

Assertion and its Social Significance: An Introduction

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Abstract This paper offers a brief survey of the philosophical literature on assertion, presenting each contribution to this special issue within the context of the contemporary debate in which it intervenes. The discussion is organised into three thematic sections. The first one concerns the nature of assertion and its relation with assertoric commitment – the distinctive responsibility that the speaker undertakes in virtue of making a statement. The second section considers the epistemic significance of assertion, exploring the role that assertion plays in the transmission of knowledge, the epistemic constraints that regulate it, and its relation with truth. The third section deals with communicative content that goes beyond what is literally asserted: implicatures, metaphors and expressive meaning.

Keywords: Assertion, Commitment, Implicature, Expressive Meaning

0. Introduction

This special issue of RIFL investigates the speech act of assertion, with a focus on its role(s) and effects in our discursive practices and social relationships. Assertion is arguably the most studied speech act in philosophy of language and linguistics. It is the standard linguistic tool to share information and make claims about how things are. It is thus unsurprising that philosophers of language, together with epistemologists and scholars from other fields of research, put so much emphasis on it. To date, there is still much controversy about the nature of assertion (including its normative status, and how it differs from other illocutionary acts). Furthermore, scholars are becoming increasingly interested in the various ways in which assertions can convey truth-conditional content, such as implicatures and presuppositions, as well as evaluative and expressive meaning.

In what follows, we will offer a brief introduction to some philosophical issues concerning assertion, presenting each contribution to the special issue within the context of the contemporary debate in which it intervenes. The present discussion is organised into three thematic sections. The first one focuses on the nature of assertion

and the distinctive responsibilities it engenders. The second section considers the epistemic significance of assertion, exploring the role that assertion plays in the transmission of knowledge, the epistemic constraints that regulate it, and its relation with truth. The third section deals with communicative content that goes beyond what is literally asserted: implicatures, metaphors and expressive meaning.

1. Assertion and Commitment

What is assertion? According to a relatively standard view, to assert is to undertake a specific set of responsibilities, to ‘commit’ yourself to the truth of a proposition. Being committed to the truth of a proposition, in turn, typically involves being criticisable if that proposition is false, and/or being responsible to defend your claim in response to legitimate challenges. This view has been defended by scholars from different traditions¹ and represents one of the most influential ways to model the illocutionary import of asserting a proposition.

While there is relatively wide consensus that undertaking this sort of responsibilities is *necessary* for asserting a proposition (but see Hiller 2013), there are some known objections to the idea that becoming committed to a proposition p is sufficient for asserting that p . To articulate, philosophers have identified two objections to the sufficiency of this analysis. First, there is the risk of conflating assertion with more indirect acts (Marsili 2015). Unlike implicatures, presuppositions and indirect speech acts, assertions are typically regarded as explicit, direct illocutions (Alston 2000: 116; Stainton 2016, but cf. also Garcia-Carpintero 2019, Viebahn 2019). Defining assertion in terms of commitment will not make justice to this intuition, because there are ways to become committed to a proposition indirectly, by merely conveying it. Consider:

(1) My sister is a trapeze artist

In uttering (1), I commit myself (in the relevant sense) to the proposition that ‘my sister is a trapeze artist’, and to the proposition that ‘I have a sister’. However, while I have asserted that my sister is a trapeze artist, I have merely presupposed that I have a sister. This problem can be solved by amending the definition so that you assert if and only if you are committed to the truth of a proposition by saying or expressing it (Searle 1969). But this pushes the problem only a little further, as we now need a criterion to determine which content counts as expressed and which does not.

A second objection to the sufficiency of commitment-based analyses was raised by Pagin (2004, 2009), who argues that these definitions entail that it should be possible to assert that p by uttering a sentence of the following form:

(2) I hereby commit myself to the following proposition: (p) salad is healthy

Assuming that the required felicity conditions for committing oneself to a proposition (whichever they are) are satisfied, in uttering (2) one will become committed to the proposition that salad is healthy (p) – so that definitions based on commitment would count this utterance as an assertion that p . Since (2) is clearly not an assertion of p ,

¹ Peirce (CP 2.315, 5.29-31, 5.43-5.47, MS 280.25-26, 517.42-44, 36.104-5); Toulmin (1958); Searle (1969, 1975); Hamblin (1970, 1971); Brandom (1983, 1994); Searle and Vanderveken (1985); Watson (1996), Green (1999, 2000, 2007, 2017); Alston (2000); MacFarlane (2003, 2005, 2011), Rescorla (2009), Krifka (2014), Marsili (2015), Shapiro (2018), Labinaz (2018); For a broader overview, see Brabanter and Dandale 2008.

