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The norm of assertion: Empirical data

Markus Kneer

University of Zurich, Rämistrasse 66, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Assertions are speech acts by means of which we express beliefs. As such they are at the heart of our linguistic and social practices. Recent research has focused extensively on the question whether the speech act of assertion is governed by norms, and if so, under what conditions it is acceptable to make an assertion. Standard theories propose, for instance, that one should only assert that p if one knows that p (the knowledge account), or that one should only assert that p if p is true (the truth account). In a series of four experiments, this question is addressed empirically. Contrary to previous findings, knowledge turns out to be a poor predictor of assertability, and the norm of assertion is not factive either. The studies here presented provide empirical evidence in favour of the view that a speaker is warranted to assert that p only if her belief that p is justified.

1. Norms of assertion

Linguistic communication occupies a central place in human life, and most human practices heavily rely on it. In uttering a string of meaningful words, we can pursue different goals: Ask a question, give an order, make a request. Most of our utterances, however, are *assertions*, that is, roughly, utterances by means of which we express beliefs (Williamson, 2002: 74). A question that has received a lot of attention in philosophy of language and linguistics recently regards the conditions under which we are warranted to make assertions.

Inquiries of this sort frequently (though not necessarily) presuppose that (i) assertions of different sorts form a unified type of linguistic move or speech act, and (ii) that 'the speech act [of assertion], like a game and unlike the act of jumping, is constituted by rules.' (Williamson, 1996: 489). Roughly, the presumption is that just as the rules of a particular game *constitutively define* the game and enable us to play it, the rules of assertion define and sustain the social practice of assertion. What kinds of rules? Four proposals dominate the literature (for recent reviews, cf. e.g. Goldberg, 2015; Pagin, 2016; Weiner, 2007):

Belief: Assert that p only if you believe that p. (Bach, 2008; Bach & Harnish, 1979)

Justified belief: Assert that p only if you justifiably believe that p. (Douven, 2006; Lackey, 2007)

Truth: Assert that p only if p is true. (Weiner, 2005; cf. also Dummett, 1959)

Knowledge: Assert that p only if you know that p. (Adler, 2002; Benton, 2011; Brandom, 1998; DeRose, 1996, 2002; Hawthorne, 2003; Turri, 2011; Williamson, 1996, 2002; for early accounts, cf. Black, 1952; Searle, 1976; Unger, 1975)

The requirements which the above accounts[1] impose on the speaker differ considerably. Whereas on the last two views, the norm of assertion is factive, on the first two accounts it is acceptable to make an assertion that p even if p is false. Besides the debate regarding which of the above rules is the most promising contender for a norm of assertion, another dispute concerns the appropriate *degree* of normative force of the rule.[2] It makes a big difference whether the norm stipulates that one 'must' (Williamson, 2002), 'should' (Douven, 2006; Turri, 2013), 'may' (Turri, 2014) or 'is in a position to' (Dummett, 1959) assert that p only if p is known (or true, or believed with justification).[3]

E-mail address: markus.kneer@uzh.ch.

[1] A further, increasingly influential type of account has been proposed by MacFarlane (2011, 2014), according to which assertion is characterized *inter alia* by a commitment to retract claims that turn out false at a later context of assessment. However, Kneer (2015, in prep.) reports results that challenge its empirical adequacy.

[2] This issue dovetails with the controversial distinction between norms of *primary* propriety (formulated in terms of strict requirements) and *secondary* propriety (what would be reasonable or permissible in light of the norm). Advocates of the distinction include DeRose (2002), Adler (2002), Hindriks (2007), Bach (2008). Scholars such as Engel (2005), Lackey (2007), Kvanvig (2011) reject the distinction.

[3] Following Turri, one can draw a further distinction between *simple* and *non-simple* accounts of the norm of assertion. The former are, *inter alia,* 'singular because they say there is exactly one norm of assertion,' and the relevant norm invoked is '*perfect* because it imposes a perfect duty, one that applies strictly to each and every assertion.' (2014: 558). While the accounts in the philosophical literature are predominantly 'simple', certain scholars defend 'non-simple' views. In contrast to most other advocates of the knowledge account, Turri himself, for instance, conceives of knowledge neither as a necessary condition for assertability nor as the unique norm of assertion (2016: 62–65). In this brief paper, we will principally be concerned with 'simple' accounts.

Which of the above norms, if any, defines the speech act of assertion is principally a matter of empirical inquiry, an inquiry, that is to say, which 'must face the linguistic data' (Douven, 2006: 450, cf. also Turri, 2013 and Pagin, 2016). Most of the existing evidence to date speaks in favour of the knowledge account, on which there has been increasing convergence over the last decade.

2. The knowledge account

A number of ordinary language observations support the knowledge account. An utterance of the sort '*p*, though I don't know that *p*', for instance, sounds infelicitous. Likewise, the fact that the question 'How do you know?' is a standard rejoinder to assertions is considered instructive: It suggests a widely-held presupposition according to which a speaker asserting that *p* is expected to know that *p*. Perhaps the most persuasive evidence in favour of the knowledge account, however, comes from experiments conducted by John Turri and colleagues. Turri (2013) reports data consistent with the factivity of the norm of assertion (a necessary condition of the knowledge account) and Turri (2015) explores the knowledge criterion directly. In one experiment, participants read a vignette in which the protagonist, Mallory, is asked whether avocados contain vitamin K. In a condition in which Mallory knows, mean agreement with the claim that he should assert that avocados contain vitamin K is high; when Mallory doesn't know, mean agreement is low. The results are robust across different scenarios and designs. In yet another study (Turri, Friedman, & Keefner, 2017), knowledge of *p* proves a better predictor of *p*'s assertability than belief, truth or certainty of *p*.

