defined (for an overview, Récanati, 2013; Saul, 2012), it is preferable to remain as neutral as possible<sup>11</sup> concerning how such content should be identified, and

<sup>10</sup>A minority of authors (García-Carpintero, 2018; Viebahn, 2020) allow for *indirect* assertions. The disagreement here is, I suspect, primarily terminological. I agree that calling some implicata “indirect assertions” may be useful for various theoretical purposes. However, it extends the scope of this term beyond its ordinary meaning, which my definition aims to track.

<sup>11</sup>My point here is that a definition of assertion need not take a stance on this issue, not that neutrality is a desideratum for its own sake. In fact, *some* accounts of semantic content will not be apt to define assertion. Theories that define semantic content by appeal to the very notion of assertion (cf. Brandom, 1994) will not do, because this move would lead to circularity. Note, further, that this limitation does not speak against my proposal specifically, for it is shared by virtually any definition that incorporates a criterion to rule out implicata (such as (i) above).



defer the determination of the relevant proposition to a theory of semantic content. To define assertion, it will be enough to require that the speaker is committed to the content of the expression uttered, rather than some other proposition:

**(CBD) Commitment-based definition of assertion:** A speaker *S* asserts that *p* iff (i) *S* utters an expression with content *p* and (ii) *S* thereby undertakes commitment (as defined above) to *p*.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2 | Becoming committed without asserting

CBD successfully differentiates between assertion and commissive implicata, but it is still incomplete. More specifically, it fails to specify that assertions must put forward their content as true. Peter Pagin (2004, 2009; cf. Pagan, 2009) has raised objections to commitment-based views that point towards this limitation. He contends that while there are speech acts (“social speech acts”, such as bequeathing and promising) that can be defined solely in terms of their normative effects, assertions cannot.

To prove this point, Pagin offers a simple test. If asserting simply amounts to communicating that one is accepting a given set of responsibilities, it should be possible to assert *just* by declaring that one is undertaking those responsibilities. For example, it should be possible for me to assert that Socrates never existed simply by uttering (9):

- (9) I hereby commit myself to the following proposition:  
(*p*) Socrates never existed.

If we follow Pagin in treating *p* as the semantic content of (9), and in assuming that the required felicity conditions for committing myself to *p* (whichever they are) obtain, it follows that in uttering (9) I become committed to the truth of *p*: CBD classifies (9) as an assertion that Socrates never existed. However, Pagin would object that in uttering (9) I do not assert that Socrates never existed: I merely communicate that I accept to be criticised if Socrates indeed existed, and to defend this claim against appropriate challenges. Arguably, this is not yet to *claim* that Socrates never existed: Commitment-based accounts of assertions must therefore be incorrect.

With some reservations,<sup>13</sup> I share Pagin’s intuition that uttering (9) is not quite *asserting* that Socrates never existed, and I concur (partially on independent grounds) that assertions should not be defined *solely* in terms of their social effects. But even if one takes Pagin’s argument to be successful, the example merely shows that commitment-based accounts fail to provide sufficient conditions for asserting *p*. It does not establish that these definitions are beyond repair—merely that they are incomplete.

<sup>12</sup>A referee wonders whether condition (i) incorrectly rules in cases in which a speaker produces an utterance without meaning it—as it might happen when an incompetent speaker accidentally produces a meaningful expression in a foreign language. To exclude such cases, condition (ii) can be modified, to require that *S* undertakes commitment to *p* *knowingly* and *intentionally*. However, some theorists want to allow for unintentional assertions (e.g., Kölbel, 2010; cf. Dummett, 1973, 1979, p. 111), and more generally for unintentional performance of *any* illocutionary act (for a recent overview, McDonald, 2021). I will not take a stance on the matter here, but an additional clause (e.g., *knowingly* and *intentionally*) can easily be incorporated into CBD, if deemed appropriate.

<sup>13</sup>See Marsili and Green (2021) for elaboration.

Arguably, the reason why commitment-based definitions deliver an incorrect prediction about (9) is that they allow that a speaker can assert that  $p$  even if the speaker is not putting  $p$  forward as true. This is exactly what happens in Pagin's example: (9) expresses a proposition ( $p$ ) that can be true or false, but does not take an explicit stance as to whether  $p$  is true—it merely commits the speaker to it. Asserting a proposition, by contrast, requires putting a proposition forward as true. This is what is missing in accounts of assertions based *solely* on commitment: the requirement that the proposition is *presented as true*.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3 | Presenting a proposition as true

Already found in Frege (1892), the thesis that assertions present their content as true has been defended by Wright (1992, pp. 23–34) and Adler (2002, p. 274), and shares several features with the view that assertion “aims at truth” (Dummett, 1973; Marsili, 2018a, 2021b; Williams, 1966, pp. 18–19). However, left unanalysed, the expression “presenting as true” is not very informative.

