

Assertion and the Semantics of Force-Markers*

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1 Introduction

In recent work, Williamson (1996/2000) has defended an account of assertion that I find suggestive. It fits with the anti-reductionist account of knowledge he has also independently argued for. Williamson claims that the following norm or rule (the *knowledge rule*) is constitutive of assertion, and individuates it:

(KR) One must ((assert p) only if one knows p)

Williamson is not directly concerned with the semantics of assertion-markers, although he assumes that his view has implications for such an undertaking; he says: ‘in natural languages, the default use of declarative sentences is to make assertions’ (1996/2000: 258).

In this paper I will explore Williamson’s view from this perspective, i.e., in the light of issues regarding the semantics of assertion-markers. I will end up a slightly different account, on which, rather than KR, what is constitu-

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tive and individuating of assertion is an audience-involving *transmission of knowledge* rule:¹

(TKR) One must ((assert *p*) only if one's audience comes thereby to be in a position to know *p*)

I will argue that TKR, of which KR is an illocutionary consequence (but not the other way around), has all the virtues that Williamson claims for his account and no new defect.² I will argue in addition that TKR, in contrast to KR, has the outstanding merit of fitting better in a neo-Gricean account of linguistic meaning of the kind I have argued for elsewhere.³

The paper has the following structure: in the next section, I justify my resort to the phrase 'semantics of force-indicators', which in many usages is oxymoronic; in the third I present the main features of Williamson's view; in the fourth, I criticize purely truth-conditional views of meaning; in the fifth, I defend my semantic proposal; in the sixth and final section I locate it in the context of debates between Austin, Grice and others about the relative place of intention and convention in speech acts.

2 The Constitutive Account of the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction

The phrase 'semantics of force-indicators' is prototypically oxymoronic in the usage of people who take it that semantics has only to do with truth-conditional contents and their compositional determination, and nothing to do with speakers' acts. Sometimes this is because they think of linguistics and semantics as a quasi-mathematical enterprise, only concerned with theoretically characterizing the abstract languages that Lewis (1975: 163) contrasts with those actually in use: 'a function, or set of ordered pairs of strings and meanings'. There is no point in quarrelling about this, merely stipulatory usage. I will just note that my interest in an accurate semantics-pragmatics distinction arises from a concern with natural languages, things in use in our spatiotemporal surroundings like English, Spanish or Catalan. As a result, on the stipulation I find expedient 'language' will henceforth

¹My proposal develops Evans' (1982:310) point: 'communication is *essentially* a mode of the transmission of knowledge'. It is also in agreement with Coady (1992: 42) proposal to characterize testimony, if we take, as I do, assertions as *prima facie* acts of testifying.

²A content *C* with force *F*, *F*(*C*), is an *illocutionary consequence* of contents *C*₁ ... *C*_{*n*} with forces *F*₁ ... *F*_{*n*} iff any speaker committed to each *F*_{*i*}(*C*_{*i*}) is thereby committed to *F*(*C*). Given a natural understanding of the primitive *commitment*, if an argument is deductively valid, then the conclusion taken with assertoric force will be an illocutionary consequence of the premises also taken with assertoric force. See Green 2000: 444-7.

³ See García-Carpintero 2001.

refer to them, and semantics will be a part (together at least with phonology and syntax) of a theoretical account thereof; it will also refer to the subject-matter of such an account.

In a series of recent writings Bach (1999, 2002) has clearly articulated why, given our concern with natural languages, it is wrong to state the semantics-pragmatics distinction in terms of an alleged contrast between the determination of truth-conditions on the one hand, and features of what expressions mean that depend on speaker's acts or their context of use on the other. This constitutes a taxonomically and theoretically inadequate conception of languages, as the facts about indexicals and demonstratives make clear. It is a given in the present discussion that semantics aims to provide an explanatory systematization of the validity of English arguments like (1):

(1) The tallest person is hungry

∴ Someone is hungry

By the same token, semantics has to include in its explanatory systematization the validity of arguments like (2)-(4):

(2) He is hungry

∴ Some male is hungry

(3) That pot is empty

∴ Some pot is empty

(4) You are angry

∴ Someone in the audience is angry

But there simply is no way of ignoring context and speakers' acts in accounting for the validity of arguments like (2)-(4). This is so if, following the views of the leading researcher in these matters, Kaplan (1989a), we distinguish the validity of (1) from that of (2)-(4). For this distinction depends on the fact that indexicals, like proper names, are 'directly referential'; their truth-conditional import is just their referent. As a result, (2)-(4) are not valid in the sense in which (1) is: it is not the case that the truth-conditions of their conclusions are satisfied in all possible circumstances in which those of their premises are. The validity of (2)-(4) is 'character-validity': given contexts in which their premises, if uttered there, would all signify truth-conditions satisfied there, their conclusions would signify truth-conditions similarly satisfied if uttered in the very same contexts. On this

view, character-validity, even though a semantic phenomenon, is not simply a matter of ordinary truth-conditions, and depends on speakers' acts and their contexts.

Kaplan is aware of the need for a semantics-pragmatics distinction that goes beyond the traditional one that Bach questions. More so in that he is not only a direct-reference theorist about indexicals and demonstratives, but also a Millian about proper names. A Millian rejects the view that proper names are linguistically associated with descriptive contents – even in the way in which an utterance of 'you' must be linguistically related to a description like *the audience in the context in which the utterance of 'you' occurred* to account for the semantic nature of the character-validity of (4). In particular, Kaplan wants to reject the idea that the validity of (5) is a semantic matter, in contrast to that of (2)-(4):

- (5) Kaplan is hungry
 ∴ Someone called 'Kaplan' in the baptism supporting its use
 in this context is hungry

To set apart the merely pragmatic validity of (5) from the properly semantic (character-) validity of (2)-(4), Kaplan (1989b: 573-4) made a distinction between *semantics* and *metasemantics*, in terms reminding of the Lewisian distinction:

The fact that a word or phrase *has* a certain meaning clearly belongs to semantics. On the other hand, a claim about the *basis* for ascribing a certain meaning to a word or phrase does not belong to semantics. 'Ohsnay' means *snow* in Pig-Latin. That's a semantic fact about Pig-Latin. The *reason* why 'ohsnay' means *snow* is not a semantic fact; it is some kind of historical or sociological fact about Pig-Latin. Perhaps, because it relates to how the language is *used*, it should be categorized as part of the *pragmatics* of Pig-Latin (though I am not really comfortable with this nomenclature), or perhaps, because it is a fact *about* semantics, as part of the *Metasemantics* of Pig-Latin (or perhaps, for those who prefer working from below to working from above, as part of the *Foundations of semantics* of Pig-Latin).

Stalnaker (1997: 535), motivated by a similar Millian concern, follows Kaplan's final suggestion and distinguishes *descriptive* from *foundational* semantics: 'A descriptive semantic theory is a theory that says what the semantics for the language is without saying what it is about the practice of using that language that explains why that semantics is the right one. A descriptive-semantic theory assigns *semantic values* to the expressions of the language, and explains how the semantic values of the complex expressions

are a function of the semantic values of their parts.' Foundational theories, in contrast, answer questions 'about what the facts are that give expressions their semantic values, or more generally, about what makes it the case that the language spoken by a particular individual or community has a particular descriptive semantics.' Both Kaplan and Stalnaker would like to argue that the validity of (5) is a foundational (pragmatic) matter, not a semantic one, as is the validity of (1) *and* also that of (2)-(4).

Is the Kaplan-Stalnaker line adequate to characterize the semantics-pragmatics distinction for natural languages? I myself disagree with the Millian view, and have argued elsewhere that something like (5) is valid in the same terms that (2)-(4) are, and that proper names are to that extent linguistically associated with ('reference-fixing') descriptions. This issue is not our present concern, but can be used to expose the inadequacy of the Kaplan-Stalnaker characterization. (Incidentally, I think that it has been drawn in that particular way to discard from semantics proper the ascription to names of metalinguistic descriptions.) All parties to the dispute accept that many historical sociological and psychological facts about, say, how 'ohsnay' came to be used in Pig-Latin with the meaning it did lack any semantic import. The issue is whether all do; what we need is a principled way to distinguish those that are from those that are not, and a little reflection shows that neither Kaplan's nor Stalnaker's proposals offer one.