The evidence reported by Turri and colleagues suggests that, among the four alternatives surveyed in Section 1, knowledge fares best. However, two important worries persist. First, in all of Turri's experiments the assertability question is framed in terms of whether the protagonist *should* say that p. But it might be more apt to characterize the norm of assertion in terms of *p*'s being a *permissible, appropriate* or, more colloquially, an *okay* thing to say. The fact that *p* should be done entails that it is permissible or appropriate to do it, but the reverse relation does not hold. If one should wear a suit to the wedding, it must be permitted or appropriate to do so; if it's permissible to wear jeans it doesn't mean one should. An empirical inquiry into norms of assertion must thus be carefully framed: Which expression is used has important consequences for the normative *force* at stake, and hence for the *type* of norm that is supposed to govern assertion.[4]

A second worry regards certain tricky cases that stood epistemology on its head in the early 1960s. Traditionally, knowledge was defined as true, justified belief. However, since the publication of Gettier's 'Is justified true belief knowledge?' (1963), it is widely believed that there are cases that satisfy all three conditions in which we are nonetheless loath to ascribe knowledge. Consider the following example by Goldman (1976): Henry takes his young son for a ride through the countryside and points out objects that come into view. "That's a cow," "That's a tractor," "That's a barn" he says. The scene takes place in broad daylight, the barn is fully in view, Henry has excellent eyesight and he is focused on the task, as there is little traffic. Henry's belief that there's a barn has good evidential support and thus seems well justified, and let's presume it's also true: the object in view is in fact a barn. But unbeknownst to Henry, the area will be used as a film-set the next day. The fields are full of papier-mâché facsimiles of barn façades, which look indistinguishable from real barns from the road. Henry happens to have pointed to the only real barn in the area. Would we call his mental state a state of knowledge? Presumably not. And yet, it seems perfectly acceptable for Henry to assert that the designated object is a barn. Differently put, and as various scholars have suggested, in Gettier cases

such as the one described, assertability seems warranted despite the fact that the speaker does not have knowledge (Coffman, 2014; Lackey, 2007; Smithies, 2012).

Turri (2016) reports several experiments with Gettier cases which, once again, confirm the knowledge account. Their design, however, is perhaps not ideal. In between-subjects experiments, participants were assigned either an uncontroversial knowledge condition or an accidentally true, yet justified, belief condition. They had to choose among the following four options: The agent (i) knew that *p* and should assert that *p*, (ii) knew that *p* and should not assert that *p*, (iii) did not know that *p* yet should assert that *p*, or (iv) did not know that *p* and should not assert that *p*. But this bundling of choices is controversial in pragmatic terms. Facing a Gettier vignette, it might seem unpalatable to respond that the agent should say that *p* though she didn't know that *p*, because there is a strong implicature that the agent was not justified in believing (and hence asserting) that *p*.[5] What is more, to decide which account best captures the norm of assertion, it makes good sense to let perceived assertability, knowledge, truth and justification vary independently. The following experiments address the two worries empirically.

3. Experiment 1

3.1. Participants, materials and procedure

380 participants located in the US were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete an online questionnaire. Non-native speakers, subjects failing an attention test and those responding in under 10 seconds were excluded. 337 participants remained (150 female, age $M = 36$ years, $SD = 12$ years).

The vignette was based on Russell's (1948/2013) *Clock Case,* an early precursor to Gettier's (1963) examples. It came in three conditions: an uncontroversial case of knowledge (K), a case of justified, yet accidentally true belief (TJB) and a case of false belief (FB). The three scenarios were identical except for the final sentences (the letters in bold were omitted in the vignettes):

> June is at the station, talking to her friend Joe on the phone. At some stage, Joe asks her what time it is, since he wants to go for a run before it gets dark. June looks at the platform clock, which says it's 5.30 h. So she concludes it's 5.30 h.
> **K** The clock shows the correct time, since it has just been controlled that very morning.
> **TJB** Unbeknownst to June, the clock does not work. It has shown the same time for weeks. However, it so happens that it is in fact exactly 5.30 h when Joe asks for the time.
> **FB** Unbeknownst to June, the clock does not work. It has shown the same time for weeks. The actual time is 4.18 h.

Participants were asked forced-choice yes/no questions about whether they consider *p* assertable, whether *p* is true, and whether June knows that *p* (in that order), where *p* stands for 'it is 5.30 h'. The assertability question came in three versions, asking whether participants thought June 'should say' that *p*, that June 'is permitted to say' that *p* and whether it is 'appropriate for June to say' that *p* (see Appendix for details). There were thus nine conditions in total (3 scenarios × 3 formulations). Each participant was randomly assigned to one of them.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Assertability results across formulations

Fig. 1 shows the results for the assertability question across formulations and scenarios. While the impact of formulation on

[5] Note that formulating the norm of assertion in terms of what *should* be said, rather than what it is *appropriate* or *permitted* to say, might considerably aggravate the problem.