Against the identification of assertoric content with compositional value

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Abstract This essay investigates whether the things we say are identical to the things our sentences mean. It is argued that these theoretical notions should be distinguished, since assertoric content does not respect the compositionality principle. As a paradigmatic example, Kaplan’s formal language LD is shown to exemplify a failure of compositionality. It is demonstrated that by respecting the theoretical distinction between the objects of assertion and compositional values certain conflicts between compositionality and contextualism are avoided. This includes the conflict between eternalism and the semantics of tense, the embedding problems for contextualism about epistemic modals and taste claims, and the conflict between direct reference and the semantics of bound pronouns (and monstrous operators). After presenting the theoretical picture which distinguishes assertoric content from compositional semantic value, some objections to the picture are addressed. In so doing, the objection from King (Philos Perspect 17(1):195–246, 2003) stemming from apparent complications with the interaction of temporal expressions and attitude reports is assessed and shown to be non-threatening.

Keywords Assertoric content · Compositionality · Contextualism · Propositions · Direct reference · Monsters · Embedding · Semantics

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The best theory of compositional semantics should cohere with the general theory of speech acts, including the theory of assertion, and the broader systematization of linguistic communication. This is so, even though the way in which these disciplines fit together and interact is not always clearly articulated. Something would clearly have gone wrong if our theory of what our sentences mean didn’t fit naturally with our theory of the things we say by the act uttering those sentences.

Roughly speaking, when someone makes an assertion by uttering a sentence $\phi$, they offer up some information for their audience to consider.\(^1\) This information that is offered up is the content of the utterance, i.e. it is *what is said* by the act of uttering the sentence $\phi$. Let’s call what is said by the utterance of a sentence the assertoric content of a sentence. I intend “the assertoric content of a sentence (in a context)” to mean roughly the same thing as the following phrases\(^2\):

- der von einem Satz ausgedrückte Gedanke (Frege 1892)
- the proposition expressed by an utterance (Moore 1927)
- “what is said” by an utterance (Kaplan 1989a)
- what an assertion adds to the common ground (Stalnaker 1978\(^3\))
- the propositional content of an utterance (Lewis 1980)
- the information content contained in a sentence (Salmon 1986)
- the proposition expressed by a sentence (King 2007).

The assertoric content of a sentence somehow depends on the expressions that are its syntactic constituents. For example, an utterance of ‘Some monkeys have tails’ asserts something very different from an utterance of ‘Some donkeys have tails’—and anyone who knows what an utterance of ‘Some monkeys have tails’ asserts and understands ‘donkey’, will thereby know what an utterance of ‘Some donkeys have tails’ asserts. So by systematically substituting meaningful words into grammatical forms we are able to produce infinitely many novel sentences, the utterances of which are understandable by members of our linguistic community.

These phenomena call for an explanation. The hypothesis that our natural languages are compositional is standardly thought to be the best explanation. The principle of compositionality can be glossed as the principle that the meaning of any complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and the way they are put together. This is more carefully defined as follows.

\(^1\) I want to stay neutral on the nature of assertion here—except for the claim that assertions have content. One can substitute in their favorite theory of assertion, e.g. to make an assertion is to propose to add information to the common ground, or it is to undertake a commitment to the truth of a proposition, or it is to express an attitude toward a propositional content. For a theorist who denies a role for the theoretical notion of the content of assertion, the questions raised in this essay regarding the relationship between compositionality and assertoric content will not be so pressing. Nevertheless, there is still the question about how compositional semantics relates to the act of assertion.

\(^2\) Likewise, this is what Yalcin (2007) means by “the informational content of an assertion” and what Egan (2007) means by “the content of an assertive utterance” and what Stanley (1997) and Ninan (2010) mean by “assertoric content”.

\(^3\) Roughly, the common ground of a conversation is the set of mutually (and knowingly) presupposed propositions. And the speech act of assertion has the effect of updating the common ground of the conversation by adding the content of the assertion.