

Assertion, commitment, and deniability

This is a project in the philosophy of language and epistemology. It focuses on the role of commitment in speech act theory and more precisely on assertoric commitment, i.e., commitment associated with the act of assertion.

Assertion is probably the speech act that is most commonly made. People usually assert when they want to convey some information to their interlocutors. Assertion is typically characterized in one of the four ways: (i) as an expression of a belief and an intention that the audience believe what was uttered, (ii) as a move defined by constitutive norms (e.g., knowledge norm says that you should assert that p only if you know that p), (iii) as a proposal to add the content of assertion to the common ground or (iv) as a commitment to the truth of what was uttered. This last approach assumes that assertion can be defined in terms of commitments undertaken by the speaker; the precise nature of those commitments is a matter of controversy.

In my project I'd like to focus on the commitment-based view of assertion and in particular I propose to theoretically investigate the following interrelated issues:

1. The most adequate commitment-based view of assertion and its comparison to its rival common-ground-based view;
2. Indirect assertions, that is assertions that are not directly made. Commonly it is assumed that assertions can only be direct. I'd like to investigate the consequences of the assumption that there are indirect assertions. So, for instance, one can argue that if you say ironically "Jane is a fine friend" you assert (and not merely imply) that she's a terrible friend and do not assert that she's a fine friend.
3. Proper characterization of deniability and the relation of commitment to deniability. Roughly speaking deniability has to do with the fact that in some cases speakers can plausibly deny that they have said something. Deniability has been mentioned already by Bach and Harnish in their seminal book on speech acts but it has become a subject of detailed study relatively recently and so far, it is not even clear how it should be understood and how exactly it relates to other phenomena, such as e.g., cancellability. My hypothesis is that it is most fruitful to interpret deniability in relation to assertoric commitment.
4. The relation between asserting and insinuating: often it is argued that they differ in that assertion is direct and insinuation is not, so introducing indirect assertions makes it necessary to revisit this distinction;
5. The role of commitments undertaken by speakers in distinguishing lying from misleading: three different commitment-based views of lying have been proposed recently, each of which has different consequences for the lying – misleading distinction. I intend to investigate whether the account I'll propose will be able to shed new light on that distinction.
6. The relation between a commitment view of assertion and the view of testimony as a source of knowledge. One of the reasons why epistemologists are interested in deniability is that it seems to threaten the possibility of transmitting and gaining knowledge through testimony. I'll study testimony from the point of view of philosophy of language and assess whether defining what is said in terms of commitment might allay these worries.

In my opinion the notion of commitment lies at the heart of all these diverse phenomena (assertion, indirect assertion, insinuation, deniability, lying and testimony based on telling) and its proper interpretation is a key to better understanding all of them. Adequate account of assertoric commitments and their relation to those other issues can make it possible to better grasp the mechanisms behind our everyday conversations (both cooperative and adversarial). It can help to properly distinguish insinuating from asserting, lying from mere misleading and it can give us tools to argue that our interlocutor isn't in fact entitled to claim deniability and oppose them when they insist that that they didn't say what we think they did.

The project will have impact on philosophy of language, epistemology and social philosophy.