

Symposium: Ethico-political dimensions in contemporary social epistemology: disagreements, epistemic communities, scientific denialism, and post-truth.

About Conjectures, Selfless Assertions and Bullshit.

Some comments on the Pragmatics of Scientific Disinformation

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Aim of this presentation

- I'll try to show that the classic conception of speech acts provided by Searle fails to provide a proper understanding of conjectures and hypotheticals.
- It leaves us without conceptual tools to differentiate honest scientific conjectures from insincere assertions and bullshit.
- I trace the difficulties to the mentalistic assumptions of Searle's approach to pragmatics.
- I favor the inferentialist and expressivist account of assertion of Robert Brandom, more akin to anti-mentalistic approach of J.L. Austin.

Outline

- Assertive Speech Acts: the received view
 - Origins and theoretical choices
- The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses
- What are we doing when we advance a conjecture?
- Are scientists liars or bullshitters?
- Replacing seriousness for sincerity

Assertive Speech Acts: the received view

Searle (1970) and Vanderveken (1985) provided philosophers and linguists with a thorough proposal for a theory of speech acts.

Speech acts are classified according to the *illocutionary point* they aim to accomplish.

Assertive Speech Acts: the received view

There are five (and only five) types of illocutionary points:

1. Assertive
2. Commissive
3. Directive
4. Declarative
5. Expressive

Assertive Speech Acts: the received view

There are five (and only five) types of illocutionary points:

1. Assertive (one can say how things are)
2. Commissive (one can commit oneself to doing things)
3. Directive (one can try to get other people to do things)
4. Declarative (one can bring about changes in the world through one's utterances)
5. Expressive (one can express one's feelings and attitudes)

Assertive Speech Acts: the received view

There are five (and only five) types of illocutionary points:

1. Assertive (one can say how things are)
 1. Assertion
 2. Testimony
 3. Swear
 4. Conjecture
 5. Hypothesis
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Assertive Speech Acts: the received view

There are five (and only five) types of illocutionary points:

1. Assertive (one can say how things are)

Different types of assertives are individuated through the strength they involve in achieving their saying how things are and their particular mode of achieving it, alongside “preparatory conditions” that account for what is implied (but not said) by an assertive.

They also involve a “sincerity condition” in which due to the expectation of a sincere expression of a mental state accompanying the public utterance, an assertive is faulty whenever one expresses a belief one does not have.

Assertives require the belief in the content of act.

How did we get here?

Frege in his *Begriffsschrift* or “concept-talk” already distinguished between the force of a judgement and its content.

Propositions (or Fregean thoughts) are assertible, the act of asserting them is a judgement or assertion.

This let's us distinguish between asserted and unasserted contents:

In saying “ $p \wedge q$ ” I'm asserting both p and q .

In “ $p \rightarrow q$ ” I'm not asserting neither of them, but the conditional between the unasserted antecedent to the unasserted consequent.

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The difference between predication (inferential content) and judgement allows Frege to understand the validity of modus ponens and other valid forms that involve unasserted premisses.

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J. L. Austin objected the suggestion that there was an infinity of sentence types that involved an infinity of possible speech acts. He proposed his theory of the performative component of speech acts.

Grice then added his notions of conversational implicature and non-natural meaning that allowed the resolution of apparent semantic conundrums through pragmatic inferences.

How did we get here?

Then, Searle (and later with Vanderveken) set pragmatics in the safe path to a serious research programme in both philosophy and linguistics.

Unlike the previous parallel development of semantics as a tool for philosophy of science and epistemology, pragmatics developed with greater detail the tools needed to account for *non-assertive* pragmatic forces.

Robert Brandom took elements of Frege, Wittgenstein, Davidson, Lewis and Dummett to try to provide an explanation of specifically assertoric force.

Unlike Searle, no effort was made to provide linguists with elements to apply this model to their work.

The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

- Conjectures and hypotheses are as important to scientific and general cognitive endeavors as full assertions.

At the same time:

- Conjectures do not differ from assertions in content.
 - The same propositional content can be asserted or conjectured or put forward as a hypothesis.
- Scientific lies and scientifically sounding bullshit are also primarily pragmatic phenomena.
- A wrong account of their differences can hinder our efforts to better fight scientific disinformation.

The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

The sincerity condition for speech acts.

Each speech act involves the expression of a mental state. Specifically beliefs, desires and intentions.

Assertives express beliefs. Insincere assertives express beliefs the speaker does not have.

The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

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Assertives express beliefs. Insincere assertives express beliefs the speaker does not have.

Now, conjectures, guesses and hypotheticals involve a *weaker* commitment expressed with the propositional content.

Hypotheticals are a limit case of assertives, as a lot of hypotheses are not believed at all, or are even presumed false.

