Paolo Labinaz*

Moorean utterances and the illocutionary dynamics of assertion

Abstract: This paper aims to show, in the light of an Austin-inspired speech-act theoretical framework, that there is a fundamental difference in the absurdity that occurs when one utters either the belief or the knowledge version of Moorean sentences (whose linguistic form amounts to "p, but I don't believe/know that p") and that this difference lies in the kind of speech act norms that their utterance overtly violates. To do so, I will consider the conversational patterns in which the two versions might emerge and, in particular, what linguistic reactions they might elicit in the audience. I will show that, while it is possible to imagine conversational patterns in which someone asserts something and also says that she cannot believe it to be true (although they seem to occur very rarely), the same cannot be said for the knowledge version. I shall argue that while in both cases, a speech act norm appears to be overtly violated, these violations regard different kinds of speech act norms, and thereby result in two different kinds of absurdity.

Keywords: assertion; conversational patterns; illocutionary dynamics; Moorean utterances

1 Introduction

This paper deals with Moore's paradox at the level of speech.[1] The paradox concerns the absurdity (and not only the infelicity) of uttering sentences of the form "p, but I do not believe/know that p" which might well be true.[2] Since it was

---

---

*Corresponding author: Paolo Labinaz**, Department of Humanities, University of Trieste, Trieste, Italy, E-mail: plabinaz@units.it

first formulated, this paradox has received considerable attention in the philosophy of language.[3] In particular, in the recent debate over the nature of assertion, it has been widely accepted that being able to adequately account for the absurdity of Moorean utterances is one of the most important criteria for adjudicating among competing accounts of the norm for assertion (see, e.g., McKinnon 2015: 125–137). So, if we consider the Moore paradox as arising at the level of speech, the challenge becomes explaining what is wrong with uttering sentences of that form. Some philosophers of language and epistemologists, such as Sydney Shoemaker (1988, 1995) and Uriah Kriegel (2004: 101–103), have roundly criticized this way of dealing with the paradox. In their view, the absurdity does not primarily arise from one's uttering a Moorean sentence, but from one's believing its content. In their view, the paradoxical nature of Moorean utterances descends from the Moorean beliefs they express. It is the so-called "priority thesis" of belief over assertion, according to which "[w]hat can be (coherently) believed constrains what can be (coherently) asserted" (Shoemaker 1995: 227, fn. 1). It follows from this that an account of the paradox at the level of thought should be more fundamental than one at the level of speech. For the purpose of this paper, I shall leave aside whether the absurdity of Moorean assertions should be explained in terms of the absurdity of Moorean beliefs.[4] Indeed, my aim is not to propose a complete account of the paradox. More modestly, I shall be considering from a speech act perspective what makes the difference between the absurdity of uttering the belief and the knowledge versions of Moorean sentences by examining the conversational patterns in which they might be involved. In particular, my aim is to use an Austin-inspired speech-act theoretical framework to show (i) that there is actually a fundamental difference between the absurdity that occurs when one utters one or the other version, which appears to be backgrounded in the debate on the assertion's norm, and (ii) that this difference lies in the kind of speech act norms overtly violated when they are uttered.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 explains what is so philosophically puzzling about Moore's paradox and why resolving the puzzle has been

---

whether my analysis can also be applied to the commissive version, whose linguistic form amounts to "p, but I believe/know that not p".

3 A general overview of the issues surrounding Moore's paradox as discussed by philosophers of language over the last fifty years and the competing positions regarding how to deal with these issues is presented in Green and Williams's Introduction to *Moore's Paradox* (see Green and Williams 2007b).

4 Be that as it may, it seems to me that there are convincing arguments, such as those presented by Atlas (2007), Williams (2013) and Woods (2018), to resist the priority thesis. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper, see Baker and Woods (2015: 413–420).

considered so significant by philosophers of language. Section 3 focuses on Williamson's normative account of the paradox, which is considered the most straightforward explanation of the absurdity of Moorean utterances in the debate over assertion's norm. Section 4 highlights an aspect that appears to be back-grounded in the analyses offered by Williamson and his rivals: indeed, if we look at the conversational patterns in which the belief and knowledge versions of Moorean sentences might be involved and in particular, at what linguistic reactions they might elicit in the audience, different explanations need to be provided to account for their absurdity. In an attempt to account for this difference, Section 5 provides an Austin-inspired speech-act theoretical framework (as elaborated in Sbisà 2018), which distinguishes different kinds of speech act norms in light of the role they play in the dynamics of illocution. In Section 6, I argue that, while a speech act norm appears to be overtly violated in uttering both the knowledge and the belief versions, these violations regard different kinds of speech act norms and therefore produce two different kinds of absurdity.

2 Moore's paradox

Imagine being away on vacation and calling a friend to ask what the weather is like back home. Surprisingly, she says either

(BV) It's raining, but I don't believe that it's raining

or

(KV) It's raining, but I don't know that it's raining.