Pagin's argument goes, undertaking commitment to a proposition is not sufficient for asserting it.

In *When Alston met Brandom: Defining Assertion*, Matthew Cull offers a novel solution to deal with both objections. Cull defends the following definition of assertion:

U asserted that p in uttering S iff both:

- (i) S explicitly presents the proposition that p, or S is a prosentence anaphorically referring to a sentence that explicitly presents p.*
- (ii) U endorses that p, offering license to make inferences from p*
- (iii) U commits to p, undertaking a justificatory responsibility for p.*

This proposal incorporates insights from the work of William Alston and Robert Brandom, both of whom have advanced commitment-based accounts of assertion. Condition (i) draws on Alston's proposal, and requires that the proposition is either presented explicitly or anaphorically. This condition deals with the first problem, and provides a fine-grained criterion to determine which content is explicit enough to count as asserted – excluding presuppositions (as they are neither explicit nor anaphorical) and implied content more generally. But while Alston maintains that assertoric content can include elliptic content, Cull convincingly argues that including *any* kind of ellipsis would let in too much, allowing for some presuppositions and implicatures to be incorrectly classified as asserted. To prevent this, Cull narrows this criterion down to a specific kind of ellipsis, namely anaphoric ellipsis.

Condition (ii) and (iii) are rather inspired by Brandom's work, and spell out what it means for a speaker to assert that *p*. Articulating the notion of commitment in this way addresses Pagin's worry, because if one substitutes the word 'commitment' with (ii) and (iii) in (2), the resulting performative expression is indeed (Cull argues) intuitively an assertion that *p*. The proposed definition is thus able to address all the objections to the sufficiency of commitment-based accounts, offering a novel solution to some known challenges to commitment-based definitions of assertion.

Different authors have written on the notion of commitment, for a variety of purposes. One of the most influential analyses of the distinctive responsibilities engendered by assertoric speech acts is the one advanced by Robert Brandom in his 1994 volume *Making it Explicit*. According to Brandom (1994: 174-175), to assert is not only to commit oneself to respond to appropriate challenges (undertaking justificatory responsibility), but also to provide a license to reassert what one says. When a speaker is treated as making a successful assertion (that is, when her assertion is either unchallenged² or appropriately justified in response to a challenge), the audience inherits her entitlement, which licenses them to reassert the original claim (and its immediate consequences). When they rely on this license and so reassert that claim (or its immediate consequences), they can defer the justificatory responsibility back to the speaker, a responsibility which would otherwise be undertaken by them.

In *Asserzione, riasserzione e responsabilità discorsiva* [Assertion, reassertion and discursive responsibility], Vaccargiu argues that this account of the deference mechanism associated with assertion is defective, because it holds that the audience inherits the same entitlement as the speaker who has made the original claim, irrespective of whether they have reasons to doubt the speaker's reliability. Since the audience inherits the very same entitlement as the speaker, it would be natural to expect them to

² According to Brandom (1994: 177-178), when an assertion is unchallenged, the speaker is acknowledged as having entitlement to it (at least, until the hearer has some reason for thinking otherwise).

undertake the same task-responsibility. According to Brandom, though, the task-responsibilities of speakers and reasserting audiences are different: while the speaker must provide further claims in support of her assertion, it is enough for the audience to defer to the speaker's authority.

