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Brandom's deontic scorekeeping model and the assertive family

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with what, from a speech-act theoretical point of view, can be considered to be the “illocutionary” side of Robert Brandom’s pragmatist framework, which regards the pragmatic significance of linguistic performances (specifically, assertional performances) characterized in terms of their effects on the normative statuses of the participants in a discursive practice. In Brandom’s deontic scorekeeping model of discursive practice (which consists of ascribing, undertaking and acknowledging commitments and entitlements), all speech acts are alleged to have pragmatic significance because of their relationship with the act of asserting: here, I investigate whether the same model can be used to account for the pragmatic significance of other assertive speech acts which differ from assertion in terms of their varying degrees and modes of commitment, and I argue that it simply lacks the resources to do so. I conclude by making some general suggestions (with examples) of how an Austin-inspired conception of illocutionary force (to some extent compatible with Brandom’s analysis) could be used as a basis to account for the varying degrees and modes of commitment of assertive speech acts in terms of variations in their force.

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with what, from a speech-act theoretical point of view, can be considered to be the “illocutionary” side of Robert Brandom’s pragmatist framework, which concerns (to use his own terminology) the pragmatic significance of linguistic performances, and assertional performances in particular (see [Brandom, 1994, 2000](#)). According to him, the pragmatic significance of a linguistic performance is characterized in terms of its potential to change the normative statuses of the participants in a discursive practice, especially those in which participants give and ask for reasons. These practices, which he refers to as “the game of giving and asking for reasons”, are considered as the core of language use, since the conferral of propositional content to linguistic expressions depends on them. The speakers and interlocutors involved in this game are represented as engaged in a scorekeeping activity (see also [Lewis, 1979](#)), consisting of ascribing, undertaking and acknowledging commitments and entitlements.¹ Brandom holds that the most basic move here is the speech act of asserting, which expresses the speaker’s doxastic commitment, lending her authority to the content asserted and licensing others to undertake the same commitment. By making, withdrawing and challenging assertions, participants in this activity keep track of one another’s commitments and entitlements to those commitments.

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¹ As [Brandom \(1994: 142\)](#) points out, “[t]he job of pragmatic theory is to explain the *significance* of various sorts of speech acts in terms of practical proprieties governing the keeping of deontic score – what moves are appropriate given a certain score, and what difference those moves make to that score”.

In recent years, Brandom's pragmatist framework has become increasingly influential among scholars interested in speech acts, especially with regard to his social analysis of assertion. Indeed, his way of conceiving assertion is seen as a useful starting point for scholars aiming at describing illocutionary force in terms of entitlements (or rights) and commitments (or obligations) (see, for example, Peregrin, 2012: 220–224).² Moreover, because of its similarities (though superficial) with Austin's (and in part, Searle's) view of illocution, specifically as to how it describes the (normative) effects of speech acts, which we will see in Section 5,³ Brandom's pragmatist framework can be seen as a potential rival to the traditional way of conceiving illocutionary force. My aim here, then, is to examine whether and, if so, to what extent Brandom's pragmatist framework may be taken as effectively contributing to the analysis of illocution. Although Brandom (1994: 158–159) openly acknowledges that his model of discursive practice is an "artificial idealization", it is still an open question whether it can be used to account for the pragmatic significance of speech acts that are not directly involved in the game of giving and asking for reasons, at least as conceived by him. In particular, in light of the privileged role assigned to assertion in Brandom's account of discursive practice, I will consider whether his deontic scorekeeping model can account for the performance of assertive speech acts that are not straightforward assertions (which are in fact ubiquitous in our discursive practices) and their effects.⁴ Indeed, while asserting can be held to be the main way of undertaking (and so overtly acknowledging) a doxastic commitment,⁵ there are other speech acts that, while intimately related to asserting, are characterized by varying degrees and modes of commitment on the part of the speaker to what she says. For example, when reading a newspaper, one can easily come across sentences such as the following

- (1) Perhaps there is now a chance to achieve a so-called soft Brexit (TIM_BREX)
- (2) Our Government has absolutely no idea how many EU citizens live in the UK (IND_GOV)
- (3) Well, I guess the Saudis are killing a lot of [Yemenis] right now (IND_GUAN)
- (4) In my view, on the facts as reported, a limited use of force, necessary to address the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, and proportionate to the humanitarian objective of forestalling any further use of chemical weapons, would be lawful under international law (GUARD_VIEW)
- (5) I firmly believe that across Australia an even broader acceptance for marriage equality will come sooner than we think (GUARD_MAK)

which can be described as performing various kinds of assertive speech acts with their commitments weakened or reinforced in different ways.⁶ While in speech act theory, such differences have traditionally been accounted for in terms of the "degree of strength" of illocutionary force (see, in particular, Searle and Vanderveken, 1985), in the case of Brandom's scorekeeping model we need to examine whether it has the resources to analyze how assertive speech acts such as those performed when uttering (1)–(5) differ from each another and from straightforward assertions.

The paper is organized as follows: the following section presents an outline of Brandom's pragmatist framework, focusing mainly on its illocutionary side, which is part of what he calls "normative pragmatics" (Section 2). In Section 3, some examples of assertive speech acts are given, and their similarities and differences highlighted: then follows an explanation of how such differences have been described in speech act theory. Section 4 looks at what resources Brandom's scorekeeping model has available to account for the performance of assertive speech acts that are not straightforward assertions, and the effects of these; I contend that its resources are too limited for that task. In Section 5, I introduce an Austin-inspired conception of illocutionary force (compatible to some extent with Brandom's pragmatist framework) and then describe the resources it has available to account for the various ways of attenuating, fine-tuning or disowning assertive commitments. Finally, I discuss the examples of actual language use presented above in order to show how and why the Austin-inspired conception of illocutionary force does a better job of accounting for the performance of assertive speech acts besides straightforward assertions and their effects than Brandom's deontic scorekeeping model (Section 6).

2. Brandom's pragmatist framework

The central claim of Brandom's pragmatist framework is that propositional content is conferred upon linguistic expressions by how they are used in discursive practices, and specifically those practices in which participants give and ask for

² For example, Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance (2009), while criticizing Brandom's exclusive focus on assertion, have proposed a general, normative theory of speech acts, which modifies and elaborates upon some central aspects of his pragmatist framework.

³ Note, however, that Brandom's inferential semantics is compatible neither with Austin's meaning-force distinction nor with Searle's notion of propositional act.

⁴ What I am doing here is probably not directly relevant to Brandom's philosophical project, which is aimed at developing an inferentialist semantics grounded on a normative pragmatics. But since his deontic scorekeeping model can allegedly account for the basic dynamics involved in any discursive practice, this paper can be seen as a way of critically testing its applicability to a wider range of linguistic performances.

⁵ According to Brandom (1994: 162), "for someone to undertake a commitment [...] is to do something that makes it appropriate to attribute the commitment to that individual". As MacFarlane has also pointed out (2010: 90–91), this means that being committed to *p* corresponds to being committed to doing something, but it is not clear "what kind of action commitment to *p* could be a commitment to perform". In this paper, I will rely on Brandom's explicit claims about this, without attempting to further interpret or exemplify.

⁶ These examples are collected from a selection of newspapers articles, mostly comprising interviews and opinion pieces (editorials and comments). Their sources are listed in the Appendix.

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