In both cases, you would probably regard what she has told you as absurd. In fact, uttering a sentence like (BV) or (KV) is not simply infelicitous. It amounts to something more than an infelicitous assertion. Indeed, we can easily conceive of utterances that result as infelicitous assertions but are not in themselves absurd. Think of Austin's well-known example of someone's saying that there are fifty people in the next room when she (obviously) has no idea how many people are actually there: in saying that, the speaker is not in the position to make an assertion, but can instead be regarded as guessing or conjecturing (see Austin 1975: 137). Another more controversial example proposed by Austin is someone saying in this day and age "The present King of France is bald": in his view, since the presupposition triggered by "the present King of France" is not satisfied, the sentence uttered should be considered as an assertion merely purported, but not

successfully performed (see Austin 1975: 20).[5] Beyond the controversy surrounding their analysis, while both are instances of putative assertions that are infelicitous (or "null and void", to use the Austinian term), one would certainly not regard them as absurd. Uttering (BV) or (KV), on the other hand, is not only an infelicitous attempt to assert them, but also seems at least as absurd as asserting a semantic contradiction. The problem is that there is no contradiction between the two conjuncts of these sentences. In fact, it might be raining, while at the same time, the speaker attempting to assert them may be completely ignorant of the state of the weather. After all, the state of affairs in which a certain proposition is true, and a subject does not believe or know that proposition is true is quite common. So, the absurdity arises only when the same speaker asserts the first conjunct and at the same time says that she does not believe or know that the first conjunct is true. But if there is no contradiction in the content of what is asserted, wherein lies the absurdity of uttering the two conjuncts together? The philosophical puzzle of explaining this issue has become known as Moore's paradox. There have been many controversies over whether the paradox arises only at the level of speech or at the level of thought or at both levels, and so whether we should give explanatory priority to an explanation of Moorean absurdity at the level of speech or thought or whether these explanations are independent (for a thorough discussion of these issues, see the essays published in Green and Williams 2007a). At the same time, however, philosophers of language involved in these controversies mostly agree that proper treatment of the paradox should help us understand something more about the nature of assertions and beliefs. While the focus was initially on the absurdity in assertion, as evidenced by the writings of Wittgenstein (1969: 190–192) and Moore himself, orthodoxy nowadays requires that "[a]n explanation of the absurdity should first start with belief, on the assumption that once the absurdity in belief has been explained then this will translate into an explanation of the absurdity in assertion" (Williams 2013: 1118–1119). I do not want to get into this

---

5 Nowadays, most philosophers of language would reject the view that an assertion with at least one of its presuppositions unsatisfied is infelicitous, or more specifically, null and void (for this view, see Austin 1975: 20, 50–52, and also Strawson 1950). It is also true that for illocutionary acts other than assertion (think of a purported promise to lend you my Ferrari), the failure of one of the presuppositions (in the example, the presupposition triggered by "my Ferrari") blocks the bringing about of their characteristic illocutionary effects (in the example, you will not consider me as committed to fulfilling the promise). This might suggest that presupposition failure can also have a negative effect on the felicitous performance of an assertion. Of course, this issue needs to be clearly distinguished from the one regarding the role played by presuppositions in evaluating the appropriateness of an assertion in relation to the goal of the conversation (on that issue see, e.g., Domaneschi 2011). Since an in-depth discussion of the relationship between assertion and presupposition goes beyond the scope of this paper, I shall leave it for another occasion.

controversy here. Instead, I shall concentrate on how Moore's paradox has been used in the debate on the nature of assertion as a test for evaluating the explanatory power of competing proposals concerning its norm.

3 Williamson on Moorean utterances

Referring to a supposed norm governing assertion seems to be an effective way to handle Moorean absurdity (at least, at the level of speech). After all, the absurdity seems to arise from the fact that one's uttering the second conjunct appears to be pragmatically at odds with what one has done by uttering the first one, and if there is a norm that governs assertion, then it is precisely that norm that has been violated in uttering the second conjunct. In the recent debate on the nature of assertion, advocates of the various candidate norms have argued that their accounts are especially well-positioned to explain the absurdity of uttering (BV) and (KV). Of these normative accounts, Williamson's Knowledge Norm (henceforth, KN), according to which one should assert that p only if one knows that p, would appear to be the most suitable for explaining that (see Williamson 2000: 253–254). To be clear, this does not mean that there is no other proposal as regards which norm of assertion is capable of doing this job (see, e.g., Douven 2006: 473–476, 2009; Kvanvig 2009: 149–154). Still, they do not have the elegant and unified explanation of the source of the absurdity which (KN) has. For example, even Igor Douven (2006: 476), the proponent of the Rational Credibility Norm (RCN) and a fierce opponent of (KN)[6] has admitted that, although he considers (RCN) as capable of doing just as good a job as (KN) in accounting for the absurdity of Moorean utterances, the latter can provide a more straightforward explanation than (RCN) does. Indeed, proposals concerning the norm of assertion, such as (RCN), which impose weaker norms than (KN) on the making of it, usually have to appeal to other resources to explain what is wrong with the utterance of (BV) or (KV). For example, if the norm of assertion were a norm requiring that one should assert p only if one has warrant to assert it, then in some instances, asserting (KV) might be appropriate. Indeed, we could imagine cases in which one has adequate evidence to assert that it is raining, but at the same time, that such evidence may not be enough to hold that one knows it is raining. In order to explain what is wrong in asserting (KV), then, an advocate of that norm would probably have to rely on other norms, particularly on conversational ones, or on further considerations. This does not happen with (KN). Let us see why.

---

6 According to (RCN), one should assert p only if p is rationally credible to one (Douven 2006: 449).

Let us first consider (KV). If (KN) governs the practice of assertion, one must know both conjuncts to assert (KV) properly. But given the factivity of knowledge, one knows the first conjunct only if the second conjunct is false and conversely, one knows the latter only if the former is false. Thus, according to advocates of (KN), one cannot properly assert a sentence of the form "p, but I don't know that p". That is not all. Advocates of (KN) claim that by relying on it one can also account for the perceived absurdity of (KV). Indeed, in asserting the first conjunct a speaker presents herself as knowing that p, thereby leading her hearer to believe that it is so. However, if she also asserts the second conjunct, she is denying what she made her hearer believe when she asserted the first conjunct (see Simion 2016: 145).