Vaccargiu argues that, since speakers and reasserting audiences are undertaking different task-responsibilities, they should be taken to be performing two different kinds of speech acts. He accounts for this difference by referring to what Kukla and Lance have called the 'normative positions' that a speaker and her audience occupy when they are involved in a discursive practice (see Kukla and Lance 2009: 155-163). In making an assertion, the speaker puts forward a claim as true and so commits herself to defending the claim if appropriately challenged. Those reasserting this claim only endorse the speaker's commitment; that is, they acknowledge that what the speaker has asserted is true, without undertaking any specific task-responsibility. Vaccargiu adds that under certain conditions a reassertion can count as a genuine assertion. This happens when those reasserting the original claim are able to vindicate the inherited entitlement to it by making other claims that are inferentially related to it. But when the original assertion is left unchallenged and the audience has no reasons in support of it, there is no alternative for the audience but to reassert the original claim by deferring to the speaker's authority. These reassertions are not genuine assertions, because those reasserting that claim only endorse the commitment expressed by the original assertion, without undertaking a genuine task-responsibility.

2. Assertion and Epistemology

Assertoric responsibility comes in different varieties. We have seen that the notion of 'assertoric commitment' captures the responsibilities that a speaker has *as a consequence* of making an assertion. But this is only one side of the coin: linguists and philosophers agree that there are also normative constraints that apply 'upstream' (MacFarlane 2011), *before* making an assertion, regulating which assertions are appropriate to make and which are not. To give a simple example, we expect other speakers not to lie: the norms governing linguistic interaction forbid assertions that are insincere.

But warranted assertion seems to require something more than mere sincerity. For instance, a speaker can be criticised for asserting something sincerely, if she is aware that her belief is based on a wild guess, wishful thinking, mere gut feeling, or held despite knowing that there is solid evidence to the contrary. This suggests that saying what you believe is not sufficient for making a proper assertion. To offer a systematic theory of warranted assertability is to answer the following question: given our mutual conversational and epistemic expectations, under which conditions is a given proposition assertable?

In his 1996 paper *Assertion and Knowledge*, Timothy Williamson introduced the hypothesis that a proposition's assertability may be modelled around the satisfaction of a simple rule: one must assert that p only if p has C , where C is some epistemic property (Williamson 1996: 492). This hypothesis has triggered a lively debate as to which property exactly C is – that is, as to which property makes a proposition assertable. The most influential proposals identify C with the property of being true (Weiner 2005; Whiting 2012), known by the speaker (Williamson 1996; Derose 2002; Hawthorne 2004), or reasonably believed by her (Douven 2006; Lackey 2007; Kvanvig 2009).

Between all the available views, the most influential is the one that takes that *knowledge* to be the norm of assertion. This in spite of the fact that the knowledge account is

known to be subject to a wide array of unaddressed objections and counterexamples³, in particular when compared with competing views like the justification rule. One prominent counterexample levelled against the knowledge norm of assertion is represented by ‘selfless assertions’. Lackey defines them as follows:

An assertion that p is selfless if and only if:

1. *a subject, for purely non-epistemic reasons, does not believe that p;*
2. *despite this lack of belief, the subject is aware that p is very well supported by all of the available evidence; and*
3. *because of this, the subject asserts that p without believing that p* (Lackey 2007: 599).

Lackey’s most commonly cited example of selfless assertion involves a creationist teacher, Stella, who is aware that evolutionary theory is supported by the best available evidence, but firmly believes that creationism (that denies evolutionary theory) is true, on the basis of her religious faith. Most philosophers agree that if she were to tell her students that (3), her assertion would be appropriate, despite the fact that she believes it to be false.

(3) *Homo Sapiens* evolved from *Homo Erectus*.

This is a problem for the knowledge account of assertion, since on this view an assertion is proper only if the speaker knows it to be true, and therefore only if the speaker believes it. Several strategies have since been developed (Engel 2008, Montminy 2013, Turri 2014, Milić 2017) to attempt to reconcile these cases with the knowledge norm of assertion.

Grzegorz Gaszczyk’s *Are Selfless Assertions Hedged?* contends that these strategies are unsuccessful. He focuses on an influential response by Ivan Milić, according to which selfless assertions can be interpreted as being under the scope of a covert evidential. Milić’s view is that, in some conversational contexts (more specifically, those in which selfless assertions are proper), making an assertion that *p* actually amounts to making a hedged assertion of the form ‘*According to evidence E, p*’. This would explain why Stella’s utterance is proper: in her context, she is merely asserting that *Homo Sapiens* evolved from *Homo Erectus* *according to the evidence accepted by the scientific community*, so that she is not actually asserting something she believes to be false.