Here is one way to articulate the idea more precisely. An unasserted proposition merely “describes” or “represents” a state of affairs, without taking a stance as to whether that state of affairs matches reality. Of such a proposition we could say that it is true or false, but not correct or incorrect. This is because a proposition does not alone specify a *criterion* to evaluate its correctness: it represents a state of affairs without specifying whether it obtains.<sup>15</sup> Asserting, instead, involves presenting a proposition as true—that is, describing the world as being in a certain way, so that one's assertion is successful (correct, right) only if the world is in fact in that way. Speech act theorists talk in this sense of a “word-to-world direction of fit” (Searle, 1976): To present a proposition as true is to perform an act that can be described as successful if the proposition (*word*) “fits” the way the *world* is.<sup>16</sup> Because it is presented as true, an asserted proposition can be appropriately described as “successful” or “unsuccessful” (and correct or incorrect) depending on whether or not the proposition that it expresses is indeed true.<sup>17</sup> When a proposition is presented as true, we can say that the speaker “got things right” (or wrong) when the proposition turns out to be true (or false). Truth here establishes a “correctness” or “success” condition for the speech act. It is, in this sense, assertion's goal (Dummett, 1973; Marsili, 2018a, 2021b; Williams, 1966).

<sup>14</sup>Here I am treating “putting forward as true” and “presenting as true” as synonymous.

<sup>15</sup>Some theorists (e.g., Barker, 2004; Bronzo, 2021; Hanks, 2007; Reiland, 2019) who reject the force/content distinction deny this. Broadly, they hold that since a proposition involves an act of predication, it can be correct and incorrect. This view, however, is somewhat unorthodox (for objections, see, e.g., Green, 2018), and the literature on the nature of assertion tends to operate within the framework that I am adopting (see Pagin & Marsili, 2021). Furthermore, even if we were to accept this unorthodox view, it would at most render the extra requirement *redundant* (condition (i) would already entail that the content is “presented as true”). The definition would still draw the right distinctions, and correctly differentiate between assertions and other speech acts, by means of the commitment condition.

<sup>16</sup>Following Green (2017, 2019) and Marsili (2018a, pp. 464–465), correctness and success are here regarded as properties of the speech act. This is not to deny that these notions apply to speakers too. If Bob falsely claims that Gianni is drunk, his assertion (the act) is incorrect. But we can also derivatively say, of Bob, that he was incorrect or wrong about Gianni's state. Presenting as true is here characterised in reference to the first sense, or incorrectness of the act: To present  $p$  as true is to perform a speech act that we would call “incorrect” if  $p$  is false, and that we would call “correct” (and successful) only if  $p$  is true. Similarly for the notion of success: What matters is whether the assertion meets its presumed goal (describing reality), not whether it meets the goal of the speaker (which might be different, e.g., telling a lie).

<sup>17</sup>For elaboration, see Green (2017) on “liability” and Marsili (2018a, 2021b) on assertoric aims and success-conditions.

Pagin's objection (and more generally the observation that assertions present their content as true) can then be met simply by incorporating the requirement that the proposition is presented as true into the definition:

**(MD) Mixed definition of assertion:** A speaker *S* asserts that *p* iff (i) *S* utters an expression with content *p*, thereby (ii) presenting *p* as true, and (iii) undertaking assertoric commitment to *p*.

This definition does not classify (9) as an assertion, because uttering (9) is not a way of putting forward *p* as true. This is easily shown. First, we would not say that (9) is incorrect or unsuccessful if *p* turns out to be false. Second, and relatedly, being committed to a proposition is logically compatible with that proposition's falsity, so (9) is compatible with *p* being false. Third, it would *not* be a logical contradiction to assert the conjunction of “not *p*” and (9) (cf. Pagin, 2009). These observations point in the same direction: To utter (9) is not to present *p* as true. Since (9) does not present the proposition as true, it does not satisfy (ii), and MD does not classify it as an assertion—*quod erat demonstrandi*.