As for (BV), by relying on similar reasoning, one can hold that, since knowledge implies belief, a speaker asserting it has to believe that p and know that she does not believe that p. But since (as I said before) knowledge is factive, it follows that she should believe that p and not believe that p. Which would be nonsensical. According to advocates of (KN), that is why a sentence of the form "p, but I don't believe that p" cannot be appropriately asserted and is also why its utterance is typically perceived as absurd by its audience.

4 Moorean utterances and conversational patterns

As we have seen, by relying on (KN), one can explain the absurdity of both versions of Moorean utterances without needing to refer to other norms or further considerations, which other competing accounts of the norm of assertion are instead obliged to do. For this reason, (KN) appears to be better placed than any other rival to explain their absurdity. In what follows, I do not wish to deny the explanatory power of this account, but I do wish to highlight one specific aspect that is not always fully considered in the analysis of Williamson and those of his rivals. I am referring to what might happen after a sentence like (BV) and (KV) is uttered. Indeed, most assertion theorists assume the absurdity of (BV) and (KV) in the absence of a context of utterance and of the linguistic reactions that their utterance might elicit in the audience. Whereas I believe that by considering the possible linguistic reactions of the audience, we can understand something more about the kind of absurdity which their utterance exhibits. In the remaining part of this section, I shall look at the conversational patterns in which (BV) and (KV) might be involved. In particular, I shall be looking at the audience's possible linguistic reactions according to whether one or the other version is uttered. If there are differences between the two, this should mean that their absurdity is perceived as

being of a different kind. Accordingly, we would then need two separate analyses to account for the absurdity of their utterances.

4.1 The belief version case

Let us first consider the (BV) case. It amounts to an imagined situation in which, in response to a question from you about what the weather is like in your hometown, a friend replies, "It's raining, but I don't believe that it's raining". What might happen next? In particular, what might be a reasonable linguistic reaction to what she just said?

To start with, it would not be at all unreasonable if you were to ask "Why don't you believe that it's raining?", because by asking this, you would be requesting clarification regarding the second conjunct without necessarily challenging the first one.[7] Indeed, in light of what she has said, you might well suspect that there are reasons (particularly non-epistemic ones) that prevent your friend from believing what has been asserted in the first conjunct.

As for the first conjunct, it is pretty obvious that it would be nonsensical to ask your friend, "How do you know that it's raining?". The simplest explanation we can provide is that, since knowledge implies belief, and your friend has asserted that she does not believe that it is raining, a question like this would be pointless. In the imagined situation, a more appropriate way of asking for clarification about the displacing utterance of (BV) may be, "Well, if you take yourself not to believe that it is raining, then why are you asserting that it is?".[8] Jennifer Lackey (2007: 612) thinks it is unclear how one could reasonably answer a question of this kind. However, if we consider the conversational context of the imagined situation, it might be argued that a reasonable response, albeit somewhat unusual, would be possible from your friend. It is to be noted that the question itself suggests that in

---

7 Some might argue that a question like "Why don't you believe that it's raining?" is not only directed at requesting clarification regarding the second conjunct, but also suggests that asserting the first conjunct was not appropriate in the conversation at hand. Indeed, if one asserts that it is raining, one is expected to believe it is so. That may be true, but the fact remains that, in uttering the first conjunct, the speaker has made a genuine assertion. Even when someone utters p but does not believe it, what is being made is still an assertion, although it counts as insincere. When this happens, and the speaker is found to have made an insincere assertion, she will be blamed for this. In the case at issue, there is nothing deceptive about uttering (BV): indeed, the speaker makes it clear that she does not believe what is asserted in the first conjunct. So here, by asking, "Why don't you believe that it's raining?" the hearer seems to be suggesting that the speaker ought to believe that it is raining, since she has previously asserted that it is. At least, that is what would be expected from a reasonable speaker.

8 In formulating this question, I have taken inspiration from Lackey (2007: 612).

uttering the first conjunct your friend is recognized as asserting that it is raining, even if she does not believe that it is so. Indeed, the question is focused on why she has asserted (BV). After all, she might respond that she heard that it is raining on a TV weather program, but she is having a hard time accepting it, because she feels there are certain reasons (once again, probably non-epistemic ones) that prevent her from believing this. Given that a TV weather program is a reliable source of information on this topic, she might believe that she feels entitled to assert that it is raining, even if she does not believe that it is. If this were the case, one would be expected not only to utter (BV) but also to specify why one does not believe it is raining, and the reason why the utterance of (BV) is perceived as absurd might well derive from the fact that this explanation is lacking.

Let us return to the issue of the entitlement your friend may have acquired from what has been said on the TV weather program. After all, in response to her utterance of (BV), it would not be that unreasonable to ask her, "From whom or what do you get the information that it is raining there?". In asking this, one seems to take for granted that the interlocutor does not believe it is raining (given that she has told him that), but that it might well be raining, provided that the source of that information is reliable. We would say that in asserting the first conjunct, your friend has reproduced linguistically encoded knowledge transmitted to her by someone else. It will certainly not be knowledge coming from her own epistemic sources; otherwise, she would probably also believe that it is so. After all, your friend's obligation to justify her assertion of the first conjunct here falls to the author of the original assertion. Suppose now you regard the original asserter as trustworthy. In that case, you may consider yourself as having inherited the entitlement to re-assert or otherwise use the content of the first conjunct, regardless of your friend's not believing that it is raining. What is more, you will also be entitled to assert that your friend does not believe that it is raining. After all, as long as she is sincere, your friend is the most reliable source about her own beliefs and disbeliefs. And so, in asserting the second conjunct, she has transmitted you first-hand knowledge that she does not believe that is raining. In the end, you may be entitled to use both the content of the first conjunct and that of the second one to make further assertions or use those contents as a reason for action. Regarding the second conjunct, that is why asking your friend, "Why don't you believe that it is raining?" would be appropriate in the imagined situation, and the reason is that she told you she does not believe that it is raining. As for the first conjunct, since she asserts that it is raining, but you also know that she does not believe that it is raining, the only thing you might think is that, as said above, she feels entitled to assert that it is raining because she has received this information from a supposedly reliable source. This makes it appropriate to ask her, "From whom or what do you get the information that it is raining there?". Here, a distinction seems to