Gaszczyk shows that this account of selfless assertions is wanting in a number of ways: it does not offer general criteria to determine in which contexts selfless assertions are so hedged, nor it specifies which specific hedging is supposed to be in place in any given context. Furthermore, this reading is shown to be sometimes inconsistent with the way in which we actually interpret and assess these utterances. If one wants to show that selfless assertions pose no challenge to the knowledge norm, Gaszczyk argues, postulating covert hedges will not do the job.

We have seen that making an assertion that is fully cooperative requires meeting some epistemic standard. But sometimes speakers wishfully ignore this sort of assertoric norms, and exploit our mutual trust to manipulate and deceive their interlocutors. Especially in the last twenty years, a lively academic debate has emerged that aims to

³ See Douven (2006), Lackey (2007), Pelling (2012), Hill and Schetcher (2007), Brown (2010), Levin, Gerken (2011), Carter (2017), Pagin (2016), Marsili (2018), Kel and Simion (2018); for empirical objections, see also Reuter and Brossell (2018), Kneer (2018), Marsili and Wiegmann (in preparation).

offer a systematic analysis of dishonest communication. A lot of attention has been devoted to drawing conceptual distinctions: much recent work attempts to determine under which conditions an utterance is a lie (Fallis 2009; Carson 2010; Fallis 2013; Stokke 2018; Fallis 2012), an assertion insincere (Marsili 2014, 2016, 2018; Dynel 2016; Wiegmann *et al.* 2016; Krauss 2017; Benton 2018; Pepp 2018), and whether lying necessarily involves an intention to deceive (Carson 1988; Carson, Wokutch and Murrmann 1982; Lackey 2013; Fallis 2015, 2018; Krstić 2018). Another important debate concerns the ethics of lying, addressing longstanding questions such as what makes lying morally wrong (Korsgaard 1988; Bok 1978; Faulkner 2007), and whether other forms of deception, like merely misleading (Adler 1997; Saul 2012; Pepp 2018), are preferable to lying.

In *The responsibility of misled people*, Franca D'Agostini intervenes in the latter debate. Here the concept of deceptive lying is opposed to the concept of misleading: while lies deceive 'directly' (by literally saying something they believe to be false), misleading statements only deceive 'indirectly' (by saying something that is literally true, but that implies or conveys something that you believe to be false). There is wide consensus that these two terms individuate two different concepts (but cf. Meibauer, 2011, 2014), but authors disagree as to whether deceiving by lying is preferable to deceiving by misleading⁴.

D'Agostini critically reviews some arguments in support of the thesis that misleading is morally preferable to deceptive lying, to focus on one in particular: the idea that if you get deceived by misleading statement (as opposed to a lie) you are partially responsible for being deceived. The idea is that successful misleading (but not lying) requires the hearer to draw inferences to reconstruct what the speaker means beyond what is literally said, and in venturing into believing these inferred propositions (rather than sticking to what is literally said) the hearer actively participates in her own deception. D'Agostini dubs this argumentative strategy a 'victim blaming' (VB) strategy, since part of the responsibility for deception is blamed on the victim.

To test this putative asymmetry between lying and misleading, D'Agostini proposes a methodic approach that she names 'responsibility calculus'. For any given utterance in a context, this method allows one to quantify the extent to which the intended audience is responsible for believing each of the propositions that the speaker conveys in making a statement. As it is construed, responsibility calculus shows that lying and misleading are not asymmetrical in terms of hearer responsibility. Since there is no substantial asymmetry, VB arguments about misleading (that accept responsibility asymmetry as a premise) fail.

There is a close relation between the notions of assertion and truth. Some philosophers of language have appealed to their interconnection when defining assertion (e.g., Frege 1982; Wright 1992), and indeed, many would agree that when making an assertion one presents its content as true. Although we can make assertions about anything we want, telling the truth can be risky, especially when our (public) assertions run counter to the claims made by those in power. Michel Foucault has worked on this issue, and attempted to weigh up the consequences of speaking truth to the powerful. He describes the specific kind of speech (or verbal) activity performed in this situation as "parrhesia" (borrowing the term from Greek literature).