Compared to simple “commitment-based accounts”, the “mixed definition” has the advantage of offering a more accurate and unified account of how assertion works.<sup>18</sup> In asserting, you *explicitly* express a proposition, as opposed to merely implying it (condition (i)). But when you assert, you do not just put this proposition forward as something that has no relation with the actual world: You present that proposition as true (condition (ii)). Finally, asserting comes with normative consequences (condition (iii)): It makes you liable to be criticised if your claim is inaccurate, creating the expectation that you show, if challenged, that what you said is indeed true.<sup>19</sup> It is yet to be demonstrated, however, that this definition reliably distinguishes assertions from other speech acts, and that it avoids known objections to commitment-based accounts of assertions. This is the task I undertake in the next section.

## 4 | TESTING THE DEFINITION

### 4.1 | Assertions and other speech acts

A good definition of assertion should be able to reliably distinguish assertions from other speech acts. Let us start simple, considering utterances that are obviously not assertions:

<sup>18</sup>Wright (1992, p. 24) claims that it is a platitude that assertions present their content as true. Perhaps defenders of “simple commitment views” did not include this requirement in their definitions simply because it is platitudinous (cf. Marsili & Green, 2021, p. 26). This might be, but the addition proposed here would still be significant: It brings to light an important requirement that is otherwise left implicit, and shows how it can handle the objections raised by Pagin (2004, 2009).

<sup>19</sup>A referee wonders if the “presenting as true” condition makes the *accountability* requirement redundant. Pagin's example shows that the two notions are not coextensive: The speaker of (9) is accountable for a proposition they have not presented as true. Still, it might be that whenever you present a proposition as true, you are accountable for it. This conjecture has some plausibility. If it is correct, the *accountability* requirement could in principle be excised from the definition without threatening its intensional adequacy. But this would not make MD any simpler (since “accountability” is required only indirectly, through condition (iii)), and the analysis of commitment provided in Section 2 would be no less valuable, since both conditions are still needed if one aims to characterise assertoric commitment.

- (10) Leave the cat alone!
- (11) Assume that creationism is true ...

There might be some disagreement as to which proposition qualifies as the semantic content of (10) and (11). But no matter how we identify their semantic content, condition (iii) cannot be satisfied here. First, there is no plausible propositional content of (10–11) for the falsity of which the speaker could be criticised: “Accountability” cannot obtain here. Second, challenges such as “How do you know that?” would be illegitimate in response to (10) and (11): “Discursive responsibility” is not satisfied. The definition correctly predicts that these utterances are not assertions.

By requiring that the speaker presents the proposition as true, MD places assertion within the broader category of *representatives*: illocutionary acts that have word-to-world direction of fit, like suppositions, guesses and conjectures (Green, 2013; Récanati, 1987, pp. 147–163; Searle, 1976; Vanderveken, 1990). A definition of assertion featuring solely conditions (i) and (ii) would fail to differentiate assertions from the other members of its family. MD avoids this problem by requiring that the speaker commits themselves to the proposition. To see this, consider the following:

- (12) I guess that [Jorge is in the shower].
- (13) I conjecture the following: [the human race will go extinct in 10 years].

It is rather uncontroversial that by uttering (12) I would not assert that Jorge is in the shower, and that by proffering (13) I would not claim that the human race will go extinct in 10 years. A good theory of assertion should predict that the bracketed content in (12) and (13) is not asserted (but rather guessed and conjectured, respectively, cf. Green, 2007, p. 71; Shapiro, 2018).

However, there is a sense in which these conjectures and guesses *present their content as true*: Condition (ii) is arguably satisfied here. We would say (12) and (13) are incorrect if, respectively, it turns out that Jorge is not in the shower, and that the human race will not go extinct in 10 years. It is rather condition (iii) that is undisputably not satisfied here. Challenges such as “How do you know?” would clearly be illegitimate in this context (since the speaker could appropriately dismiss the question by offering replies like: “I don’t: it’s just a conjecture/guess”).<sup>20</sup> MD rules out these speech acts because they do not involve the undertaking of the right kind of commitment.<sup>21</sup>

A different verdict concerns illocutionary acts that are “stronger” than assertions (in the sense outlined by Searle & Vanderveken, 1985)—illocutionary acts that involve undertaking responsibilities *more demanding* than assertoric commitments. Suppose that Giotto utters:

<sup>20</sup>Some other challenges would be warranted in this context, such as “Why did you make that conjecture?” or “What makes you think that?”. Indeed, virtually every speech act warrants challenges of this kind, but this is beyond the point. Only the availability of challenges to the *veracity of the speaker’s claim* is evidence that the speaker is discursively responsible, as clarified in Section 2.2

<sup>21</sup>For more on the relationship between assertion and other representative speech acts, see Searle (1976, pp. 5, 10), Searle and Vanderveken (1985), and Labinaz (2018), who consider how different representative illocutions yield different *degrees* of commitment. For how commitment accounts can handle hedges and mitigation, see for example, Coates (1987) and Krifka (2019). I discuss these matters in Marsili (2014, pp. 165–167, 2015, pp. 124–125, 2018b, pp. 179–180, 2021a, pp. 3262–3263) and in Caponetto and Marsili (forthcoming).

