Performative and Informative Update in Assertions

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The classical account of assertion by Stalnaker (1978, 2002; Clapp 2019) implements COMMON GROUND as a context set c, a set of world-time indices that represents the shared assumptions of the participants in a conversation, and ASSERTION of a proposition φ by a speaker as having the intended effect of restricting c to those indices at which φ is true. Stalnaker makes it clear that this cannot be taken as a DEFINITION of an assertion – the update can be achieved in other ways, the speaker may have no hope or even intention to achieve it, or the addressee can reject it. Later dynamic accounts of assertions have integrated some of these additional aspects; cf. Farkas & Bruce (2010) for a mechanism of acceptance and rejection of the proposition φ using the concept of a negotiating table, and Lauer (2013) for distinct update steps, first for understanding the utterance as an expression of speaker belief and then for the update with the proposition by Gricean reasoning.

In this presentation I will have a closer look and provide for a more fine-grained modeling of the steps involved in assertive updates. I take the common ground c as encompassing the situation in which the communication is situated, as well as the information gained from past conversation or part of the background knowledge of the participants. This requires the simplifying assumptions that c is indeed mutually shared and known to be shared, and that c is consistent Successful assertion then can be exemplified as in (1).

(1) c + A, to B: *Emmy has a cat.*
   i. c + A uttered [$_{\text{ForceP}}$ ASSERT [$_{\text{TP}}$ *Emmy has a cat*]] = c′   locutionary act
   ii. c′ + A is committed to 'Emmy has a cat' = c″   illocutionary act
   iii. c″ + 'Emmy has a cat'   perlocutionary act

The three steps correspond to Austin's constitutive parts of speech acts. There can be additional intended perlocutionary effects, e.g. A might issue a warning if B is a person allergic to cats.

In STEP (i), it becomes part of the common ground that speaker A made the utterance, under an appropriate parsing (which may give rise to misunderstandings, neglected here). I assume that in the syntactic and prosodic representation, the sentence is marked as an assertion (cf. Jary 2019; this can be more clearly expressed in languages with dedicated morphology, cf. König & Siemund 2007). B can signal that (i) was not successful by voicing non-understanding, by an echo question, or by asking for clarification of meaning, which typically will result in another act that achieves the goal of (i).

The effect of (i) is STEP (ii), that speaker A undergoes COMMITMENT to the truth of the asserted proposition. This is a normative notion; A can now be blamed and undergo social sanctions like loss of face if the proposition turns out to be false and A does not have a proper excuse (cf. Shapiro 2019 for the commitment view, Geurts 2019 for additional support). I will present new arguments for the commitment view by pointing out problems of the belief-based view for assertions involving speakers' beliefs like (2) and assertions involving strenghtened commitments like (3) (cf. Krifka 2020).

(2) *Emmy has a cat, I believe. | Presumably, Emmy has a cat.*
(3) *Honestly | Truly | By God | I swear | Emmy has a cat.*

The purpose of step (ii), undergoing social commitment, is STEP (iii), that the asserted proposition becomes part of the common ground. This is a conversational implicature in prototypical assertions: B assumes that A had a purpose in undergoing the commitment, B assumes that A

only commits to propositions if A believes it to be true, and hence, if B considers A trustworthy, B will admit the proposition to the common ground. B has the option of explicitly acknowledging that the proposition is now part of the common ground (e.g. by *okay*, *mmhmm*, nodding, cf. Clark & Schaefer 1989), of expressing the same commitment (e.g. by *yes*, *you're right*) or of rejecting it (e.g. by *No, I don't think so*). In the latter case, the proposition will not become part of the common ground, but A's commitment will remain in it (cf. Farkas & Bruce 2010, Krifka 2015). If B rejects with *no, that's not true*, B will introduce B's commitment to the negation of the proposition. The commitment of step (ii) can only be retracted in a roundabout way, as in A: *O.k., I was wrong, I take this back*.

I will argue that step (i) and (ii) affect the SITUATION of communication, whereas (iii) affects its CONTENT. The common ground c is understood as a set of indices that are epistemic candidates for the real world/time index, according to the understanding of the participants. Steps (i) and (ii) change the indices in c by creating NEW FACTS (a sentence was uttered, the speaker is committed) that immediately become mutually known; step (iii) restricts this set by adding information about propositions that HOLD INDEPENDENTLY. Only step (iii) can be modeled by classical INFORMATIVE update, $c' = \{i \in c \mid \varphi(i)\}$. Index change can be modeled by PERFORMA-TIVE update, as proposed by Szabolcsi (1982) for performative sentences like *I promise to come* (cf. also Krifka 2014). Performative update of c by φ results in $\{i \mid \exists i' \in c \ [i' \text{ differs from } i \text{ minimally such that } \varphi(i')]\}$. I will present a model of branching indices that allows for modeling of performative updates. A minimal change of an index i' that makes φ true is an index i such that it holds that $\varphi(i)$, and for all propositions ψ that are logically independent from φ such that $\psi(i')$, it holds that $\psi(i)$. Notice that φ may already be true at i.

I will argue that EXPLICIT PERFORMATIVE utterances like A: *The buffet is open* are not assertions, but rather actions that result in a performative update of c with the proposition 'The buffet is open'. The assertive utterance of this sentence is are performatives as well (similar as in Austin 1962) with the effect that A is committed to the truth of the proposition. In the first case, A makes the proposition true, and in the second, A claims that the proposition is true. I will propose a distinct semantic representation of this sentence.

The distinction between performative and informative updates should be captured in representational accounts such as DRT by separating the utterance SITUATION from the utterance CONTENT (cf. Buch 2020 for reference to speech acts vs. propositions). Performative updates affect the situation, whereas informative update affect the content. The performative update of commitment to a proposition is a device that triggers the informative update with that proposition.

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