In *Asserire il vero. L'atto parrhesiastico nell'analisi foucaultiana dei discorsi* [Asserting the truth. Parrhesiastic acts in Foucault's discourse analysis], Deborah De Rosa deals with this

⁴ Three main positions are available in the debate: that misleading is defeasibly *better* (Strudler 2009; Webber 2013), *equivalent* (Adler 1997; Williams 2002; Saul 2012), or *worse* (Rees 2014) than lying.

Foucauldian concept. She first considers how Foucault characterizes the parrhesiastic act and then looks at its function within his discourse analysis, particularly with reference to its role in the dynamics of power and subjectivation. Foucault (1985: 19) conceives of parrhesia as «a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)». Simply telling the truth does not constitute a parrhesiastic act *per se*: there are certain conditions which need to be satisfied for it to be considered as such. Firstly, a parrhesiastic act requires that the speaker authentically believes that what she is asserting is genuinely true. Secondly, a parrhesiastic act must question the present state of affairs and therefore be potentially undesirable (either to oneself or to others). Thirdly, since the parrhesiastes considers telling the truth to be a duty, parrhesia requires having the courage to tell the truth despite the danger involved. Indeed, the parrhesiastic act always takes place when the speaker is in a position of inferiority with respect to its audience. This also means that a parrhesiastes cannot act in her own interest.

De Rosa points out that what makes the parrhesiastic act different from any other kind of speech activity is that it momentarily blocks those mechanisms of censorship that, according to Foucault, every society implements, at all times and in all places. Accordingly, the parrhesiastes is someone who (for a moment, the time of the act being made) steals, from those who hold it, the privileged or exclusive right to speak about topics belonging to “regions of speech” that are inaccessible to those who are not in power. De Rosa describes the parrhesiastic act as a ‘change of position’, a leap of the parrhesiastes that takes her where she is not supposed to be. And this act determines some important changes concerning the parrhesiastes’ relation with what she believes to be true, with her own life (in light of the danger she runs), and with others (because of the threat that her assertion constitutes). De Rosa concludes that in every historical context, speaking freely to those who hold political power can set off unpredictable chains of events, and bring about radical changes into how society is structured and power relations are organised.

Assertion occupies a central place in epistemology because of its role in the transmission of information between epistemic agents. Most epistemologists take assertion to be the central vehicle of testimonial knowledge transmission (Adler 2006, Hawley 2010). They are interested in whether it is rational to believe someone else’s assertions, and under which circumstances taking someone’s word for it can be a source of knowledge (if ever).

Roughly, epistemological theories of testimony can be divided into two factions: reductionist theories and non-reductionist ones. Reductionists⁵ argue that testimony is not a distinctive source of knowledge (like *perception* or *introspection*). If we gain knowledge from a bit of testimony, it is always because we have some non-testimonial reasons (typically inductive) for accepting that bit of testimony, so that what grounds our testimonial knowledge are ultimately these reasons: testimonial warrant is, on this view, *reducible* to them. Non-reductionists⁶ take this picture to be inaccurate, and argue that we have a *pro tanto* reason to believe what we are told, so that testimony constitutes a distinctive source of epistemic warrant, that cannot simply be reduced to memory, perception or induction.

⁵ Like Hume (1748); Fricker (1994, 1995); Van Cleve (2006).

⁶ See Reid (1785), Coady (1992), Burge (1993), Audi (1997), Goldman (1999), Goldberg (2010), Foley (2001).

In *Epistemic Internalism and the Challenge from Testimony*, Felix Bräuer argues that non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony is difficult to square with epistemic internalism, the popular view according to which you are epistemically justified in believing a proposition only if you have reflective access to your reasons for believing that proposition (cf. Pappas 2017). Between the accounts of testimonial justification available on the market, Bräuer identifies assurance theory (as championed by Moran 2005; Hinchman 2005; Faulkner 2011; McMyler 2011) as the only one able to meet this challenge. But Bräuer argues that this view rests on some controversial assumptions – amongst them, the idea that testimonial warrant can only ever be transmitted to the *intended recipient* of an assertion. Following the steps of Goldberg (2011, 2015) and Pelling (2013), he puts forward an alternative account, the ‘assertion view’, that grounds testimonial justification in the norm of assertion. Simply put, once one accepts the norm of assertion hypothesis (the idea that speakers should only make assertions they are in a sufficiently good epistemic position to do), it follows that hearers have a *prima facie* reason to believe what they are told – since they know that speakers are expected to meet the epistemic standard set by the norm of assertion. The resulting account provides the basis for a reconciliation between epistemic internalism and non-reductionism about testimony, that avoids some of the unpalatable commitments of the assurance view. More generally, Bräuer brings home the important point that one can be internalist about epistemic justification without thereby being committed to either reductionism or anti-reductionism, either by accepting some version of assurance theory, or by endorsing his own ‘assertion view’.