According to Kaplan's and Stalnaker's views, a semantic value of an utterance of 'I' by Kaplan is its referent, i.e., Kaplan himself. This is (in part) what such an utterance means; it is a semantic value that a descriptive semantics should ascribe to it, in order to determine the semantic values of more complex expressions of which it is part. However, a *reason* why such an utterance means that semantic value is that it was Kaplan *who uttered it*. This is a fact about English that fits Kaplan's characterization of what metasemantics is about: that he was *the utterer of that case of 'I'*; for it is a reason why such a case means him. However, by Kaplan's own lights, this particular linguistic fact, this particular reason why the expression means him, falls under the theoretical concerns of semantics, not metasemantics. Similarly, although the fact in question can be described perfectly well as one of those that give the expression (the case of 'I' that Kaplan uttered) its semantic value – i.e., as one in virtue of which the language spoken by a community has a particular descriptive semantics – Stalnaker should not want to count it as belonging to a foundational theory of English, but rather to a descriptive theory. It thus transpires that Kaplan's and Stalnaker's characterizations do not give us what we need; for they do not allow us to distinguish reasons why expressions have certain semantic values which belong in a semantic account from those that do not. As a result, although their char-

acterizations suggest that descriptions linked to proper names like the metalinguistic one used in the conclusion in (5) do not belong in a semantic account of natural languages, they cannot establish it.

The preceding discussion had two goals: to bring Lewis' distinction between abstract and used languages to bear on our problem, and to expose the difficulties of a relatively popular line also invoking it to state the semantics-pragmatics distinction, compatibly with the results of contemporary research on the widespread context-dependence of natural language semantics. Part of what motivates my own proposal is that it captures some of the intuitions that that line tries to articulate.

In advancing linguistic theories, as in advancing theories of any other phenomena, we are sensitive to the distinction between what is constitutive of or essential to our subject-matter, natural languages, and what is merely accidental. I take this notion of what is constitutive of a given object as primitive, irreducible to modal notions like metaphysical or epistemic necessity (see Fine 1994). I assume that we have a sufficient intuitive grasp to ground more theoretical articulations; such a grasp manifests itself in the indicated sensitivity. Following Schiffer (1993), we might usefully put the issue in terms of Lewis' distinction, as concerning the nature of *actual-language relations*. What makes it the case that a particular abstract language is in fact the language used by a given population? What relation should exist between the language and the population, for that to be the case? When we characterize a language aiming thus to describe a fragment of a natural language, we may well fail in our goal, but we at least succeed in characterizing thereby one of Lewis' abstract languages; for the requirements for success in this undertaking are settled only by our pretheoretical conception of languages. The way Lewis describes abstract languages thus gives an idea of the very minimum that is assumed *a priori* to be constitutive of natural languages: they at least should have an (abstract) phonology, determining a stock of well-formed expressions (Lewis' 'strings'), and an equally abstract semantics, determining meanings for some of them. To move beyond this in characterizing what it is that makes a given abstract language the natural language we are trying to characterize (the language actually used by a given population) thus providing a richer characterization of what is constitutive of natural languages requires adopting potentially controversial theoretical decisions; but this is as it should be, here as elsewhere.

Thus, for instance, although some abstract languages lack any substantive syntax, being just a finite set of ordered pairs of strings and meanings, I think we are justified in believing that none of them is appropriate to characterize a natural language, i.e., that it is constitutive of natural languages to

have a substantive syntax. For, on the basis of correct information about the nature of the languages they use, ordinary speakers are able to understand strings that differ from any of those that have allowed them to acquire that information; any abstract language capable of counting as a natural language will in fact be infinite. And there simply is no alternative explanation for this than that the object of the speakers' informational state has a compositional semantics, which the informational state correctly represents;⁴ some of the compositional rules constitutive of natural languages are recursive, helping thus to determine an infinite number of meaningful strings. It is true that the number of strings that ordinary speakers are able to understand is finite; but I think we are justified in taking this to be explained by accidental properties of natural languages (by features of the psychology of speakers irrelevant to the identity of the languages they use).

My proposal regarding the proper way to capture the semantics-pragmatics distinction is then as follows. As we have seen, a semantic component is uncontroversially constitutive of languages; among other explanatory roles, such an uncontroversial component of linguistic theories accounts for the validity of some arguments, like (1); it also accounts for synonymy relations, ambiguities, analyticities, etc. As we have just seen, what is in general constitutive of natural languages and of the semantic component in particular will depend on substantive matters, to be theoretically settled, regarding the actual-language relation. Thus, if a Chomskian reductively psychologistic view of what is constitutive of natural languages were correct, and languages were just the end products in the mind/brain, internalistically understood, of a biologically determined language faculty, it would make some sense to think of semantics as really a form of syntax, as Chomsky himself has repeatedly insisted. On the sort of neo-Gricean view of what is constitutive of natural languages that I consider correct, that is definitely wrong.⁵ Languages are fundamentally conventional resources socially designed to implement the sort of communicative intentions that Grice took to be constitutive of non-natural meaning. I take this to be compatible with some aspects of the Chomskian picture; among other things, a proper account of the facts about compositionality accepted as constitutive of natural languages in the previous paragraph require I think that unconscious psychological facts like those contemplated by Chomsky and his fol-

⁴I am not at all persuaded by Schiffer's (1993) efforts to argue for the opposite, but it will take too much space to indicate why. Of course, particular precise versions of the principle of compositionality can be disputed.

⁵García-Carpintero (2001) outlines the view and indicates what is neo-Gricean in it, i.e., distinct from the Gricean view as it is usually understood.

lowers be also constitutive of them.⁶ What is wrong in the Chomskian view is its reductive internalist psychologism. For reasons like those given by Kaplan for the case of indexicals, the semantic component will I think ascribe to some expressions environment-involving propositions.

If this view is correct, there are psychological third-personal features that are constitutive of natural languages, i.e., involved in the determination of the actual-language relation, while others are not. Now, I take pragmatics to deal with features of natural languages of the same kind that the semantic component of a theory of a given natural language deals with (the ascription to expressions of propositional contents and forces, intended to explain some validities, ambiguities, etc.), where the former differ from the latter in that they are not constitutive of that natural language. Particularized conversational implicatures and non-literal uses like creative metaphors, irony, etc., as understood by Grice (1975), are the prototype that I have in mind for what pragmatics is about. For, on Grice's view, the fact that implicated meanings are ascribed to expressions can be accounted for in virtue of facts that are not constitutive of the language in question, or of any other particular natural language for that matter. They can be accounted for on the basis of practical principles that follow rationally from the nature of communicative purposes; and these purposes are in themselves independent of any specific natural language. To put it in a nutshell, helping ourselves to a prior conception of meaning; semantics deals with meaning-features of expressions constitutive of specific natural languages; pragmatics deals with those of their meaning-features not constitutive of any particular natural language.

The present proposal captures what is intuitively correct in the proposals by Kaplan and Stalnaker considered earlier. Semantics attempts to characterize the meaning-properties constitutive of specific natural languages. This is why semantics is compositional, as Stalnaker simply takes for granted without any justification arising from his own elucidation. Foundational theories give an account of those linguistic facts that, even if empirically important to establish that a population uses a given language, are not constitutive of it. As we said earlier, psychological facts determining performance, as opposed to competence, belong in this category. The same applies to meaning-facts like those which the present proposal would count as pragmatic, like conversational implicatures or non-literal meanings that speakers of any given language convey. Similar points about the semantics and pragmatics of illocutionary forces will be made later.

In addition to being supported by the intuitions motivating Kaplan's and Stalnaker's characterizations, the present proposal allows us to count as semantic the descriptive aspects of the meaning of indexicals accounting for the character-validity of (2)-(4), without provoking the doubts I raised for those accounts. Even if we agree, as I do, with the direct-reference view that the truth-conditional contribution of indexicals is exhausted by their referents, to the extent that there are good reasons to contend that indexicals are associated with certain descriptions as a matter of their constitutive natures in a given language we can still count the association as a semantic phenomenon. It would then be a further problem to articulate the nature of that association, semantic but distinct from the association between expression and referent.⁷ On this proposal, the basic disagreement between Millians and anti-Millians concerns whether the link between names and some descriptions, like the metalinguistic descriptions accounting for the validity of (5), is constitutive of the semantics of names in natural languages, irrespective of whether the link is such that the truth-conditional import of proper names in natural languages is thereby identical to that of the relevant descriptions.

The present proposal agrees with this claim by Bach (2002: 287): 'For me the distinction applies fundamentally to types of information. Semantic information is information encoded in what is uttered – stable linguistic features of the sentence – together with any linguistic information that contributes to the determination of the references of context-sensitive expressions.' As Bach says, a merit of a proposal along these lines is that it helps prevent a widespread confusion concerning the relevance of psycholinguistic facts to these issues. It is a clear commitment of my proposal that there is a substantive distinction, among the undifferentiated meaning-facts concerning the expressions of a given natural language, between those that are the concern of linguistic theories (semantics) and those that are not (pragmatics). This sets it apart from the views of many contemporary writers, including Bezuidenhout, Carston, Recanati, Schiffer, Sperber and Wilson, and Travis. Just to give an example, the present proposal provides a principled justification to put Grice's generalized implicatures in the pragmatic basket; later I will touch upon similar cases, indirect speech acts and explicit performatives. Even though there is a form of linguistic conventionality (standardization) involved in these cases, it is arguable whether the conventions at stake are among those constitutive of the relevant languages; in addition to appealing to Grice's Modified Occam's Razor, considerations like

⁶Davies (2000) supports a compatibilist view that takes Chomskian third-personal, unconscious features of psychological states to be constitutive of languages, in addition to the consciously available, first-personal features that a Gricean picture focuses on.