(14) I swear that [I did not eat the Nutella].

In uttering (14), Giotto presents the bracketed proposition as true, and undertakes the relevant commitments. He is criticisable in case he did in fact eat the Nutella, and it would be appropriate to challenge (14) with questions like “Is that true?”.<sup>22</sup> MD counts (14) as an assertion, although it seems that Giotto rather *swore* that he did not eat the Nutella.

This might seem like a counterexample to MD. I am confident, however, that a good theory of assertion *should* classify (14) as an assertion (see Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, pp. 99, 130, 188). This is for a number of reasons. First, it would be perfectly natural to say that, in uttering (14), Giotto has claimed (or affirmed, stated, asserted, etc.) that he did not eat the Nutella. This is easily explained if we grant (14) the status of assertion, but not if we insist that it is not one. Second, if Giotto really ate the Nutella, it seems clear that his utterance would be a lie. Lie-aptness is generally understood to be a sign that the speaker is asserting something (Stainton, 2016, pp. 406–407). Once again, unless we acknowledge that (14) is an assertion, it is hard to explain this datum. Third, the argument against classifying (14) as an assertion seems to rely on the assumption that (14) can be either an assertion or an act of swearing, but not both. However, this assumption is misguided. Speech act theorists agree that different illocutionary forces can be achieved at once and directly<sup>23</sup> (a mechanism known as *illocutionary entailment*, cf. Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). To say that in uttering (14) Giotto is asserting that he ate the Nutella is not to deny that in uttering (14) Giotto is *also* swearing that he did. Rather, asserting that he did not eat the Nutella is *part* of what Giotto did when he swore that he did not eat the Nutella.

That a good theory of assertion should acknowledge the possibility of asserting by performing other illocutionary acts becomes more evident when one considers illocutions that are more closely connected to assertions, such as denials, objections and the like:

(15) I deny that [I was present at the scene of the murder].

(16) I object that [I was not present at the scene of the murder].

(17) I insist that [I was not present at the scene of the murder].

It seems straightforward that a good definition of assertion should rule in (15), (16) and (17) (Alston, 2000; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 183; Marsili, 2023b, section 2). Denials in particular are telling, since they are functionally equivalent to asserting the negation of their content.<sup>24</sup> To see this, consider (18), which is functionally equivalent to (15):

(18) I assert that [I was not present at the scene of the murder].

<sup>22</sup>Note that “How do you know?” challenges are “redundant” in this context, given that the answer is already common ground. But this does not mean that DR is not satisfied (see Section 2.2).

<sup>23</sup>Here “directly” is opposed to “indirect” illocutions, like implicatures and indirect speech acts; compare Searle and Vanderveken (1985, pp. 129–130). See also Lewiński (2021).

<sup>24</sup>By saying that they are functionally equivalent, I simply mean that an ordinary speaker would regard them as communicating pretty much the same thing. This is not to say that these expressions are *fully* equivalent, for they are not (see Ripley, 2011).

A definition of assertion that includes (18) and excludes (15) would be perhaps defensible, but it would be concerned with an excessively strict sense in which the word “assertion” can be used.<sup>25</sup> It would tell us something quite trivial about the performative verb employed by the speaker, but little about the less trivial issue of what the speaker is doing in performing the utterance (i.e., little about the force of their speech act). Since I take the latter to be the main preoccupation of a definition of assertion, I welcome the prediction that these utterances are asserted as a desirable one.<sup>26</sup>

## 4.2 | Excuses and levels of normativity

Whether an agent is responsible for doing something is not always straightforward. Moral theorists are familiar with a variety of puzzling cases: Obligations can be *in conflict* with one another, can be *defeated* by appropriate excuses, or can be *annulled* by someone with the authority to do so. Similar complications arise with assertion; in such cases, it may be unclear whether the normative conditions postulated by MD are met. I will now consider some such complications, to show that a few clarifications are all we need to deal with them.