be emerging between two separate, though interrelated, aspects of knowledge transmission, regarding the two different kinds of entitlement which a hearer can in principle acquire from the utterance of (BV). There seems to be transmission of knowledge (in ways to be specified) in the hearer's acquiring both entitlements, namely the one stemming from the utterance of the first conjunct and that stemming from the utterance of the second one, although full transmission occurs only in the latter. I shall deal with this difference in Section 5.

Yet the fact remains that in uttering (BV), your friend may still be regarded as not providing an appropriate contribution to the purpose of the conversation in which you two are involved. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the problem with this Moorean utterance is that it is misleading and therefore embrace something like what Lackey calls the "Not Misleading Norm of Assertion". According to this "Gricean" norm:

> NMNA: A speaker S should assert that p in context C if it is not reasonable for S to believe that the assertion that p will be misleading in C relative to the purposes of the exchange in question. (Lackey 2007: 617)[9]

In light of (NMNA), it is reasonable for your friend to think that her utterance of (BV) would probably mislead you. In particular, you could be misled because your friend's joint utterance of the two sentences provides either more or less information than what can be expected in that situation, given the purpose of the conversation.

Let's consider the first option. By uttering the second conjunct, your friend gives you more information than what one can expect in that situation, because the purpose of the conversation was to get information about the current weather in your hometown, not to get information about what your friend believes or not about whether it is actually raining in your hometown. What is more, since it is reasonable for her to think that uttering (BV) would mislead you in this way, if we assume that (NMNA) is in force, it follows that she should avoid uttering it.

As for the second option, even if your friend's view on whether it is actually raining or not in your hometown was assumed to be part of the purpose of the conversation, her conversational contribution would convey less information than what could be expected in that situation. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine for you the relevance of uttering (BV) given the purpose of the conversation. The problem is that you know nothing about why she does not believe that it is raining. And that is why asking, "Why don't you believe that it is raining?", as said above,

---

9 (NMNA) is said to be Gricean because it is akin to Grice's Maxim of Quantity, according to which the speaker has to give as much information as required by the purposes of the conversation (Grice 1975: 26).

would be appropriate in the imagined situation. Indeed, only if she answered this question could you make full sense of her conversational contribution.

What I have suggested so far is that if we focus on (BV) alone, that is, detached from its context of utterance, it cannot be considered in any other way than as being asserted with manifest absurdity. Indeed, in the absence of further information about your friend's personal situation, it is reasonable for you to form either no relevant belief or a false belief from her utterance. But if (BV) is considered as being involved in a certain conversational pattern, in which the speaker explains why she does not believe that it is raining, then its utterance, albeit somewhat unusual, may be conceived as serving to highlight some kind of conflict between the entitlement to assert the first conjunct inherited by the speaker from a recognized reliable source and her refusal to accept that things are as established by that source.

4.2 The knowledge version case

Let us now turn to (KV). Notice that Lackey (2007: 615–616) thinks we can use the same explanation based on (NMNA) to account for it. However, looking at how a hearer might react to the utterance of (KV) can lead to a different conclusion.

Regarding the second conjunct, it would be pointless to ask your friend, "Why do you not know that it's raining?" or "How do you not know that it's raining?". As for the former, a why-question is typically inappropriate when knowledge is involved. As pointed out by Austin (1979: 77–78), when knowledge is at issue, we inquire about what makes the asserter knowledgeable or about what qualifies her to be recognized as such. Instead, asking "How do you know that it is raining?" is typically an appropriate way of challenging someone's assertion in a conversation, even though there is no explicit reference to someone's knowledge in the speaker's words. But asking how one does not know that it is raining (by uttering "How do you not know that it's raining?" or "How come you don't know it's raining?") is only appropriate when the speaker asking that already knows that it is raining, while her hearer does not seem to know that it is. But that is not the case here.

Furthermore, even if your friend tells you that she gets the information that it is raining there from another speaker or from hearing it on a TV weather program, it would be hard to imagine how you could make sense of the communicative exchange with her. Unlike the case (BV), in uttering the second conjunct, your friend seems to be denying that she has inherited any entitlement to assert that it is raining, and this is what makes her attempt to assert the first conjunct infelicitous. As a matter of fact, the strongest challenge to an assertion on the part of a hearer is indeed "You don't know that", and in uttering (KV) your friend is admitting that

she does not know that it is raining. If the question "How do you know?" is typically taken to be an implicit challenge to the speaker's competence about the subject matter of the assertion, "You don't know that!" explicitly rejects it.[10] And here your friend undermines her entitlement to assert the first conjunct of (KV). Thus, it seems that uttering (KV) is more than misleading: it is nonsensical in itself. The only reaction I can imagine is for you to ask your friend: "What are you saying?". Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the conversation might move forward after (KV) has been uttered.

Some might argue that in uttering the first conjunct the speaker is not purporting to make an assertion but rather a conjecture. This could make the utterance of (KV) perfectly legitimate. Indeed, in uttering it your friend would be conjecturing that it is raining while also admitting that she does not know that it is raining. Insofar as she has (and can show that she has) some evidence for making this conjecture, she would be regarded as entitled to make a conjecture about the subject matter at issue. However, it would be very strange to use the plain, non-modalized indicative mood, associated with the declarative sentence form on its own to make a conjecture, because this is the prototypical linguistic means of making an assertion. Instead, there are other linguistic means for performing assertive speech acts that are weaker than assertion. For example, your friend could have said:

> It is raining, I believe, but I don't know that it is.