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Searle takes Moorean paradoxes as proof that the sincerity conditions are internal to the definition of a speech act as such.

Furthermore, it is not obvious that “I conjecture that p , but I don’t believe that p ” implies a Moorean-like paradox.

The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

Davidson-Fallis definition of lying:

You lie (to X) iff:

1. You say that p (to X)
2. You do not believe that p is true
3. By saying that p , you intend to represent yourself (to X) as believing that p is true.

The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

Davidson-Fallis definition of lying – **as a checklist for a conjecture:**

You lie/conjecture (to X) iff:

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But if conjectures or hypotheticals are assertives, and their (internal) sincerity condition is the expression of a belief, it would appear that even if the degree is extremely weak, one would indeed be presenting oneself as *believing* that p .

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Davidson-Fallis (Fallis, 2013) definition of lying – **as a checklist for a conjecture**:

You lie/conjecture (to X) iff:

1. You say that p (to X) ✓
2. You do not believe that p is true ✓
3. By saying that p , you assert that p is true. ✓

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The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

- What are the alternatives?
- We can say that hypotheticals are not something we *say*. We merely present it, like Frege used to think about unasserted propositional contents.

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- What are the alternatives?
- We can say that hypotheticals are not something we *say*. We merely present it, like Frege used to think about unasserted propositional contents.

This would put hypotheticals closer to bullshit statements. According to Harry Frankfurt, bullshit is short of lying due to being short of *saying* something presented as true.

The problem for conjectures, hypotheticals and guesses

- What are the alternatives?
- Another possibility is taking hypotheticals closer to “selfless assertions”. According to Lackey (2007), a selfless assertion is one that the speaker performs without believing in its content, but having strong evidence that its true.
- This does not seem to capture the point of a conjecture.

What are we doing when we advance a conjecture or hypothesis?

Sincerity appears to be out of the question, what is the difference that makes a difference?

Hypotheses can be presented *seriously* or unseriously. (Austin, Frege)

What counts for the seriousness or unseriousness of a speech act if not the expression of a mental attitude?

What are we doing when we advance a conjecture or hypothesis?

According to Robert Brandom (1994), one asserts that p through:

1. Committing to p
2. Entitling others to a commitment to p
3. Endorsing p –committing to the inferential consequences of p and entitling others to ask for appropriate challenges of p

What are we doing when we advance a conjecture or hypothesis?

Why commitments and not beliefs?

Brandom takes 'belief'-talk to be ambiguous between committing to what one takes p to amount, and being normatively bound to accept the inferential consequences of p .

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Why commitments and not beliefs?

Brandom takes ‘belief’-talk to be ambiguous between committing to what one takes p to amount, and being normatively bound to accept the inferential consequences of p .

He also adds the phenomena of “bare assertions”, assertions that are not legitimately challenged.

What are we doing when we advance a conjecture or hypothesis?

What do **lying** and bullshit look like from a *commitment* based account of assertion?

You lie (to X) iif:

1. You assume a commitment to p
2. You grant an entitlement to p to others
3. You do not endorse p , but present yourself as endorsing p and grant them an entitlement to defend p

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In conjectures you do endorse p , but don't grant an entitlement to defend p .

What are we doing when we advance a conjecture or hypothesis?

What do lying and **bullshit** look like from a *commitment* based account of assertion?

You bullshit (to X) iif:

In conjectures you do endorse p , but don't grant an entitlement to defend p .

1. You utter a sentence that would appear to commit you to p
2. You don't commit nor entitle others to p
3. You avoid being answerable to challenges to p .

Replacing seriousness for sincerity

Keeping Searle's mentalistic account of speech acts leaves us with this dilemma:

Either, a) we can "say how things are" through a hypothetical without expressing a belief, or b) uttering a hypothetical is not about saying how things are

b) Is unpreferable due to the role that hypotheticals play alongside regular assertions (for instance, in natural deduction or other theories of proof, or formal proofs in general (take axioms, conjectures, etc. in mathematics))

This leaves with a). But Searle cannot accommodate an assertive without the expression of a belief to its truth. It leaves sincerity unaccounted for and liable to confound serious conjectures with lies or bullshit.

Replacing seriousness for sincerity

Keeping Searle's mentalistic account of speech acts leaves us with this dilemma:

We can either:

- 1) Create an ad hoc class of *hypotheticals* like Daniel McKaughan (2012) weakly suggest,
- 2) Completely rework Searle's classical mentalistic account of assertives
- 3) Reject a mentalistic order of explanation and opt for a social normative pragmatic order of explanation.
 - 1) This last proposal can already has conceptual resources to account for what differentiates serious hypothetical statements from lying and bullshit.
 - 2) A commitment theory of assertives probably does not allow for selfless assertions. (But I'm out of time)

Thank you!

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