⁷García-Carpintero (2000) argues that it is a form of presupposition.

those marshaled by Levinson (2000) could be invoked to argue that they are not.

Now, those writers I just mentioned argue for what in my view is a mistaken blurring of the semantics-pragmatics distinction on the basis of certain psychological assumptions.⁸ They assume, for instance, that the semantic meaning of a sentence should easily come to the conscious awareness of speakers untrained in theoretical linguistics. Or they assume that the processing of the semantic content of a given sentence should finish before the processing of the pragmatic content starts. On the present proposal, these assumptions are unwarranted. A given meaning of a sub-sentential expression (say, the temporal connotations of disjunction) may well be pragmatic, i.e., non-constitutive, even if the processors of the typical speaker in the typical context compute it previously to deriving the interpretation of the sentences in which they occur.⁹ Similarly, it is compatible with the present proposal to classify a meaning as pragmatic, even though it is the first that comes to mind to the conscious awareness of the ordinary speaker, and even if it takes some effort to bring what is properly the semantic meaning of the relevant expression to the conscious awareness of such a speaker. It is not, as I have insisted, that on the present proposal the languages for which we trace the semantics-pragmatics distinction are entities fully independent of the psychology of speakers. To think of actual-language relations as settled in part by which conventions are in place to perform communicative acts entails in my view that languages are constitutively psychological, the psychological features constitutive of them including conscious and unconscious features.

Bach (1999: 64) makes a claim about the distinction with which I disagree: 'semantic information pertains to linguistic expressions, whereas pragmatic information pertains to utterances and facts surrounding them'. The context makes it clear that 'expression' here is expression-type; in my previous discussion of facts concerning indexicals, as henceforth in the rest of the paper, by that term and related ones like 'sentence', 'phrase', etc., I mean expression-cases or expression-tokens.¹⁰ Given my proposal, this is unwarranted. It is true that a language is on my view essentially conventional, and also that linguistic conventions are associated to types: to adopt a convention relative to an expression entails potential regularities in behavior involving the expression, which therefore should be something repeatable, i.e. a type. But this is compatible with thinking of natural languages as

classes of actual and possible concrete utterances. In my view, a proper understanding of indexicality requires this. For an analogy, consider the case of a symbolic system like traffic signals. It is essentially conventional; signals acquire their meaning in part in virtue of their instantiating certain types. But it is also essentially designed so that their meanings are ascribed to signals in virtue of some of the physical properties they have, like their spatial and temporal location. Thus, it does not seem correct to describe the meaning-features constitutive of this system as merely pertaining to types. The same applies to natural languages, and this fact is even much more deeply widespread in that case. If, for instance, Kripke and Putnam are right about the semantics of natural kind terms, as I think they are, semantic information pertains essentially to natural kind term-tokens.¹¹

Under the present proposal, speaking of the semantics of force-markers is not immediately oxymoronic. In the fifth section we will consider the reasons why it not only makes sense, but is actually justified. A more immediate concern now is to be clear about what the meaning of force-indicators might be, putting aside whether it is constitutive of natural languages, in some cases at least, the signification of illocutionary forces; i.e., whether the signification of forces is a semantic or rather a pragmatic matter. One of the many merits of Williamson's (1996/2000) discussion is that it gives a clear account of the nature of assertoric force. Let me now briefly summarize his account.

3 Williamson's View

Like other speech acts, assertions are praised and criticized in many respects: as relevant or not, impolite or not, sincere or not, clumsily phrased or not, etc. Say that any respect in which the performance of an act can be praised or criticized is a *norm* or *rule* for that act; assertions are subject to many norms. The same applies to many social activities, like games, for instance, or musical performances. Among norms governing these activities we should distinguish those that are constitutive of them from those that are not, including Rawls's (1955) and Searle's (1969) *regulative* rules. Constitutive norms for a given type of act are essential to it: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act. Regulative norms are thus not essential, although they might be ordinarily involved in appraisals of the act. Thus, for instance if one promises *p* and does not then bring *p* about, or brings it about but not for the reason that one promised – perhaps having forgotten all about it – one breaks the constitutive rule of promises. One is then subject to blame, even if the act can be praised from utilitarian or other

⁸García-Carpintero (2001) discusses further the matter, and provides references.

⁹See Levinson (2000) for many illustrations that this is the case.

¹⁰See García-Carpintero (1998) for justification and further clarification. Levinson (2000: 23-4) appears to make an assumption similar to Bach's.

¹¹*Abstract* languages are so only in being possibly non-instantiated in the actual world.

teleological considerations. And the other way around: the promise is constitutively correct if it is kept, even if it can be criticized on utilitarian grounds. The utilitarian or teleological considerations constitute merely regulative rules. As Rawls emphasizes, this leaves open the appeal to utilitarian considerations in justifying the *existence* in the actual world of the institution of promising with its defining constitutive obligations.

Thus, for instance, we can think that the composer of a musical work *M* specifies a constitutive norm that is to govern performances of that work. He states his composition on a score Σ , indicating pitches, rhythms, harmonies, dynamics, timbres and so on. We can think of the composer as thereby specifying a constitutive norm of this form:

(MW) One must ((perform *M*) only if one instantiates in so doing Σ)

The combination: one performs *M*, although in so doing one does not instantiate Σ , is taken to be possible, otherwise there would be no point in forbidding it. Under this view, there could be incorrect performances of *M*: acts consisting in producing sounds that do not instantiate the score, but still count as performances of the work – incorrect ones. Perhaps most performances of *M* are incorrect. On this view, the production of sounds instantiating the score is not an essential property of the act of performing the musical work, one without which the work is not really performed. What is essential is that those acts are regulated by the norm invoking the score; the score thus serves as a criterion of correctness.

This is just offered here by way of illustration of the intuitively correct distinction between the constitutive character of a norm involving a given criterion, in contrast to the non-constitutive character of the criterion itself. A similar account of games would, intuitively correctly, allow for cheating; violations of their constitutive rules could still count as instances of the game. As Wolterstorff (1980: 33-105) indicates in defending an account of musical works along these lines, it agrees better with the way we speak than Goodman's contrasting view that the score is an essential property of performances of a musical work, and therefore no performance that does not instantiate the score *really* counts as a performance of the work. On the other hand, the analysis counterintuitively counts as performances of a given work even those that diverge wildly from the score; an intuitively correct account of what is constitutive of musical works should classify those that diverge very much from the score as at most failed attempts. Thus, filling out the schema MW does not appear to suffice to define what counts as a performance of a musical work.

Speech acts are supposed to be defined by illocutionary forces, and to have propositional contents. There is a well-known ambiguity, such that

'illocutionary force' may refer both to types of illocutionary forces (asserting, promising, ordering, questioning and so on), but also to the combination of one of these types with a given propositional content (or, in cases like wh-questions, with a propositional function as content). Here I will mostly follow the first usage; when I do not, context should make it clear. Given that speech acts necessarily have contents, in characterizing illocutionary forces we need to schematically mention them. By a *simple account* of an illocutionary force like assertion Williamson means one according to which the force is defined (uniquely characterized) by a constitutive rule, which invokes as constitutive criterion a property of the asserted proposition. Williamson's account in terms of the *knowledge rule* KR, repeated below, is a case in point; one in terms of the *truth rule* TR is another:

(KR) One must ((assert *p*) only if one knows *p*)

(TR) One must ((assert *p*) only if *p* is true)

As before in the examples of musical works or games, violation of what these rules forbid (i.e., that one asserts false propositions, or propositions that one does not know) is on simple accounts understood to be possible. It is even compatible with accounts of this kind that this is what, as a matter of fact, happens most frequently. What simple accounts propound is that one such rule is constitutive of the act: necessarily, any performance of the act is governed by it; also, that one such rule individuates the act: assertion is necessarily the unique force of which the relevant rule is the unique norm. Any further norm applying to the act can be derived from the constitutive rule and considerations not specific to it.