> Perhaps it is raining, but I don't know that it is.

> It might be raining, but I don't know that it is.[11]

Here, the first conjuncts integrated with these hedging devices (the parenthetical "I believe", the adverb "perhaps" and the modal verb "might", respectively) are compatible with the second conjuncts' disavowing knowledge: what the first conjuncts do is to indicate why the speaker did not make a plain, unqualified assertion. This seems to confirm that what is expected in order to make a plain, unqualified assertion is the possession of knowledge about the subject matter at issue.

---

10 Note that if it turns out that a speaker asserting that p did not know that p, her hearer could quite reasonably feel aggrieved and accuse her of having attempted to assert p without any entitlement to do so (see Williamson 2000: 246–247).

11 The formulation of these examples takes inspiration from Benton and van Elswyk (2020).

5 Speech act norms and assertion

If, as I have tried to explain, the utterance of sentences like (BV) and (KV) elicits different responses from their possible hearers in conversational contexts, this suggests that there is actually a difference in their perceived absurdity. And it is this difference which the last part of this paper will be focusing on.

Both the advocates of (KN) and Lackey seem to background that difference. Indeed, according to the former, the absurdity of both (KV) and (BV) can be traced back to the violation of their favored norm: while in the (KV) case, this violation is apparent, in the (BV) case it derives from the assumption that knowledge implies belief. The latter, on the other hand, overgeneralizes her "conversational" explanation to both cases. In order to overcome the limits of their analyses in accounting for the difference in the absurdity that occurs when one utters one or the other version, I will try to account for it by referring to the different speech act norms that, I suppose, their utterance appears to be an overt violation of. And I shall do this by using an Austin-inspired speech-act theoretical framework. In particular, I shall be focusing on the role played by speech act norms in what Marina Sbisà calls "the dynamics of illocution". By this expression, she refers to "[…] the interactional mechanisms that make it possible for the utterance of one interlocutor to bring about an illocutionary effect, recognized by the other interlocutor" (Sbisà 2018: 23).

Before moving forward, let me clarify that I do not think that the difference in the absurdity of uttering sentences of the form of (KV) and (BV) can simply be explained by referring to the speaker's intentions. Indeed, there is no single intention according to which an assertion can be made: one can make an assertion with the intention to let one's hearers know something, or to make them believe it, or to let them know or believe that one believes or knows it, and so on (see also Williams 1994: 165). Most importantly, whatever it may be, this intention has to do with the consequential effects pertaining to the perlocutionary dimension of speech acts. But the intention with which an assertion has been made differs in important ways from the conditions upon which its performance is dependent. Since these conditions constitute the system of norms governing a certain speech act, they play some kind of normative role with regard to the various aspects involved in the production and understanding of that act. According to Sbisà (2018: 25–31), in conformity with Austin's distinction between conditions A-B and conditions Γ (see Austin 1975: 14–15), one can basically distinguish between two kinds of speech acts norms:[12] constitutive rules, which play an essential role in the

---

[12] According to Sbisà (2018: 32–34), there is a third kind of speech act norm, which she calls "objective requirements". Sbisà (2018: 32) characterizes them as "[…] normative standards for 'accomplished utterances' […] or complete speech act tokens, which take into consideration both

dynamics of illocution, and maxims which, although closely connected to an illocutionary act, are not indispensable to its successful performance.

Constitutive rules are those norms that "[…] when complied with, enable us to perform the acts they define" (Sbisà 2018: 24).[13] More specifically, they establish how the initial state to which the act applies must be (e.g., what position, capacity or competence the speaker must have or what the appropriate circumstances must be) and the steps to be carried out in order to be recognized as performing that act, typically (in the case of informal speech acts) the use of a linguistic form that makes it recognizable. In contrast with what is claimed by Williamson (2000: 239) and other normative theorists, which take constitutive rules to be non-conventional,[14] Sbisà regards them as socially accepted norms. For her, they fix "[…] procedures or routines that are repeatable and recognizable from one occasion to another and whose function (the production of illocutionary effects) is only exercised against a background of intersubjective agreement" (Sbisà 2018: 24; see also Witek 2015). As the quote suggests, compliance with these rules ensures the production of the characteristic conventional effects of an illocutionary act (see also Sbisà 2009: 43–50). In an Austin-inspired perspective, these effects are describable in terms of deontic properties that the speaker and her hearers recognize, attribute to, or remove from each other, thereby establishing (one may say) their normative statuses (Sbisà 1984, 2007). These normative statuses determine what they are

---

their force and their meaning". However, since these norms are not relevant to treating the absurdity of Moorean sentences, they are not taken into consideration in what follows here.

13 There are two main aspects that differentiate the constitutive rules for illocutionary acts to which I refer here from Searlian ones (see Searle 1969: 62–71). Firstly, in the Austin-inspired speech act framework adopted here, constitutive rules specify the procedure that needs to be invoked by a speaker in order to perform a certain illocutionary act. Instead, Searle (1969: 65) considers constitutive rules as rules for the use of the linguistic expressions that serve as "illocutionary force indicating devices" (see also Searle 1969: 35–36). In particular, the essential rule, that is, the rule that specifies the type of illocutionary act that is meant to be performed by uttering a certain sentence, sets as a necessary condition the possession of a certain intention by the speaker. This reference to the speaker's intention brings us to the second difference. Indeed, Searle's constitutive rules appear to impose mainly "internalist requirements", i.e., they concern attitudes and mental states of the speaker and of the addressee (see Sbisà 2002 and for an opposite interpretation, Harnish 2009). Here, on the other hand, the constitutive rules to which I am referring and which correspond to Austinian felicity conditions A.2–B.2, concern the circumstances, persons and modalities suitable for performing the procedure associated with a certain type of illocutionary act. In this sense, in contrast with Searle's constitutive rules, the requirements imposed by these constitutive rules can be regarded as externalist.

