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Assertion in Speech-act Theory

2.1 Introduction

Although, as we will see later in this book, the notion of assertoric character is employed, tacitly or otherwise, in the study of inference and representation, assertion is first and foremost an action. Accordingly, we do well to start with an overview of assertion as it has been viewed in speech-act theory. This will serve a number of purposes. First, it will highlight issues relating to assertion to be discussed in later chapters, such as the relationship between assertion, truth and belief. Second, it will allow discussion of certain fundamental issues in some depth. One of these concerns which features of assertion – informativeness, truth-commitment, belief expression, explicitness – are central to its analysis. Another is whether assertion should be analysed as a sister of other illocutionary acts, or whether it is more fundamental, and therefore correctly seen as a superordinate species of act.

The chapter begins by distinguishing two types of speech-act theorist. Their two approaches are then discussed, and the work of major players in each camp compared and contrasted in some detail. I end the chapter by highlighting the points raised in this chapter that will be important in the remainder of the book.

2.2 Two types of speech-act theorist

Meaning theorists with an interest in speech acts tend to fall into two camps. For one, speech-act theory is a component of a theory of linguistic meaning, one that is designed to work in conjunction with a truth-conditional account of some notion of ‘core meaning’. As we will...
see, such approaches tend to treat the proposition as this core element of meaning, viewing assertion as being just one of the many things that speakers can do with it. For these theorists, the key question concerning assertion tends to be how this act is to be distinguished from others such as ordering, promising and questioning. Probably the best known member of this group is Searle, who is justly considered one of the founders of speech-act theory, so we’ll call this camp the ‘traditional speech-act theorists’.

But of course, while a founder, Searle is not the father of speech-act theory. That mantle rests with Austin (1962/1975), who, like Wittgenstein (1958), argued that philosophers of language had placed too much emphasis on the descriptive – or propositional – element of declarative sentences, with the result that they ignored the uses to which sentences of all types were put and hence failed to take into account a crucial social element of linguistic meaning. For those in the second camp, this social element of meaning is not merely crucial, but central: rather than viewing speech act-theory as a bolt-on to truth-conditional accounts, they argue that linguistic meaning should be explained in terms of the uses to which linguistic forms are put. Detailed and well articulated theories of this type have been proposed by Brandom, Alston and Barker. Because they see speech acts as fundamental to linguistic meaning, we’ll call them ‘speech-act fundamentalists’.¹ They are of particular interest here because, unlike the traditionalists, they tend to give special status to assertion, claiming (in the case of Brandom and Barker, though not Alston) that other sentential illocutionary acts must be understood in terms of assertion.

We begin by looking at the traditionalists.

2.2.1 Speech-act traditionalists and assertion

2.2.1.1 Individuating assertion: truth, belief and informativeness

The view of assertion as a sister, rather than the mother, of other illocutionary acts has its roots in Austin’s rejection of the distinction he introduced, at the start of *How to Do Things with Words*, between constative and performative utterances. Austin first suggested that utterances might usefully be divided into two types, depending on whether they can be aptly judged true or false. Those that can, he termed ‘constatives’. Those that cannot, he suggested, have their meaning in the acts that they can be used to perform, hence the term ‘performative’. Examples of these included explicit performatives such as (1) and (2), which share with constatives declarative word order, and acts performed using