Simple accounts are normative; they define forces in terms of norms. They might well be false; remember that for Williamson assertion is supposed to be the act that, by default, we perform in uttering declarative sentences. This is vague, but still allows for his proposal to be mistaken. Perhaps forces are not normatively defined. Perhaps they are normative, but no constitutive rule of the indicated kind is individuating by itself; as suggested before for the example of musical works, it may well be that further additional conditions are required, even if some constitutive norm is also part of the defining character of the relevant force. Nevertheless, Williamson's compellingly made case for a simple account based on KR is worth considering as a starting point. It is of course no objection to such an account that there are assertions whose producers lack knowledge of the contents they assert. The claim is not that knowledge by the asserter (or truth, for that matter) of the asserted proposition is essential; the claim is rather that being subject to blame if knowledge (or truth) are missing is essential. I will not

present here Williamson's elegantly and economically presented arguments for his view; I will just outline what I take to be their main elements, referring the reader to his work for elaboration.

First, conversational patterns favor the account: we challenge assertions politely by asking 'How do you know?', or more aggressively 'Do you know that?' (252).¹² Second, the account explains what is wrong in a version of Moore's paradox with 'know' instead of 'believe': *A, and I do not know that A* (253-4). Third, mathematics provides for formal situations where the speaker's sensitivity to the norms of assertion is highlighted; in those situations, being warranted to assert *p* appears to go hand in hand with knowing *p*. Fourth, an account based on TR seems at first sight preferable: given that the truth rule is satisfied whenever the knowledge rule is, but not the other way around, it provides for a practice with fewer violations of its governing rule; some evidential rule could then be explained as derived from TR, and considerations not specific to assertion. However, the truth rule does not individuate assertion; alternative speech acts like conjecturing, reminding or swearing also involve a truth rule (244-5). Moreover, reflection on lotteries (cases in which, knowing that you hold a ticket in a very large lottery, I assert 'your ticket did not win' only on the basis of the high probability of the utterance's truth) question the validity of any such alleged derivation (246-52). Finally, intuitions about many cases in which we assert without knowing can be made compatible with the view. In some cases, it is reasonable for us to think that we know, even if we do not; what we do is not permissible, but it is, as we feel, exculpable. In some cases, additional values (putting someone out of danger, enjoying a relaxed conversation) are at stake, allowing again for exculpation based on their contextual relative strength (256-9).

¹²Austin (1962: 138) appears to have this in mind when he says: 'It is important to notice also that statements too are liable to infelicity of this kind in other ways also parallel to contracts, promises, warnings, &c. Just as we often say, for example, "You cannot order me", in the sense "You have not the right to order me", which is equivalent to saying that you are not in the appropriate position to do so: so often there are things you cannot state – have no right to state – are in no position to state. You *cannot* now state how many people there are in the next room; if you say "There are fifty people in the next room", I can only regard you as guessing or conjecturing'. Austin seems to be contemplating a situation in which the utterer lacks knowledge of the number of people in the next room; I think that he says that in that case the assertion is not permitted, and that, those facts being fully in the open, the most natural thing is to interpret the speaker as (indirectly) doing some weaker act.

4 Are Forces Linguistically Encoded?

The following words used by Harnish (1994: 417) summarize our previous proposal about the semantics-pragmatics distinction: 'Semantics is the study of linguistic meaning – meaning encoded into expressions of a language'. As we saw, a formulation along these lines allows for semantics to go beyond truth-conditions (whether characterized in terms of possible-worlds, or *à la* Davidson, by means of Tarskian truth-definitions) and their compositional determination. Williamson's account of assertion elaborates on what it is for meanings to transcend truth-conditions. The indication that an act governed by KR is being performed goes beyond the asserted truth-conditions. Is this encoded by expressions of natural languages?

That meaning in general, and in particular meaning encoded by expressions of natural languages, reduces to truth-conditions is the core of what Austin (1962) deplored as the *declarative fallacy*. Initially Austin appears to argue for his reproof of that fallacy by contrasting *constative* utterances, whose meaning is constituted by descriptive contents amenable to truth-conditional analyses, with *performative* utterances, which, not being truth-evaluable, do not allow for a truth-conditional treatment. It soon transpires, however, that Austin is justifiably not satisfied with this way of putting the matter, and ends up arguing instead that utterances of the two kinds have a locutionary aspect, characterizable in truth-conditional terms, and an illocutionary force not so characterizable.¹³ On the assumption that a proposal along Williamson's lines appropriately characterizes this non-truth-conditional element, Austin's view appears to provide an answer to our question: forces are encoded in language.

Unfortunately, matters are not so simple. Austin mainly discussed explicit performatives, sentences like 'I bequeath you my Ferrari', 'I promise to come', 'I declare war on Zanzibar'; his own proposals to characterize non-truth-conditional meanings by felicity conditions (which in the final section I will compare to my own) are designed with that paradigm in mind. However, the best treatment of explicit performatives has it that, in uttering those sentences, one (*tactically*, to put it in terms of Dummett's (1993) happy metaphor) asserts that one is at the same time promising, or christening, or declaring war, and (*strategically*, to go on with Dummett's metaphor) thereby additionally does these things.¹⁴ Even though it is the second, strategic goal that is consciously salient to ordinary speakers, the constitutive account of the semantics-pragmatics distinction suggests that it is in fact

¹³Levinson (1983, ch. 5) offers a clear presentation of the Austinian dialectic.

¹⁴Ginet (1979) provides an excellent defense of this view.

only their tactical means for it, namely the assertion, which is linguistically encoded. There is a conventional, standardized mechanism by means of which the assertion that one is bequeathing leads to the bequest; but arguably the conventions in question do not count among those constitutive of natural languages; and if so the phenomenon is not semantic but pragmatic on the present view. On the Gricean view languages are conventional devices to put forth communicative intentions; the needs accounting for the practices at stake (declaring war, promising, bequeathing and so on) go beyond those basic communicative intentions for whose satisfaction we would expect a community to develop conventional resources. As a result, we would expect the phenomenon to occur in every community where the practices exist, no matter what natural language they use; this is in fact the case.

The fact that we do not need to count as semantic the signification of the illocutionary forces ultimately intended by explicit performatives may fuel the hopes of those who think that truth-conditions exhaust the meanings encoded in natural languages. Aside from explicit performatives, grammatical moods (imperative, interrogative, and the indicative mood of full sentences) are the obvious candidates for the role of force-encoders in natural languages. The suggestion to sustain a truth-conditionalist view would then be to treat the utterances in question as linguistically mere surface variants of the appropriate explicit performatives. Proposals along these lines differ mainly on how they treat indicatives. On a *symmetric* view, the indicative is treated symmetrically: semantically, an utterance of 'I am hungry' has the truth-condition of 'I hereby assert that I am hungry', and is therefore true to the extent that, in making it, I indeed assert that I am hungry at the time, whether or not I am in fact hungry. On the more popular alternative *asymmetric* proposal of Lewis (1970) and Davidson (1979), indicatives are unique in not being taken as equivalent to the corresponding explicit performative.

These proposals are not correct. The first and philosophically most important point to make against them is not that they fail to provide a proper account of the linguistic meaning of utterances in non-indicative moods, although this criticism is also valid. The main problem is that they fail to account even for the linguistic meaning of utterances in the indicative mood. Frege pointed out that an indicative has the same propositional content both when it is uttered as a full sentence and is thereby asserted, and when it occurs as part of longer sentences, in particular as the antecedent of a conditional. Frege's point thus accounts for the validity of *modus ponens*. Although 'Mallory climbed Mt. Everest' does not have the same meaning,

broadly speaking,¹⁵ than it has in 'If Mallory climbed Mt. Everest, Irvine did so too', this 'ambiguity' is still compatible with the validity of inferring 'Irvine climbed Mt. Everest' from them: the validity of the inference depends on relations among propositional contents. Now, it is at most propositional contents that are captured in the theories we are considering, in terms of truth-conditions.¹⁶ When we are first exposed to these theories, it is perhaps obscured to us that only contents of that kind are according to them *linguistically* encoded by indicatives, or any other utterance. The linguistically encoded meaning of (6) is therefore represented by (7); according to proponents of the symmetric view the linguistic meaning of (8) is represented by (9), and according to proponents of the asymmetric view by (10):

- (6) Did Mallory climb Mt. Everest?
- (7) That I ask you if Mallory climbed Mt. Everest
- (8) Mallory climbed Mt. Everest
- (9) That I assert that Mallory climbed Mt. Everest
- (10) That Mallory climbed Mt. Everest

Of course, proponents of the views under consideration would admit that (10) (or (9), if they countenance the symmetric view) does not capture all that is communicated in uttering (8); for they admit that speakers also convey assertoric force. Their view is that this is not *linguistically* encoded.