14 In particular, Williamson (2000: 239) argues that constitutive rules cannot be conventional because, if they were, they would have to be contingent and replaceable. In his view, a constitutive rule is such only if it necessarily (and not contingently) governs a certain act: if that rule were not in force in a certain linguistic community, then that act would not exist within that community.

entitled or obliged or committed to do with respect to each other. Only when the characteristic conventional effects of an illocutionary act are recognized as occurring can it count as having been successfully performed.

Maxims, on the other hand, encode regulative advice that a speaker should follow in the attempt to optimize her communicative behavior (Sbisà 2018: 47). In particular, they specify how sincerity and consistency are to be conceived in relation to a certain kind of illocutionary act. Sbisà (2018: 29) describes them as half-way between constitutive rules (in the sense described above) and Grice's (1975) conversational maxims. Indeed, like constitutive rules, maxims are closely connected with the performance of a certain speech act, but they are not conventional. As suggested by Sbisà (2018: 29), similarly to Grice's conversational maxims, they can be conceived of as based on rational motivations.

Consider now what the consequences would be of violating each of these types of norms. In the case of constitutive rules, their violation leads to failure in performing the act and therefore in bringing about its characteristic illocutionary effect. Instead, when a failure in observing a maxim occurs, the speaker will be blamed for this (with a resulting loss of credibility), but this would have no impact on the act being performed (at least insofar as its constitutive rules are respected). So the illocutionary act will have been successfully performed, but from the perspective of the participants, the conversational contribution offered by performing it will not be optimally satisfactory.

Let us now move on to consider how the norms involved in the illocutionary dynamics of assertion may be characterized.

If we consider the constitutive rules governing assertion, one of them must fix the epistemic position required of a speaker in order to make it.[15] A plausible and probably reasonable constitutive rule about that would require that an asserter must know how things are (Sbisà 2020; see also Labinaz and Sbisà 2021: 69–71). Indeed, as seen in Section 4.2, assertion appears to have a special relationship with knowledge. For example, prompts and challenges to assertions, as well as abstentions from making them, require (either directly or indirectly) a standard of knowledge (see Turri 2016: 7–10). This points to the fact that the possession of some relevant knowledge is necessary for a speaker to be recognized as making an

---

15 Another constitutive rule must require a speaker to use a linguistic form that makes the act she purports to perform recognizable. In the case of assertion, this is the plain, non-modalized indicative mood associated with the declarative sentence form ("It is raining") or less frequently, a declarative sentence with the performative verb *to assert* (or a related one, such as *to state*) in the first-person singular of the present indicative active ("I assert that it is raining"). The second option is expected to be chosen only in certain special contexts, such as when it is unclear whether the speaker's utterance should count as an assertion, and she wants to make it clear that the act she purported to perform was indeed an assertion (see Labinaz 2019: 114–115).

assertion. However, as suggested in Section 4.1 with regard to knowledge transmission, knowledge seems to have two facets. If we consider it within the illocutionary dynamics of assertion, this distinction may become more apparent: the first facet concerns the *de facto* capacity to reliably make true assertions, which is close to Williamson's notion of knowledge, while the other has to do with the *de iure* entitlement to make certain assertions, which as a socially recognized status, is transmitted conventionally (Labinaz and Sbisà 2021: 70). And it is precisely this entitlement that is transmitted as part of the characteristic, illocutionary effect of assertion. The part to which I am referring concerns the hearer's inheritance of the entitlement to use the content of the assertion made as the content of further, related assertions or as a premise in reasoning or as grounds for decisions (Sbisà 2020; see also Labinaz 2019: 121–224).[16] Indeed, which speaker has an entitlement to be socially recognized as possessing knowledge of a certain content, if not the speaker who actually entertains a state of mind that makes her capable of making true assertions about that subject matter? But it can also happen that a speaker is socially recognized as being knowledgeable about some subject matter without actually being able to make true assertions about it reliably. In this case, the hearer believes she has acquired the entitlement transmitted by the speaker's assertion and with it the *de facto* enablement to make assertions on the subject matter of that assertion. If the hearer should discover that the speaker is not in an appropriate position to make an assertion with that content, the illocutionary effect of that assertion will be nullified, along with the entitlement the hearer deems to have inherited from the purported assertion she has made. While the two cases just considered are the most frequent ones, there may be situations like the (BV) case, in which the speaker has inherited the *de iure* entitlement to make a certain assertion from a reliable source, but she considers herself as not having reached a full state of knowledge (namely, the *de facto* capacity) because she does not believe that what she is entitled to assert is true.

As for maxims, they require (at least) that the speaker should believe that what she has asserted is true and that her subsequent behavior (both verbal and nonverbal) is consistent with the assertion made (Sbisà 2018: 39; see also Labinaz 2019: 119–120). Indeed, a hearer expects an asserter not only to be knowledgeable but also to be sincere and consistent in her subsequent behavior. It should be noted that when a speaker is recognized as insincere or inconsistent in her behavior, what she has made is still a successful assertion (that is, its characteristic conventional effect is in force), but not an optimal one, since to be an optimal

---

16 The other component of the illocutionary effect of assertion has to do with the asserter's obligation (or commitment, if one prefers) to give evidence or reasons in support of her assertion if requested to do so.

contribution to the ongoing conversation, the assertion needs full cooperativity. Indeed, in making that assertion, the speaker has misled her hearer, by leading him to believe that she believes that what she has asserted is true.