3. Beyond Assertion

Traditionally, the study of assertion has focused on its illocutionary force and its literal, truth-conditional meaning. But in making an assertion, a speaker is often able to communicate more than what is literally asserted: implicatures, metaphoric and ironic meaning, expressive and evaluative content. The third section of this special issue investigates communication that goes beyond what is literally asserted.

In *Assertion, Implicature, and Speaker Meaning*, Mitchell Green proposes a novel treatment of certain alleged implicatures in terms of more primitive forms of communication than speaker-meaning. Green focuses on the alleged quantity implicatures generated by cases like the South of France scenario (SF):

- A. Where does C live?
- B. Somewhere in the south of France.

In SF, B is less informative than he is expected to be, thus not only does he say that C lives somewhere in Southern France, but he also gets across the information that he is not in a position to say where C lives exactly.

Green challenges the Gricean framework⁷ by arguing that many cases of communication that are typically treated as norm violations (giving rise to quantity implicatures) are not instances of *overt* norm violations (and therefore do not give rise to implicatures at all). For Green, in SF B does not *intend* A to believe that he is not in a position to know where C lives, so he does not speaker-mean it; rather, he is willing to *allow* A to think so. Since B lacks the required reflexive communicative intention, B is not implicating that he does not know where C lives.

⁷ Grice (1989); see Neale (1992: 524 FF), Petrus (2010: 4-12), Bianchi (2013: 110), and Bach (2012: 54).

In addition to criticizing the Gricean analysis of SF and other cases of alleged implicatures, Green offers a novel analysis of the intermediate space between natural and non-natural meaning. Relying on insights from evolutionary studies on communication, he develops a new analysis that parsimoniously does without intentions to communicate and reflexive communicative intentions. Contents that so far have been treated as quantity implicatures should be seen either as manifestations, cues, signals, or expressions of the speaker's epistemic state, which do contribute to the conversation, for instance by contributing to update the Stalnakerian common ground. Drawing a parallelism with more primitive forms of communication, Green also reconstructs the journey from these simpler signalling systems to the current practice of assertion.

Like implicated propositional content, metaphoric meaning is typically taken to go beyond what is literally asserted. From a pragmatic perspective, when we speak metaphorically we say something that is literally false (e.g. 'Life is a rollercoaster'), thereby overtly violating Grice's first maxim of Quality («Do not say what you believe to be false», Grice 1989: 27), to communicate another proposition (in the example, something like 'Life involves plenty of ups and downs and twists and turns'). Many theories have been proposed over the years to account for how metaphors work (see, e.g., Black 1954; Davidson 1978; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Moran 1989; Searle 1979; Sperber and Wilson 2006).

In *An Inferential Articulation of Metaphorical Assertions*, Richmond Kwesi deals with the controversial issue of the relationship between metaphor and assertion. Some scholars indeed hold that a metaphorical statement cannot count as an assertion, since it is a non-descriptive use of language. According to this view, despite being expressed in the indicative form, metaphorical statements cannot be properly assessed as either true or false, nor do they have a propositional content (Davidson 1979; Lepore and Stone 2010). Lamarque and Olsen (1994), for example, hold that what is constitutive of metaphors is not that they state that something is the case, but rather that they invite the hearer to see things differently.

Against this family of theories, Kwesi argues that metaphorical statements can indeed be genuinely assertoric. He proposes an inferentialist account of metaphors, according to which they can be classified as assertions, and hence as moves within discursive practices, in a Brandomian sense (see Brandom 1994: 167-168). Within this framework, we can see that a speaker using a metaphor is doing more than simply inviting the hearer to see things differently. Kwesi convincingly shows that in resorting to metaphorical claims a speaker is recognized as undertaking certain commitments, and her interlocutors regard themselves as entitled to draw certain inferences from those claims. It follows that asserting and inferring are not peculiar to literal uses of language, but can also occur when language is used metaphorically.