This claim obviously contradicts our intuitions.¹⁷ But this is only the most conspicuous symptom of what is really wrong with them. Notice first that, even if forces are never linguistically encoded, Austin's claim still remains unchallenged as a point about the theory of meaning in general, if not about semantics – i.e., about linguistically encoded meanings. Even if it is only the content that I am performing a bequest with a certain content that is

¹⁵I.e., leaving aside whether the extra element is linguistically encoded or not, not to prejudice the present debate.

¹⁶I say 'at most', because these proposals also fail to capture, I think, presuppositional elements that are also part of linguistically encoded meanings.

¹⁷Dummett (1993: 207-8) makes this point.

linguistically encoded in 'I hereby bequeath you my Ferrari', while the bequest itself is a merely pragmatic implication, a general theory of meaning should still have to provide an analysis of the latter, even if under the 'pragmatics' label; and there is no hope of doing that merely in truth-conditional terms.¹⁸ Bequests, like promises, orders and so on ought to be characterized in part in normative terms, in terms of something like the norms we have so far considered for assertion, in addition to the truth-conditional characterization of their contents. Given that irreducibly normative forces are in any case meant, the claim that they only occur in linguistically encoded meanings as they do in (7) and (9), as constituents of propositional contents suitable to be antecedents of conditionals, needs a justification based on a general conception of language.

On the neo-Gricean view of natural languages espoused here, the truth-conditional view is unsupported. If languages are conventional devices to help implement communicative intentions, it is only to be expected that forces themselves will be signified, not just as part of propositional contents; propositional contents will be signified only in so far as, together with forces, they contribute to characterize the distinctive objects of linguistically fundamental communicative intentions. This prediction of Gricean views is confirmed by our intuitions about the unsuitability of (9) and (10) to characterize all that is linguistically encoded in (8). Defenders of the views I am questioning should provide an alternative view of natural languages well supported enough to dismiss that intuition.

A usual objection to the views I am criticizing is that they counterintuitively make implicit performatives in non-indicative moods, like (6), true or false (Harnish 1994: 418). I should warn at this point about a small inadequacy in my previous classifying together of Lewis and Davidson, the only two defenders of the view that I have referred to. For the latter (1979: 114-5) proudly claims that his proposal is not subject to this criticism, and in fact criticizes Lewis' on this very account. This is because Davidson does not

¹⁸Some writers in the symmetric division appear to think that their proposal of taking, say, the interrogative force of (6) as a content-constituent, as in (7), does provide an explanation of its nature; this would be a motivation for the symmetric treatment of (8), as in (9). This is a philosophically misguided suggestion, which obviously engenders an infinite regress. For, as the representation of the ascribed meanings by (7), (9) and (10) makes perfectly clear, even if the proposal is correct as a view about what is linguistically encoded, it still leaves aside some force with which explicit performatives are meant. To account for it under the present suggestion, we would need to think of them as part of the content of further explicit performatives with one more level of embeddings, like 'I assert that I ask if ...' for (7); and this, of course, is just the starting point of a regress. Writers in the asymmetric division do not make this mistake; Davidson (1979: 120-1) makes it clear that his view is not intended to account for assertoric force, which he takes to be a pragmatic matter, a matter of what speakers do.

analyze non-indicative implicit performatives like (6) as synonymous with the corresponding explicit performative. He instead provides a 'paratactic' analysis, by which (6) would come out under analysis as the juxtaposition of the *mood-setter* 'My next utterance is interrogative in force' and the *core* 'Mallory climbed Mt. Everest'. This is in my view essentially indistinguishable from Lewis' proposal; Davidson can only contend the opposite because he stipulates *à la* Humpty-Dumpty that, when a sentence comes out after analysis as the paratactic juxtaposition of two, it is neither true nor false, even if the juxtaposed sentences have truth-values (1979: 121). This is an *ad hoc* maneuver, recommended only for the distinction it allows between Davidson's and Lewis's proposals; as Harnish (1994: 420) says, there is no good reason to think that the paratactic juxtaposition of two truth-evaluable sentences is not truth-evaluable.¹⁹ It proves to be ultimately futile. Davidson (1979: 115) criticizes Lewis' account thus: 'simply reducing imperatives or interrogatives to indicatives leaves us with no account at all of the differences among the moods ... mood is as irrelevant to meaning as voice is often said to be'. This criticism is fair, but it applies to Davidson's view too. In his account (1979: 121), moods only occur in linguistic meanings as constituents of the propositional content (truth-conditions) of the mood-setter; they occur in essentially the same way in Lewis' account. This is not enough to capture the intuitive *linguistic* differences between the moods.²⁰

What, then, of the usual objection to these views that they counterintuitively make true or false implicit performatives in non-indicative moods, like (6)? A variant of this is the criticism by proponents of the asymmetric view of proponents of the symmetric view, that they provide incorrect truth-conditions for ordinary indicatives: in giving (9) as the linguistic content of utterances of (8), they make those utterances much more easily true than we intuitively think. Whether or not what we linguistically say obtains is only, according to the symmetric view, a matter of whether, in making the utterance, we really make the relevant assertion; it does not depend at all on what happened on Mount Mt. Everest on a day in June, 1924.²¹ Intuitively, this is

¹⁹Davidson (1969) proposes a similarly paratactic analysis of propositional attitudes reports; but he does not absurdly conclude from this that they are not truth-evaluable.

²⁰Segal (1991: 104-7) presents another criticism of Davidson's and Lewis' proposal.

²¹Lewis (1970: 224) gives this as his reason to adopt the asymmetric variant. Of course, he faces then a contrasting problem, namely, that of justifying the asymmetric treatment of implicit performatives in the indicative mood. The desire to evade this problem perhaps accounts for the incoherent justification that Davidson provides for the asymmetric view. With the elusiveness typical of his argumentative ways, he declares (1979: 119): 'Indicatives we may as well leave alone, since we have found no intelligible use for an assertion sign'. To 'leave indicatives alone' is here to forgo providing for them the paratactic analysis, which would produce a theory essentially equivalent to the symmetric view that they also are 'transformations'

not what we assert: we assert something whose truth depends on what happens on the mountain; the corresponding present point is that, similarly, with (6) we do not intuitively assert anything susceptible of truth or falsity. This criticism is in my view correct, but it should be understood in light of the first and conceptually most important. I would like to present the point, also by way of summary of what has gone so far, by analogy with one that Dummett has been pressing since his classic paper on truth: that purely disquotational accounts of truth miss something crucial (the 'point' or 'significance' of truth, he says), which can only be accounted for by thinking of the bearers of truth as objects of assertions.²²

We apply 'true' to propositional contents, like those represented by (7), (9) and (10), and also to assertions like that made with (8). Let us reserve 'obtains' for the former use to simplify the exposition. 'Obtains' applies indifferently to what is linguistically encoded by utterances in different moods. It applies also to moodless sentences that occur as parts of longer sentences, and it is thus what is needed, say, to give the semantics of truth-conditional connectives. 'True' does not apply so indifferently; it applies to utterances in the indicative, but not to utterances in other moods. A disquotational theory of truth is adequate as an account of what we here mean by 'obtains', but it does not suffice to account for the invidious 'true'; Dummett's contention is that a proper account of truth requires to embed an account of the former in an account of the latter. Now, the main objection to the theories that we have been discussing is not that they count as truth-evaluable (6), for there is this ambiguity in 'true', and it is a difficult intuitive question whether or not, in uttering (6), we convey the corresponding explicit performative, whose content indeed counts as true at least in the sense of 'obtain'. The objection is that they only ascribe as *linguistic* meanings to utterances things that can obtain or not; but they do not ascribe to them, as theories of this kind intuitively should, things only some of which can be true or false. In doing this, they fail to give a proper account both of the meanings linguistically encoded by non-indicative moods, and, what is

of corresponding explicit performatives. The phrase 'we have found no intelligible use for an assertion sign' alludes to Davidson's argument against the possibility of a conventional indication of assertion, which I will discuss in the main text presently. Davidson, however, is clear that the argument allegedly establishes *also* that there could not be either conventional indications of commands or questions. Consistency would then require that the other moods were also 'left alone'. That would be compatible with a theory along the lines of Stenius (1967); but not with Davidson's own.

²²See, for instance, Dummett (1973), ch. 10, 'Assertion'.

conceptually a more fundamental failure,²³ of those linguistically encoded by utterances in the indicative mood.

