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ABSTRACT: Assertives have a word-to-world 'direction-of-fit': their illocutionary point is that the word should fit the world. Directives and commissives have a world-to-word direction-of-fit: their illocutionary point is to make the world fit the word. Arguments in politics and practical argumentation generally are often about directives or commissives, and many of these cannot meaningfully be reconstructed as assertives. Nevertheless, many theorists of argumentation proceed, tacitly or explicitly, as if all arguments must be about assertives, thereby obfuscating matters.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, assertive, commissive, direction of fit, directive, pragma-dialectics, reconstruction, Searle, speech act

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a straightforward observation that the subjects or issues about which people argue in real-life argument belong to different types of speech act.

Austin (1962, pp. 150-163) first distinguished between types of speech acts (or illucutionary acts). Searle (1975, 1979) developed the idea and five basic classes as follows:

> If we adopt illocutionary point as the basic notion on which to classify uses of language, then there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language: we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to do things, we express our feelings and attitudes and we bring about changes through our utterances (1979, p. 29).

The terms proposed by Searle for these five basic classes of illocutionary acts are, in the same order: *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declaratives*.

Despite this insight modern argumentation theory tends to assume, either that all subjects of argumentation belong to one and the same type: assertives, or that they should be treated as if they did. I will try to show, first, that the subjects of many real-life arguments are directives or commissives; second, that to reconstruct such directives or commissives as assertives sometimes loses more insight than it gains.

The assumption, usually tacit, that all subjects of argument are assertives I will call the naïve assertive theory. There is also a sophisticated assertive theory. It recognizes

that often the subject of argumentation is not on the face of it an assertive, but it then goes on to reconstruct it as one.

A look at some authentic examples will suffice to refute the naïve assertive theory.

2. ARGUING FOR DIRECTIVES AND COMMISSIVES

In a famous broadcast on February 9, 1941, Winston Churchill made a plea to the United States to support Britain's war effort. Addressing President Roosevelt directly, he concluded:

> Put your confidence in us. Give us your faith and your blessing, and, under Providence, all will be well.
> We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle, nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we will finish the job.

What Churchill tried to make Roosevelt and the United States accept, after a series of promises that served as reasons, was not an assertion or proposition, but a plea expressed in imperatives—in other words, a directive.

Soaring even higher in seriousness and oratory, these are the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 43-48). Like Churchill, Christ argues for a directive speech act expressed by a number of imperatives:

> You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

On July 2, 1945, President Truman ended his Address Before the Senate on the proposal for the UN Charter with these words:

> This Charter points down the only road to enduring peace. There is no other. Let us not hesitate to join hands with the peace-loving peoples of the earth and start down that road, with God's help, and with firm resolve that we can and will reach our goal.
> I urge ratification. I urge prompt ratification.
> Thank you.

Truman, too, argues by giving reasons in order to have his hearers accept a plea, that is, a directive speech act, but unlike Churchill and Christ he avoids imperatives. Still, the purpose of his speech act is not to get the Senate to accept some proposition about UN as true or acceptable; he urges them to perform the collective act of ratification.

The next example is similar. It is a famous piece of forensic oratory: the concluding sentences of Clarence Darrow's summation to the jury in the trial against the Sweet family in Detroit, an African-American family accused of firing a gun against an aggressive white mob surrounding the house they had just bought in an all-white neighborhood:

> I ask you, on behalf of this defendant, on behalf of these helpless ones who turn to you, and more than that–on behalf of this great state, and this great city which must face this problem, and face it fairly,–I ask you, in the name of progress and of the human race, to return a verdict of not guilty in this case!

We now descend to an utterly mundane field of argument: advertising. An ad for Camel cigarettes from the time of the Second World War goes:

> If Camels are not your present brand, try them. Not just because they're the favorite in the service or at home - but for the sake of your own smoking enjoyment, try Camels.

Another cigarette advertisement making an argument, this time from the 'fifties:

> Only a perfect balance of sunshine and moisture produces vintage tobacco—with its qualities of gentleness and delicate flavor. These qualities tell why PHILIP MORRIS has made so many friends among younger smokers—with their fresher, unspoiled tastes. Follow Young America's lead. Enjoy PHILIP MORRIS in the convenient Snap-Open pack.