Let us start by considering how *excuses* complicate the picture. It is natural to excuse agents when they fail to meet their obligations *for reasons that are outside their control*. Here is an example: Due to family arrangements, Johannes is responsible for picking up his grandmother at the station every Friday at 10. Johannes really cares about this: He never forgot to do it, and he always leaves early to counteract potential delays due to traffic or roadworks. This Friday, however, Johannes had a car accident caused by a negligent driver, which prevented him from getting to the station in time. In this case, we would say that Johannes is *excused* for failing to pick up his grandmother at 10. We would not *blame* Johannes for his failure to meet his responsibility: The relevant social sanctions do not apply in these circumstances.

Similar cases arise for assertion. For instance, if you assert something false because you were violently coerced to do it, you may be excusable (and blameless) for making that false statement. A textbook example would be Galileo's forced declaration that the Sun revolves around the Earth:

(19) The Sun revolves around the Earth.

Similarly, one may assert something false because they have good, undefeated reasons to believe it to be true, like someone (call him Bodo) asserting (19) in the Middle Ages, when geocentrism was the prevalent view in the scientific community. Although (19) is an assertion, in both circumstances (both Galileo's and Bodo's) there is a sense in which the speaker is not criticisable for the falsity of what they said, against condition (iii) of MD.

However, excusable false assertions are a problem for MD only if we fail to differentiate between *assertoric* sanctionability and *overall* (all things considered) sanctionability. Bodo and Galileo are *excusable* for having made a false assertion: *All things considered*, they should not be criticised for the falsity of (19). But their being excusable for not *f-ing* presupposes that they

<sup>25</sup>In fact, I am not aware of any existing definition that gives this verdict—nor of one that, unlike mine, would not classify (14–17) as assertions. Reviewing each existing account to prove this point would lead us astray, but the reader can refer to MacFarlane (2011) and Pagin and Marsili (2021) for an overview, and to Marsili (2015, p. 125) for a discussion of how “norm of assertion” accounts (à la Williamson, 1996) deliver this prediction.

<sup>26</sup>For systematic criterion to both count (14–17) as assertions and acknowledge that they are not *merely* assertions, see Green (2013, 2017) and Marsili (2015).



were responsible for *f*-ing in the first place: Considering their assertoric responsibilities alone (and leaving excuses aside), Bodo and Galileo are accountable for the falsity of their claims. In other words, Bodo and Galileo would have been sanctionable for the falsity of their claims, had the relevant excuses not arisen. Had Galileo not been coerced, or had Bodo possessed good reasons to doubt geocentrism, their assertions would have been criticisable in virtue of their falsity. It is *assertoric* sanctionability, rather than *all things considered* sanctionability, that we need to take into consideration to establish whether a speaker is accountable (and discursively responsible) for a proposition being true (a point stressed in passing by both Peirce [CP 2.315] and Alston, 2000, p. 56).

There is another way in which assertoric commitments can be *defeated*: When assertoric responsibilities clash with other norms. For instance, norms of privacy and politeness can override discursive responsibilities. Imagine that I give a eulogy at a funeral,<sup>27</sup> and I say, referring to the deceased:

(20) I loved Josie dearly.

Even if this is clearly an assertion, it would be inappropriate for the funeral's attendees to interrupt me and challenge me with questions like "Is that true?" or "Do you really believe that?". Arguably, this is because there are norms of politeness (e.g., "Eulogies should not be interrupted, unless strictly needed"), of privacy (e.g., "Avoid raising excessively personal questions in public") and perhaps moral norms (e.g., "Don't hurt other people unnecessarily") that override my audience's right to challenge my statement. Similarly to previous examples based on excuses, we can say that *had the contrast with other norms not arisen*, it would have been appropriate to challenge my statement. Had I made my statement in a context where this normative clash was not a concern (e.g., speaking in private with a close friend), the same challenges would have been appropriate. From the fact that *in this context* it would be inappropriate to challenge (20) we cannot conclude, then, that in uttering I did not undertake the relevant assertoric commitments. This case is better described as one in which my assertoric commitments are overridden by other normative concerns. Once again, the distinction between "assertoric normativity" and "overall appropriateness" is all we need to accommodate intuitions.<sup>28</sup>

There is another sense, however, in which a speaker can be "off the hook" in a way that poses an apparent threat to MD. In some circumstances, it is practically impossible for an agent to face the normative consequences of their actions—so that they can be sure that they will not face the relevant "penalties of the social law", as Peirce puts it. For example, a chef may spit in the soup of an annoying customer and be sure that the customer will never notice. Similarly, someone may assert something false in a prank call from an isolated public phone, and be sure that they will never be identified. In both cases, the agents are *de facto* not sanctionable for the acts they committed. But *de iure* they are: In virtue of what they have done, were they to be caught, they would face some form of social sanction. Assertoric accountability (and DR) involves being sanctionable in this sense: *de iure*, rather than *de facto*; and *assertorically*, rather than *all things considered*.