On a Gricean view of natural languages, it is to be expected that there exists an asymmetry between meanings linguistically encoded that cannot be evaluated as true or false, and those that can. This is just the asymmetry in 'direction of fit', separating communicative acts into two classes by their criteria of correctness or regulating norms: those, on the one hand, for which how the world is independently of them constitutes a criterion of correctness (because they are constitutively intended as its faithful representations); and those, on the other, for which how the world is independently of them does not constitute such a criterion (because they are constitutively intended to change it in ways dependent on them). Communicative acts are essentially overt on a Gricean view; it is thus to be expected that some indication of which of these two groups a given speech act belongs to be conventionally marked. This renders dogmatic the views we are questioning, which allow for linguistically encoded meanings to be appraised only in terms of the indifferent 'obtains'. They are dogmatic because they should justify their contrasting view on the basis of an alternative conception of natural languages, but so far as I know they have not done so.²⁴

We have thus found reasons for an affirmative answer to the question with which we began this section; some illocutionary forces are linguistically encoded in natural languages, as expected on our conception of what they are, and moods appear to be conventionally designed for this purpose. Conventionality by itself is not enough; there is a form of conventionality, standardization, in the signification of force by explicit performatives, but one can nonetheless resist the view that forces explicitly mentioned in them are *linguistically* encoded. In that case, however, we have an explanation of how they are conveyed, compatible with their non-linguistic nature. Con-

²³It is more fundamental firstly in that it is not on the surface: because of the ambiguity in the ordinary use of 'true', it may seem at first sight that these views provide an acceptable account of utterances in the indicative. Secondly, because it is explanatorily more basic: it is only after one appreciates the reasons why they do not account for indicatives, that one really understands why they do not properly account for non-indicatives either.

²⁴A more ambitious criticism, closer to Dummett's, would be that only by assuming linguistically encoded meanings properly including the normative element can we have a correct view about the other component of linguistic meaning, truth-conditions. The identification of truth and warranted assertability is not part of the agreement expressed here with Dummett's view that a philosophical theory of truth should be embedded in a theory of assertion. Cf. Williamson's (1996/2000: 242-3) distinction between realist and anti-realist accounts of assertion along the lines of his, and his critical remarks on Brandom's (1983, 1994) anti-realist but otherwise congenial view (*ibid.*, 258 fn.).

ventionality is a good *prima facie* indication, which, together with the previous reflections, does support the claim.²⁵

Davidson (1979: 114) has argued against this as follows: ‘mood is not a conventional sign of assertion or command because nothing is, or could be, a conventional sign of assertion or command’. His argument for this is based on the Humpty-Dumptyesque tactic of stipulating a new meaning for ‘convention’. He first reminds us that sentences in the indicative mood can be used to perform speech acts different from assertion; the same of course can be said of the other moods. Thus, with ‘in this house, we remove our shoes before entering’ a command is typically indicated; indicative sentences are also indirectly used in jokes, fiction, or in theatre. He then derives the previous conclusion from this point, as a corollary of what he calls *the autonomy of linguistic meaning*, that ‘there cannot be a form of speech which, solely by dint of its conventional meaning, can be used only for a given purpose, such as making an assertion or asking a question’ (*ibid.*, 113-4). If ‘convention’ is used in any ordinary way, the conclusion obviously does not follow from this. It is no objection to there existing in a given country a convention of driving on the right that morally unconcerned suicides bend it to their own goals by driving recklessly on the left. Not much about conventions in the ordinary sense can follow from what we may call *the autonomy of driving*, that there cannot be a form of driving which, solely by dint of its conventional regulation, can be used only for a given purpose, such as arriving safely or quickly to one’s destination.

Cases like those that Davidson calls to our attention should, I think, be treated in a similar way to the one suggested earlier for dealing with explicit performatives; i.e., as pragmatic meanings derived basically through a mechanism analogous to the one involved in the conversational implicatures, as theorized by Grice (1975). It cannot be exactly that, for Grice’s appeal to the maxims of quantity and quality manifests that he mostly had in mind implicatures derived from assertoric meanings; but other writers have developed proposals along similar lines.²⁶ Having recourse to Dummett’s (1993) metaphor mentioned above, we should distinguish the speaker’s *strategic* intent (ordering his audience to remove his shoes, or, in the case of fiction or play, leading his audience to imagine certain states of affairs) from

²⁵Pendlebury (1986), Belnap (1990) and Green (2000) provide additional reasons. Pendlebury and Belnap point out that there also are conventional contrastive forms to report in indirect discourse questions (indirect yes/no and wh-questions questions), commands and assertions. Green points out that parenthetical remarks, like ‘as I conjecture’ or ‘as I suggest’ conventionally serve to indicate illocutionary commitments additional to the one that might be indicated by the mood of the main clause.

²⁶See, for instance, Searle (1975). Dummett (1993: 209) makes a similar suggestion.

the *tactical* role that his indicative utterance plays; the fact that with that utterance a certain assertion would be made if used literally according to its semantics is still essential to its performing this strategic role.

5 Assertions as Transfers of Knowledge

Davidson’s argument does point to real problems for an account of the semantics of moods, though. Harnish (1994) documents well how variegated their use is. Thus with imperatives, in addition to issuing commands, we commonly plead (‘let me go!’), give advice (‘be strong!’), permission (‘help yourself!’), warn (‘don’t trip on that wire’), wish (‘have a good time!’), and so on. With indicatives, in addition to asserting, we remind, conclude from previous premises, answer exams, confess, address indifferent, incredulous or inattentive audiences, soliloquize, and so on. The uses of interrogatives are at least as variegated.

There are two options, in view of this, for a semantics of moods. The one chosen by Harnish (1994) is to reduce conventionally signified forces to an unspecific minimum, compatible with most of the typical uses, leaving to context (to pragmatics) the selection of a specific force compatible with the conventional one. This could be understood by analogy with the case of indexicals and demonstratives. A token-reflexive linguistic rule associated with the type ‘this glass’ in English descriptively relates every token of the expression to a glass salient when the token is uttered. Knowing this descriptive character is typically not sufficient to understand a token; over-hearing one uttered in a kitchen from another room is not sufficient to understand what the speaker means, it is also required in addition to gain through perception further knowledge identifying the glass referred to. Similarly, in the case of indicative utterances with content *p* the conventionally conveyed force-element could be the indication that the force of the utterance is such that part of its defining normative requirement is that the speaker believes *p*; in the case of imperatives, the indication that the force is to be such that part of its defining normative requirement is that the audience desires *p* to be the case. Context would then indicate additional elements sufficient to individuate the specific force meant by the speaker.

Williamson suggests an alternative when he says: ‘in natural languages, the default use of declarative sentences is to make assertions’ (2000: 258). On the alternative view, we would provide a specification of a given force as the *default* for utterances in the relevant mood. In a minimal context (a context without more information than that derived from the presumption that the participants know the language), that force would be unconditionally signified, all things considered; but the default assumption could be overridden in other contexts by an open-ended list of conditions: that the alleged

assertion has been made after ‘once upon a time’, or after ‘let me remind you of the following’, or ‘therefore’, or in an exam, or includes parentheticals like ‘I surmise’. By default the utterance of a full sentence in the indicative mood signifies according to Williamson’s proposal that the act is subject to the rule KR; the counterexamples would be dealt with by taking into account the operation of some condition overriding the default assumption.

I think that the second option is better, for reasons to be given presently. Practically speaking, perhaps there is not much difference. We still end up ascribing a disjunctive, and to that extend unspecific, conventional meaning to mood, leaving to context the specification of which force is meant. Theoretically, however, a proposal along these lines agrees better with the neo-Gricean conception of language, in committing itself, as the default for each mood, to meanings in accord with the view of natural languages as social devices designed to help implement communicative intentions. Or, rather, that would be so if what individuates the default assertoric force is the token-reflexive rule TKR instead of Williamson’s KR:

(TKR) One must ((assert p) only if one’s audience comes thereby to be in a position to know p)

I follow Williamson’s (2000: 95) use of ‘being in a position to know’: ‘To be in a position to know p , it is neither necessary to know p nor sufficient to be physically and psychologically capable of knowing p . No obstacle must block one’s path to knowing p . If one is in a position to know p , and has done what one is in a position to do to decide whether p is true, then one knows p . The fact is open to one’s view, unhidden, even if one does not yet see it. Thus, being in a position to know, like knowing but unlike being physically and psychologically capable of knowing, is factive: if one is in a position to know p , then p is true’.

I have recourse to this notion in order to characterize assertion in terms of an audience-oriented norm of knowledge-transmission that does not contradict clear pre-theoretic intuitions regarding which assertions are wrong. Intuitively, cases in which we assert p but fail thereby to transfer knowledge of p to audiences who already know p do not count as such as violations of norms constitutive of assertion. Nor do analogous cases in which we fail to transfer knowledge to an audience who is not paying attention, or who has beliefs defeating our testimony, perhaps overzealous skeptical doubts. Like Williamson’s KR, the norm still requires an existing truth-maker for the contents of acceptable acts of assertion, and that the act be connected with the truth-maker so as to allow for knowledge.

