ABSTRACT. Illocutionary force and semantic content are widely held to occupy utterly different categories in at least two ways: (1) any expression serving as an indicator of illocutionary force must be without semantic content, and (2) no such expression can embed. A refined account of the force/content distinction is offered here that (a) does the explanatory work that the standard distinction does, while, in accounting for the behavior of a range of parenthetical expressions, (b) shows neither (1) nor (2) to be compulsory. The refined account also motivates a development of the “scorekeeping model” of conversation, helps to isolate a distinction between illocutionary force and illocutionary commitment, and reveals one precise respect in which meaning is only explicable in terms of use.

1. WITTGENSTEIN’S BOXER AND THE CHEMICAL ANALOGY

Students of language in the tradition of Frege, Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle sometimes use a chemical analogy as a guide to the relation between propositional content and illocutionary force. In chemical parlance, a radical is a group of atoms normally incapable of independent existence, whereas a functional group is the grouping of those atoms in a compound that is responsible for certain of the compound’s properties. Analogously, a proposition is itself communicatively inert; for instance, merely expressing the proposition that snow is white is not to make a move in a “language game”. Rather, such moves are only made by putting forth a proposition with an illocutionary force such as assertion, conjecture, command, etc. The chemical analogy gains further plausibility from the fact that just as a chemist might isolate radicals held in common among various compounds, the student of language may isolate a common element held among ‘Is the door shut?’, ‘Shut the door!’, and ‘The door is shut’. This common element is the proposition that the door is shut, queried in the first sentence, commanded to be made true in the second, and asserted in the third. According to the chemical analogy, then:

Illocutionary force : propositional content :: functional group : radical

Further, just as the grouping of a set of atoms is not itself another atom or set of atoms, so too the forwarding of a proposition with a particular
Illocutionary force is not itself a further component of propositional content. One can, for instance, assert a proposition without saying that one is doing so. The chemical metaphor can also be developed consistently with the existence of so-called free radicals, which can occur outside of any compound. For one who utters an indicative sentence on stage expresses a proposition, but rather than calling actors professional liars we may construe them as merely pretending to perform speech acts in the course of playing their parts. So construed, thespians express propositions but do not put them forth with any illocutionary force, and this corresponds to chemical radicals existing outside of any compound.\(^1\)

The chemical analogy is a useful guide for our account of communication. It helps to guard against the notorious “ing/ed” ambiguity in such concepts as judgment, belief, statement and question. It also highlights the importance of speech acts for linguistic inquiry, and enables us to see not only that language can be put to a variety of purposes other than to assert what is the case, but also that a single bit of contentful language may subserve a variety of communicative tasks. The aim of this essay is to consider whether on the strength of the chemical analogy or any other relevant considerations, it can be shown that contentful language is essentially “forceless”. A proposition’s aptness to be put forth with any of a variety of illocutionary forces has been thought by some to imply that a bit of contentful language cannot help determine the force with which the sentence in which it occurs is forwarded; otherwise, that expression’s occurrence would evidently constrain the variety of forces with which that sentence can be conveyed. For instance, contrary to initial appearances, ‘I assert that’ does not help determine the force with which ‘I assert that S’ is put forth; if it did then one could not wonder whether one asserts that S, nor suppose that one does so as in ‘If I assert that S, then someone does’.\(^2\) It would seem instead that if an expression, or group of features such as initial capital, final period, and certain non-syntactic features of the context of utterance, indicate the force with which a proposition is being put forth, then that expression or group of features cannot also have semantic content. If they did, then their content would appear to contribute to the content of the proposition of which they are a part; in that case the question would then arise, with what force is that embedding proposition being put forth?

\(^1\) This point is further developed in Green 1997.
\(^2\) In what follows, unless indicated otherwise I shall adopt the following nomenclature: S, S', etc., are sentences; A, B, A\(_i\), B\(_i\) etc., are propositional contents; \(\alpha\), \(\beta\), etc., are speakers.