<sup>27</sup>I owe this example to a helpful comment by an anonymous referee.

<sup>28</sup>Parallel observations have been made in relation to cases in which violating the norm of assertion is intuitively permissible, either because the violation is *excusable* or because the norm is overridden by other norms or concerns, like considerations of politeness (Reiland, 2021, fn. 17; Williamson, 1996, p. 489, 2023; but see Schechter, 2017 and Marsili & Wiegmann, 2021, section 5.2 for criticisms).

These distinctions come in handy to address a known objection to commitment-based accounts of assertion, namely “anonymous assertions”: Statements made anonymously on message boards or comment threads on the internet. These cases are particularly challenging because:

[W]hen it is mutually known by all parties that a claim was made under conditions of anonymity, this has a diminishing effect on the sort of (assertion-generated) expectations that speakers and hearers are entitled to have of one another (Goldberg, 2013, p. 135).

Goldberg notes that anonymity undermines expectations of reliability and trustworthiness: “Anonymity saps assertion of some of ‘the promise’ of epistemic authoritativeness that ordinary (non-anonymous) assertion conveys” (2013, p. 149). Pagin (2014) concludes from these observations that anonymous assertions are made “without, or with hardly any, speaker commitments”, posing a challenge for commitment-based accounts.

However, this objection overlooks the distinction between *de iure* and *de facto* responsibilities. Whether a speaker is accountable for what they said depends on whether we are entitled to criticise them for making a false assertion, independently of whether we are in fact able to do it. Clearly, we are entitled to criticise anonymous assertors for the falsity of what they say: Were we to discover their identity, we could rightly blame them for making a false claim. Although *de facto* we may be unable to sanction them, *de iure* we are entitled to do so. Hence, anonymous speakers are committed to their assertions.

The proposed account of commitment also helps explain *why* (as noted by Goldberg) anonymity undermines the expectations of trustworthiness and reliability that assertions ordinarily convey. In Section 2.1, we saw that assertoric accountability plays an important role in sustaining expectations of reliability: The risk of sanctions provides the speaker with a *subjective* reason to try their best to only assert the truth, and this in turn decreases the frequency of false assertions. This subjective reason will not arise when the anonymous speaker knows that they are not *de facto* sanctionable, since in these cases speaking falsely *de facto* comes at no price. When the audience knows that the speaker knows this, they lose a positive reason to trust the speaker (one that is present in ordinary conversations), and this is what undermines (or at least reduces) the audience's epistemic entitlement to take an anonymous assertor's word for it.

## 5 | ASSERTION, COMMITMENT AND TRUTH

Let us recapitulate. Understanding the nature of assertion is a fundamental step in the study of human communication, and this article offered a fine-grained analysis of what assertion is. Unlike other accounts of assertion, this account reliably tracks our intuitions about whether a given utterance is an assertion: It is, as far as we have seen, intensionally accurate. The definition here developed is original in that it incorporates both a descriptive component (assertions present their propositional content as true) and a normative one (accountability and DR).

The proposed account of assertion also yields an indirect solution to other contemporary philosophical questions, such as those raised in the debate on the definition of lying, where significant disagreement revolves around the characterisation of the underlying notion of assertion (Mahon, 2015; Stokke, 2013). A fine-grained description of the distinctive responsibilities engendered by acts of assertion (such as the one outlined in Section 3.3) is also relevant to

disciplines that focus on normative aspects of communication. This includes *social epistemology*, where assertoric obligations are taken to play a central role in grounding testimonial knowledge transmission (Goldberg, 2015; Hinchman, 2013; Moran, 2005) and *linguistics*, where illocutionary commitments are studied both theoretically and empirically (e.g., Faller, 2019; Geurts, 2019; Holmes, 1984; Kissine, 2008; Mazzarella et al., 2018). In sum, the proposed view has the potential to help advance a variety of ongoing scholarly inquiries—in particular in philosophy of language and pragmatics, where talk of assertion is commonplace and this notion often taken for granted, but rarely explained in fine detail.

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