What arguments are there in favor of TKR? In the next section I will argue that assertion, the default speech act indicated by declarative mood, is conventional in the sense that, necessarily, a community has the practice of asserting only if it has the practice of using conventional devices to execute it, as a matter of fact we do. But it is only a practice defined by TKR, as opposed to one governed by KR, that one would expect to be conventional in that sense. Silence is enough to obey both KR and TKR, which is I think O.K. However, in contrast to TKR Williamson’s rule is also obeyed by a community of individuals who assert what they know, but only in soliloquy. It would be hard to explain why a community would find a use for a convention to signify that an act governed by such a rule is intended.

Williamson (2000: 267-9) considers reasons to justify the existence of conventions to signify assertion, individuated by KR, as opposed to, for instance, a speech act individuated by the truth rule TR. The main difference lies in that, in the latter case, the rule could be obeyed just by accident: one asserts p though one is very far from knowing p , but p just happens to be the case. Williamson argues that it is socially more useful to have a device to indicate an act governed by the stronger rule, because it requires of the asserter to ensure that there exists the non-accidental relation needed for knowledge between the act and its truth-maker. He compares the relation between bringing about p on the one hand and merely desiring p when in fact p obtains on the other, to that of knowing p on the one hand and merely believing p when in fact p obtains on the other. The first members of the two relations are distinguished from the others by their requiring a non-accidental relation between act and truth-maker. Williamson suggests that it makes more social sense to institute a device to indicate an act regulated by a norm requiring these stronger, non-accidental relations.

This argument works better to justify the conventional indication of an act governed by the stronger TKR vis-à-vis TR than the weaker KR. What does make social sense is the indication of a communicative act, by which someone with authority confers a responsibility to bring about p on someone else; not just the indication that the act will be correct if it brings about p . What we expect is not a device for the conventional indication of an act regulated by the norm that its performance brings about p ; but rather that the audience thereby brings about p . In line with this, if we advanced accounts of the speech acts that are the default uses of interrogatives and imperatives of the kind envisaged by Williamson, the norms we would end up with would be audience-oriented, like TKR. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to assertion. In issuing a command, someone confers responsibility on someone else to thereby make p the case; the norm constitutive of commands requires of the former to have the authority to confer this responsi-

bility, and of the latter to discharge it by thereby bringing about p . By default, imperatives conventionally signify an act subject to this norm. In issuing an assertion, someone confers a responsibility on oneself *relative to someone else* for the truth of p ; the norm constitutive of assertion requires of the former to have the epistemic authority to discharge this responsibility, by putting thereby the latter in a position to know p . The latter can challenge the epistemic authority of the former; but, if he does not, p will be rightfully taken afterwards as common knowledge. By default, declaratives conventionally signify an act subject to this complex of normative relations.²⁷

Can we not explain TKR as a non-constitutive norm of assertion, derived from KR as its constitutive rule and considerations not specific of assertion? No proposal along these lines that I know works. One obvious candidate that comes to mind is an appeal to Grice's maxim of *relevance*. However, such a proposal would work only by smuggling in the conception of the relevance at stake the view about assertion that the TKR proposal embodies. If we tried to elaborate an account of the indirect speech acts made with interrogatives or imperatives, along the lines of Grice's theory of conversational implicatures (which was designed with implicatures made with declaratives in view), we should replace the submaxims of quality and quantity by others adequate to commands and questions, the acts conventionally made by default with those other moods. At first sight, we should not do the same with the submaxim of relevance; but this is only because we wrongly assume a conveniently unspecific understanding of relevance.²⁸ Properly understood, what is relevant is relative to the goals at stake; there is thus a form of relevance appropriate to the constitutive point of assertions, and a different one appropriate when the constitutive goals of commands and questions are at stake. Now, if we only consider the sort of relevance appropriate to acts regulated by KR, I cannot see how we can obtain TKR (or anything audience-involving) as a derivative rule. We can only do that, as far as I can see, by assuming the kind of relevance adequate when it is an act regulated by TKR that is intended; but that would be a viciously circular way of establishing TKR as a derivative rule.

²⁷The present account suggests an elucidation of the claims by Burge (1993) regarding the apriority of the epistemic justification of belief based on testimony, as just a particular case of the apriority of analyticity. Davis (2002) provides a detailed account, based on Burge's views, of how such an account of the conventional meaning of declarative mood can be used to justify the transfer of knowledge from speaker to audience in particular cases. Taken together with that elaboration, the present account thus supports the dynamic picture of assertion provided by Stalnaker (1978). It could also be usefully developed on the basis of the detailed elaboration by Brandom (1983, 1994) of the outlined normative relations.

²⁸Levinson (2000) criticizes such an unspecific understanding of relevance.

These considerations provide the reason alluded to before to prefer, of the two considered possibilities to deal with the fact that moods have common uses for different speech acts, the view that a specific one is conventionally a default. If it is only conventional for moods the indication of the unspecific constraint on forces proposed by Harnish, it is left to the rationality of speakers to infer in each context the specific force on the basis of their knowledge of language. It seems to me to agree better with the way language is taught and acquired that it is rather the conventional relation with a specific force that is constitutive of natural languages, leaving only to the reasoning of individual speakers to work out in non-default contexts which other forces are intended.

One of the reasons that Williamson gives to support KR vis-à-vis TR is that it provides a more properly individuating rule than TR, because the latter does not discriminate assertion from other speech acts, like conjecturing or swearing. A similar consideration supports TKR vis-à-vis KR. Presupposing is another speech act, which is as much subject to KR as asserting; what characteristically distinguishes the former from the latter is that presupposings are not subject to TKR. On the contrary, what is presupposed is typically taken for granted as constituting common knowledge.

In addition to these considerations in favor of the TKR proposal, we can see that it also has the merits that Williamson claims for KR. The conversational patterns he mentions also support TKR; and there are others specifically in its favor, like a usual criticism of assertions based on their inaptness to transfer knowledge ('I already knew that, thanks'). The TKR account also explains what is wrong with the modified version of Moore's paradox, for, typically, in order for an assertion of p to put the audience in a position to know p , the asserter should know p .²⁹ The practices of mathematics and formal testimony in court manifest as much sensitivity to KR as to TKR. Finally, any feeling we may have that one should not be blamed in cases in which one asserts what one knows but does not thereby put an audience in a position to know can be handled by means of Williamson's strategy for corresponding objections to his own view: we can argue that what one does in those cases is not permissible, but it is excusable.³⁰

²⁹Lackey (1999) shows that there are exceptions, cases in which an assertion puts the audience in a position to know even though the speaker does not know. They include cases where one transmits knowledge acquired from knowledgeable sources that one does not trust; and cases where speakers' lack of knowledge derives from their having defeaters that are not transferred to their audiences together with their testimony.

³⁰Although the proposal advanced in this section on the conventional meaning of the indicative mood does not coincide with Dummett's own, it should be clear that it is in the spirit of his views on this matter, when contrasted with the views of truth-conditional theorists like Davidson which we considered and rejected in the previous section.

6 Intention and Convention in Speech Acts

In claiming that illocutionary force is an irreducible aspect of meaning overlooked by previous theorists, Austin (1962) argues for a social, anti-individualistic conception of meaning; nothing is more opposed to the Austinian vision than the view of meaning that Searle (1983) has ended up propounding. Austin wants to oppose traditional views of linguistic meaning in general, and assertion in particular, that take it to aim at the mere expression of independently characterized inner states, like beliefs or judgments. To pursue this ambition, Austin distinguishes constitutive from non-constitutive features of the *felicity conditions* by means of which he hopes to characterize illocutionary forces, and then follows a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, he suggests that the existence of a specific conventional procedure is the central constitutive feature of forces; secondly, he contends that the inner states associated with acts of meaning figure in merely non-constitutive sincerity conditions.

Opposing the first prong in a classical defense of a Gricean individualistic view according to which only communicative intentions are essential to non-natural meaning, Strawson (1964) rebutted some of Austin's claims. Austin says: 'there cannot be an illocutionary act unless the means employed are conventional' (Austin 1962:119). This appears to be the very strong claim that there cannot be an illocutionary act, unless the means employed to perform it are conventionally intended for such an undertaking; this is also suggested by his claim that the existence of a conventional procedure is the main constitutive felicity condition of illocutionary forces. As Strawson points out, however, illocutionary acts that we ordinarily perform by using non-conventional means, like warnings made with declarative utterances and so on, disprove the claim so understood.³¹ Austin himself did not appear to have much confidence in the view, as witnessed by the extremely weak characterization he provides of the conventionality of forces at other places; thus, a warning is conventional 'in the sense that at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula' (Austin 1962: 103).