6 Two varieties of absurdity?

I think we are now able to account for the difference between the absurdity of uttering (BV) and (KV) respectively, within the presented speech-act theoretical framework. There is no doubt that in both cases, there is an overt violation of a speech act norm, because otherwise, no absurdity would be perceived. I contend that while in the (BV) case, the violation involves a maxim advising what to do in order to perform a speech act optimally satisfactory in the perspective of the participants in the conversation, in the (KV) case, the violation concerns an aspect that is crucial for the bringing about of the characteristic conventional effect of an assertion. Let us elaborate this point in more detail.

　　With regard to the first case, a speaker uttering (BV) makes manifest that she fails to comply with the maxim concerning sincerity. Of course, unlike what happens in the case of deception, where non-compliance with the maxim is being deliberately concealed, there is nothing deceptive about uttering (BV). While a speaker who makes an insincere assertion does so to deceive her hearers, the upshot of uttering (BV) is to bewilder them: no strategic reason can be attributed to a speaker for having uttered it. Indeed, uttering (BV) goes against what one would expect from a reasonable speaker, and so a hearer would be hard put to make sense of the speaker's utterance as a contribution to the conversation. By uttering (BV), not only is the speaker violating one of the maxims which it is rational to follow in order to optimize communicative behavior but she is making this manifest to the hearer, thereby making her communicative behavior self-defeating. That is why the utterance of (BV) is perceived as absurd by its audience. However, as suggested in Section 4.1, there are certain circumstances in which an audience can make sense of the speaker's communicative behavior. These are circumstances where the speaker is willing and able to explain why she does not believe what she asserted in the first conjunct. The speaker may offer this explanation spontaneously or do so when prompted by the hearer's asking her, "Why don't you believe that it is raining?". The fact remains, though, that in asserting the first conjunct, there can, in principle, be transmission of (at least) *de iure* entitlement to the hearer (provided that the informative source from which the speaker got the information that it is raining is recognized as reliable). Indeed, violating a maxim never results in failure to achieve the illocutionary effect.

Something even more serious happens when (KV) is uttered. Here, the speaker manifestly violates one of the constitutive rules governing the illocutionary dynamics of assertion. Indeed, asserting something and at the same time denying that you know that things are so is absurd because it leads to annulling the illocutionary effect of the first conjunct and thus the transmission of the *de iure* entitlement which is the main point of asserting something. More specifically, uttering the second conjunct blocks generation of those commitments and entitlements that a speaker and her audience would assign to one another when an assertion is made. So, uttering (KV) is more gravely self-defeating than uttering (BV): it is the former, but not the latter, which prevents the utterance of the first conjunct from achieving its illocutionary effect. What is more, unlike in the case of (BV), there is no way here to make sense of what the speaker is doing. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine how any hearer could make sense of the communicative exchange with a speaker uttering (KV), even if she tried to explain why she asserted the second conjunct. After all, as pointed out in Section 4.2, the strongest challenge to an assertion is "You don't know that", which undermines the speaker's entitlement to make that assertion, and in uttering the second conjunct the speaker is actually admitting that she does not know what she has asserted in the first. In the case at issue, then, the only options available to the speaker are either to retract the assertion of the second conjunct or rephrase the first conjunct in a mitigated form. As to this second option, the first conjunct could be integrated with a performative verb such as *to guess* or *to conjecture* in the first-person singular of the present indicative active or with a hedging device, such as those suggested in Section 4.2. Indeed, the only thing compatible with the disavowing knowledge of the second conjunct would be a less demanding assertive speech act.

7 Concluding remarks

As I have tried to show, different hearers' reactions are possible depending on whether the belief or knowledge versions of Moorean sentences are uttered. This suggests that there is a difference between the kind of absurdity that occurs when one or the other is uttered. Assertion theorists tend to background this difference, perhaps because they focus on violations of their favored norm and the explanatory potential of the latter. In order to overcome the limits of their analyses, I adopted a theoretical framework coming from speech act theory, according to which assertion, like any other illocutionary act, is governed by norms that play different roles in its illocutionary dynamics. In particular, I relied on a distinction between constitutive rules, which are essential to the dynamics of illocution, and maxims which, although closely connected to an illocutionary act, are not

indispensable for its successful performance. As I have explained in Section 6, the utterance of both the knowledge and the belief versions amounts to self-defeating communicative behavior, since it overtly violates one or the other kind of speech act norm. However, the violation of these norms has different consequences. Indeed, uttering the second conjunct of the knowledge version leads to failure in achieving the illocutionary effect that the utterance of the first conjunct would have produced under normal conditions: in contrast, uttering the second conjunct of the belief version in no way questions the achievement of the effect of the utterance of the first conjunct, but makes manifest that it does not comply with a maxim concerning what the speaker should do to optimize her communicative behavior. By referring to the violation of two different kinds of speech act norms, we were able to explain not only why both versions of Moorean utterances are perceived as absurd by their audience, but also why they generate two different kinds of absurdity. This difference, which transpires from the different hearers' reactions to the two kinds of Moorean utterances, appears to be confirmed by the fact that only in the (BV) case are there circumstances in which it is possible for a hearer to make sense of the speaker's communicative behavior, namely when the speaker is willing and able to explain why she does not believe what she asserted in the first conjunct. In the (KV) case, on the other hand, no such option is available.