Since metaphorical claims are literally false, however, it is unclear how they can play an appropriate role as premises and conclusions in reasoning. In order to account for their acceptability, Kwesi resorts to the notion of presupposition accommodation. Metaphors can be conceived as presuppositional markers, whose function is to suggest how an assertion is to be understood and interpreted. It is thus the process of accommodation that determines how metaphorical claims are involved in inferential practices and the properties of their involvement. Kwesi concludes that his account offers a suitable avenue for understanding metaphorical claims as having propositional content and so as being truth-assessable, in virtue of the fact they are involved in inferential practices where they can be appropriately used both as premises and as conclusions of arguments.

Language does not just describe state of affairs, but it is also capable of expressing attitudes. Linguistic items that are especially apt to do so are called ‘expressives’ (Kaplan 1999, Potts 2005). The research on expressives flourished impressively in the past couple of decades, with a particular focus on discriminatory language, especially slurs and kindred locutions (Schlenker 2007, Hom 2008, Jeshion 2013, Bolinger 2017, Nunberg 2018). Slurs are derogatory terms which convey a disparaging content towards a target group (a class of individuals). Most of the research on expressives – including the new works we present in this special issue – has been conducted on theoretical grounds; note, however, that a few works started investigating the expressive dimension of meaning on empirical grounds (see i.a. Cepollaro *et al.* 2019 and Sulpizio *et al.* 2019). Giuliano Torrenzo’s paper, *La teoria dell’indeterminatezza semantica degli slur* [The semantic indeterminacy theory of slurs] proposes a novel analysis of slurs in terms of semantic indeterminacy. Torrenzo first categorizes the existing accounts of slurs into three families: (i) strict content (à la Hom 2008), (ii) broad content (à la Potts 2005, Schlenker 2007, Cepollaro 2015) and (iii) no content theories (à la Anderson and Lepore 2013). He then proceeds to present a novel way to understand the relation between epithets and their associated evaluative meaning. His main claim is that the linguistic conventions underlying the derogatory power of slurs leave it *underdetermined* whether the derogatory content of epithets belongs to the truth-conditional content or whether it amounts to some non-truth-conditional content that signals the speaker’s attitude towards the target class. Torrenzo argues that the fact that slurs are often associated with derogation does not guarantee that the corresponding linguistic conventions are fully determined, nor does it conclusively establish whether and how epithets convey derogation. Indeterminacy is not the same thing as ambiguity: slurs are neither fully descriptive nor fully expressive, but this does not make them ambiguous expressions. Their indeterminacy resembles more the vagueness of certain predicates, such as ‘bald’, in that there is not one single admissible precisification that exactly corresponds to their meaning. Torrenzo concludes with some remarks on how the association between slurs and derogatory contents must have evolved.

Clearly, slurs do not cover the entire domain of expressive language. Just consider what Saka (2007) calls ‘particularistic insults’, like ‘jerk’ or ‘asshole’, or terms which can be used as insults but are not per se (e.g. ‘fascist’). In *Pejoratives: a classification of the connoted terms*, Frigerio and Tenchini explore the evaluative and expressive domains of meaning, by considering pejoratives and connoted locutions in general. The authors propose a new taxonomy of connoted terms, which also includes slurs, while situating them in a broader framework. For Frigerio and Tenchini, the relation between descriptive and non-descriptive meaning should be represented as a continuum with the descriptive and the connotative dimensions at its poles. Moreover, they identify four criteria or parameters which allow us to distinguish between different types of connoted terms: (i) polarity (positive, neutral or negative), (ii) kind of attitude (despise, mockery, condescendence, etc.), (iii) conveyed level of emotion (higher or lower), and finally (iv) vulgarity (harder to pin down, this category has to do with referring to taboo topics such as sex/defecation/other physiological functions).

These three thematic sections investigate crucial aspects of assertion. Several questions are left unanswered and many more are raised, but we hope that this special issue can offer a valuable contribution to this lively debate.

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