However, Strawson's criticism leaves open the question of whether conventions are necessary in a stronger sense for the linguistically basic speech acts that we have taken to be conventionally signified by moods, like assertions. They could be conventional in the stronger sense that a community

³¹The point applies also to the speech acts constituting, on the present view, the default meanings of moods, like questions, commands and assertions. Thus, in 'Some Advice for poets', *New York Review of Books* XLIX, 14, James Fenton says that the way poets refute the death of the sonnet 'is not by argument, but by assertion. My sonnet asserts that the sonnet still lives' (*ibid.*, 67). To produce a sonnet is not a conventional means for asserting that the sonnet still lives (unless, of course, the sonnet says so, which is not Fenton's point).

could not have instituted the practice of performing acts subject to the rules constitutive of them, except by having conventional devices to indicate so. This sense is stronger than the one Austin provides in the passage just quoted in that, unlike the latter, it is incompatible with the individualistic ambitions of Grice's program. As far as I can see, conventions are constitutive in that stronger sense, which is what accounts in part for my describing the view that this paper contributes to articulate as merely *neo-Gricean*. Non-natural meaning constitutively involves communicative intentions; but the relevant communicative intentions are in part individuated relative to conventions operating in the social environment and accounting for the meaning-contribution of the semantic units of the expressions one has put together to produce one's utterance. Dummett (1973: 311, 354) argues for this in the case of assertion. His argument relies on the fact that, except for a very limited range of cases, we cannot make sense of the attribution of the inner state (belief, knowledge or judgment) that the act verbalizes independently of its regulating function in the performance of the relevant linguistic acts. This is certainly the case for the complex higher-order mental states characteristic of Gricean accounts.

In this regard I find some remarks by Williamson about the relation between conventions and constitutive rules potentially misleading. He argues as follows: 'Constitutive rules are not conventions. If it is a convention that one must ϕ , then it is contingent that one must ϕ ; conventions are arbitrary, and can be replaced by alternative conventions. In contrast, if it is a constitutive rule that one must ϕ , then it is necessary that one must ϕ ... a rule will count as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to that act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act' (Williamson 2000: 239). Although Williamson does not say so, this might suggest that there cannot be the kind of necessary connection between assertion and convention defended in the previous paragraph, because they have contrasting modal properties. Assertions are defined by constitutive norms, which are essential to them; norms related to conventions, on the other hand, are contingent.

This rough argument can be questioned on several grounds, and it is not my intention to attribute it to Williamson. But his argument may well confusingly suggest something like it; and, in any case, I think it is wrong: any sense in which norms related to conventions can be said to be contingent is such that the corresponding norms for assertions can also be said to be contingent; and vice versa, to the extent that assertions are related to constitutive norms that are essential to them, conventions are also related to constitutive norms essential to them. Intuitively, this is what should be the case. For conventions are tacit or explicit agreements regulating a potentially in-

definite number of cases; these agreements are exchanges of conditional promises, by which one commits oneself to do something in certain recurring situations on condition that others keep corresponding promises;³² and promises are just the sort of thing to be defined by constitutive norms. Thus, for the sake of the argument, let us consider the status of the following norm associated to the convention of driving on the right:

(DR) One must ((convene with others on driving on the right) only if one thereby drives on the right while others do likewise)

Is Williamson's a good reason not to count DR as a constitutive rule of the convention to drive on the right? He argues that conventional obligations are contingent, because conventions are arbitrary. However, notice that, in the case of, say, an assertion that snow is white, the obligation that he takes to be constitutive, necessarily governing any instance of the assertion, has acts of asserting in its scope; it forbids asserting that snow is white, when one does not know that snow is white: 'The rule is to be parsed as 'One must ((assert *p*) only if *p* has C)' ... The rule unconditionally forbids this combination: one asserts *p* when *p* lacks C' (Williamson 2000: 241). The arbitrariness of conventions is surely compatible with the claim that DR is a constitutive rule of the convention of driving on the right, understood as Williamson proposes here for the case of assertion. The convention's constitutive rule unconditionally forbids convening with others on driving on the right, and then driving on the left while other parties to the convention comply with it. The arbitrariness of conventions must be compatible with counting this prohibition as necessarily governing any such case of convening. At least, the following seems to be the case: to the extent that assertions are essentially governed by the kind of norm that Williamson contemplates, conventions can be equally governed by similar norms.

'If it is a convention that one must ϕ , then it is contingent that one must ϕ ; conventions are arbitrary, and can be replaced by alternative conventions': surely this is platitudinous. But, to the extent that this is platitudinous, there is a corresponding platitude true of assertions. It is contingent that a particular convention has in fact been adopted; another convention (or none at all) could have been adopted instead, for instance that of driving on the left. But the obligation defining the convention of driving on the right would still be in place in the counterfactual situation; for it would still forbid convening on driving on the right, and then proceeding to drive on the left. What is contingent is the existence of an obligation to drive on the right, given that the convention determining it could well not have been adopted;

this does not make contingent the obligation DR, constitutive of the convention in the view parallel to the one Williamson holds regarding assertion. In the very same sense, the obligations related to assertions are contingent. If any given assertion were not made, the knowledge-obligation imposed by what Williamson takes to be its constitutive rule would not exist. No act of assertion might exist, and then none of the knowledge-commitments imposed by that rule would exist either. It would still be the case in those subjunctive situations that the obligations constitutive of assertion (as Williamson defines it) obtain.

Thus, the arbitrariness of conventions does not posit any special difficulty for the view that linguistically fundamental forces like assertion, although defined by constitutive rules, are necessarily conventional in the sense previously outlined; and this vindicates in part the Austinian position in the debate about the place of intention and convention in speech acts.

The view of assertion defended here should also help appraise the other prong of Austin's anti-individualistic strategy, namely, his counting as non-constitutive the felicity conditions concerning the presence of mental states that, on individualistic views, the utterances merely voice. Gricean critics correctly pointed out that some relation between forces and mental states should also be constitutive; because part of what distinguishes asserting from commanding is that the former is related to doxastic states in a way in which the latter is rather related to conative states, even granting that the existence of specific conventional procedures also distinguishes them.

Discussions of these matters have been in my view obscured by a confused idea of what a constitutive rule is, held both by Austin and by his critics; the preceding considerations should help clarify the issues. A norm constitutive of an act, in contrast to a mere regulative rule, is essential to the act; necessarily, every performance of the act is subject to the rule. However, the essential character of the norm should not be confused with an essential character of the criteria invoked in the norm. It is a constitutive norm of commands that whoever issues them has the required authority. But it is confused and fruitless to debate whether a command has been really issued by someone who utters an imperative merely pretending to have the relevant authority for it. What is clear is that the act counts as a flawed order, an act made in violation of a norm constitutive of ordering. As with the similar case of cheating in games, one can well say that it is because it was an order that it can be described as a flawed one; it is because it was still a game of football that the goal was scored illegally, the forward having deceitfully used his hand. As Williamson insists, it does not count as an objection to the present view that many assertions are made in violation of the rule here claimed to be constitutive, by ignorant speakers or to inattentive audiences.

³² An exchange of promises of a peculiar kind; see Gilbert, 1993.

What is claimed to be constitutive of assertions is their being subject to the norm, not its satisfaction.

Part of Rawls' (1955) aim in distinguishing constitutive and regulative norms was to put the vindication or rejection of utilitarianism in its proper place. The view of utilitarianism as a reductionist form of naturalism goes hand in hand with thinking of all norms as regulative, as generalizations summing up useful consequences that follow from recurring situations. This gives rise to a confused view of the kind of obligation applying to particular instances of practices, acts subject to norms like promises or punishments. The anti-reductionist view that there are constitutive norms prevents these confusions; and, as Rawls suggests, it still allows a place for utilitarian considerations, now directed at establishing which practices defined by constitutive rules should be in fact adopted, and thus which irreducible obligations should thereby exist in the actual world.

A similar point could be made regarding the social character of linguistic representation, as presented in this paper. It is not that the norms associated with illocutionary forces merely sum up uses of representational devices with socially beneficial consequences; this view will only lead to a confused interpretation of the obligations accruing to performances of speech acts. However, among all forces existing in the Platonic Heaven, all of them equally imposing their constitutive norms on their instances, it makes natural sense (i.e., it is compatible with a scientific view of the place of rational beings in the natural world), in addition to being confirmed by our intuitions as competent speakers, to think that the conventional signification of some of them is constitutive of natural languages; this is in a nutshell the main reason given in the previous section to think that some specific forces are conventionally signified, even if only as defaults, by devices like moods. It makes natural sense to think so of those forces whose existence would confer socially beneficial consequences – like one whose instances count as correct to the extent that they allow the transfer of information from a truthful speaker to a trustful hearer. This is, in a nutshell, the main reason given here to think of TKR rather than KR as the constitutive rule of the type of speech act conventionally signified by default by the declarative mood.

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