References

Atlas, John D. 2007. What reflexive pronouns tell us about belief: A new Moore's Paradox de Se, rationality, and privileged access. In Mitchell S. Green & John S. Williams (eds.), *Moore's Paradox: New essays on belief, rationality, and the first person*, 117–145. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Austin, John L. 1975. *How to do things with words*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Austin, John L. 1979. Other minds. In John O. Urmson & Geoffrey J. Warnock (eds.), *Philosophical papers*, 3rd edn., 76–116. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baker, Derek & Jack Woods. 2015. How expressivists can and should inconsistency. *Ethics* 125. 391–424.

Benton, Matthew & Peter van Elswyk. 2020. Hedged assertion. In Sandy Goldberg (ed.), *Oxford handbook of assertion*, 245–264. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Domaneschi, Filippo. 2011. Presuppositions and appropriateness of assertions. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 7(2). 205–222.

Douven, Igor. 2006. Assertion, knowledge, and rational credibility. *Philosophical Review* 115. 449–485.

Douven, Igor. 2009. Assertion, Moore and Bayes. *Philosophical Studies* 144. 361–375.

Green, Mitchell S. & John N. Williams (eds.). 2007a. *Moore's Paradox: New essays on belief, rationality, and the first person*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Green, Mitchell S. & John N. Williams. 2007b. Introduction. In Mitchell S. Green & John S. Williams (eds.), *Moore's Paradox: New essays on belief, rationality, and the first person*, 3–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grice, Paul H. 1975. Logic and Conversation. In Peter J. Cole & Jerry Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and semantics*: Speech acts, vol. 3, 41–58. Reprinted in P. Grice (1989), Studies in the ways of words, 22–40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harnish, Robert M. 2009. Internalism and externalism in speech act theory. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 5. 9–31.

Kriegel, Uriah. 2004. Moore's Paradox and the structure of conscious belief. *Erkenntnis* 61(1). 99–121.

Kvanvig, Jonathan. 2009. Assertion, knowledge and lotteries. In Patrick Greenough & Duncan Pritchard (eds.), *Williamson on knowledge*, 140–160. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Labinaz, Paolo. 2019. *L'asserzione come azione linguistica: aspetti epistemici, cognitivi e sociali* [Assertion as Linguistic Action: Epistemic, Cognitive and Social Aspects]. Trieste: EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste.

Labinaz, Paolo & Marina Sbisà. 2021. The problem of knowledge dissemination in social network discussions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 175. 67–80.

Lackey, Jennifer. 2007. Norms of assertion. *Noûs* 41. 594–626.

McKinnon, Rachel. 2015. *The norms of assertion*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Moore, George E. 1942. A reply to my critics. In Paul A. Schilpp (ed.), *The philosophy of G.E. Moore*, 535–677. Evanston. Ill: Northwestern University Press.

Moore, George E. 1944. Russell's theory of descriptions. In Paul A. Schilpp (ed.), *The philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 175–225. Evanston. Ill: Northwestern University Press.

Moore, George E. 1993. In Thomas Baldwin (ed.), *G. E. Moore: Selected writings*. London: Routledge.

Sbisà, Marina. 1984. On illocutionary types. *Journal of Pragmatics* 8. 93–112.

Sbisà, Marina. 2002. Speech acts in context. *Language and Communication* 22. 421–436.

Sbisà, Marina. 2007. How to read Austin. *Pragmatics* 17. 461–473.

Sbisà, Marina. 2009. Uptake and conventionality in illocution. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 5. 33–52.

Sbisà, Marina. 2018. Varieties of speech act norms. In Maciej Witek & Iwona Witczak-Plisiecka (eds.), *Normativity and variety of speech actions*, 23–50. Leiden: Brill.

Sbisà, Marina. 2020. Assertion among the speech acts. In Sandford Goldberg (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of assertion*, 159–178. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge (MA): Cambridge University Press.

Shoemaker, Sidney. 1988. On knowing one's own mind. In James E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical perspectives*. Epistemology, vol. 2, 183–209. Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing Co.

Shoemaker, Sidney. 1995. Moore's Paradox and self-knowledge. *Philosophical Studies* 77(2). 211–228.

Simion, Mona. 2016. Assertion, knowledge and rational credibility: The scoreboard. In Martin Grajner & Pedro Schmechtig (eds.), *Epistemic reasons, norms and goals*, 137–164. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Strawson, Peter F. 1950. On referring. *Mind* 59. 320–344.

Turri, John. 2016. *Knowledge and the norm of assertion: An essay in philosophical science*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Williams, John N. 1994. Moorean absurdity and the intentional "structure" of assertion. *Analysis* 54(3). 160–166.

Williams, John N. 2013. Moore's Paradox and the priority of belief thesis. *Philosophical Studies* 165(3). 1117–1138.

Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Witek, Maciej. 2015. An interactional account of illocutionary practice. *Language Sciences* 47. 43–55.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *Philosophical investigations*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Woods, Jack E. 2018. A commitment-theoretic account of Moore's Paradox. In Ken P. Turner & Lawrence Horn (eds.), *Pragmatics, truth and underspecification; towards an atlas of meaning* (Current Research in the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface), 323–348. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Bionote

Paolo Labinaz
Department of Humanities, University of Trieste, Trieste, Italy
plabinaz@units.it

Paolo Labinaz is a research fellow at the Department of Humanities of the University of Trieste, Italy. His main research interests lie in the philosophy of language, pragmatics and argumentation theory. He has been engaged in research projects on assertive discourse, the relationship between reasoning and argumentation, and theories of rationality. He published the volumes *La razionalità* [Rationality] and *L'asserzione come azione linguistica: aspetti epistemici, cognitivi e sociali* [Assertion as Linguistic Action: Epistemic, Cognitive and Social Aspects]. His papers have appeared in various international journals and collections.