These ads are clearly arguments. In both, reasons are given for a conclusion; in both the conclusion is a directive: *try* Camels, *enjoy* Philip Morris.

Argumentative discourse arguing for a directive, such as a plea, a proposal or a prayer, is also found in the language of lovemaking, or in simulated speech acts of lovemaking such as we find in poetry; a famous love poem by Christopher Marlowe begins:

> Come live with me and be my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove
> That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
> Woods or steepy mountain yields.

What the speaker argues for in this poem by making a long series of promises might perhaps best be called a proposal—a combined directive and commissive: please do this, and we will do all these together.

Now for some commissives:

> A sustainable Australia presents the opportunity to save the Great Barrier Reef from climate change, to turn around and repair the degradation to our greatest inland river system the Murray-Darling, and to foster a vibrant and competitive clean and efficient economy, and give us all meaning as we pursue a truly worthy endeavour.
>
> We are the privileged generation to face this challenge and opportunity. We still have time and we can make the changes needed. Let's just get on with the job of achieving a sustainable Australia!

Thus concluded a speech by Don Henry, Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation, at a 2002 Round Table on the theme: "Should we Sign the Kyoto Protocol?" What makes it a commissive is that it calls for collective acceptance by the body to which the speaker himself belongs of an obligation to undertake some action. The forms *Let's* or *Let us* are characteristic of these speech acts.

Another form used for commissives is the subjunctive, marked in the singular by the absence of the suffix -*s*; an example is this resolution proposed to the US Senate by Senator Harris from Kansas, in the 1899 debate on whether to ratify the treaty that would have conferred statehood to the Philippines:

> That the United States hereby disclaim any disposition or intention to exercise permanent sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over the Philippine Islands […]

The Senator is not asserting or predicting anything; instead, his speech argues for a collective, declarative speech act to be performed by the US Senate.

The subjunctive form of a directive is also found in this typical car advertisement from 1958:

The copy says:

> Not long after the motorist takes possession of his new Cadillac, he discovers that the car introduces him in a unique manner. Its new beauty and elegance, for instance, speak eloquently of his taste and judgment. Its new Fleetwood luxury indicates his consideration for his passengers,. And its association with the world's leading citizens acknowledges his standing in the world of affairs. Incidentally, this is a wonderful year to let a Cadillac tell its story on your behalf!. We suggest you see your dealer—and that you place your order for early delivery.

All the above examples argue for a directive or a commissive (or something in between). This refutes the naïve assertive theory.

But does such a theory really exist? The answer is that while modern argumentation theories perhaps do not claim explicitly that the subject of every argument is an assertion, many of them tacitly proceed as if it were. An example of such a theory is Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (1958); the claims he discusses are all simple factual assertions like *Harry is a British subject* or *Anne has red hair*.

However, Toulmin's book was intended to make a statement in the philosophy of science, which may be why the only claims it analyzes are of this kind. Elsewhere he shows great awareness of the distinctive features of ethical or practical argument (e.g., Toulmin 1950, 1981, Jonsen & Toulmin 1988).

3. A TYPOLOGY OF CLAIMS IN ARGUMENT

This suggests that it might be helpful here with a simple and provisional typology of claims in argument. Purely factual claims would represent one extreme; in the table below they are category 1.

Distinct from this is the type of claim that Toulmin's own 1958 theory may exemplify. We may call this the category of *interpretive* claims; their function is to propose a different, purportedly better interpretation or conceptual framework in which to see a well-known phenomenon (category 2). Much argument in the humanities, but also in ethics and politics, is of this kind. Unlike category 1 claims there is no clear-cut set of truth conditions by which category 2 claims may be conclusively tested as true or false; the reasons speaking for an interpretive claim will often be that it fits reality better, is more revealing, and all in all a good idea.

An argument like that already has something in common with the next categories: category 3 contains overtly normative claims, such as *Bullfighting is evil* or *Matisse is better than Picasso*. From there the distance is short to practical claims which propose actions or policies, such as *We should choose to do X* (category 4).

Many current textbooks of argument and critical thinking apply (some of) these distinctions, e.g., Rieke & Sillars (1984), who distinguish between *factual claims*, *value claims*, and *policy claims*. It is less often recognized that policy claims (category 4) are not claims in the sense of being propositions; "proposals" is the proper term. This is because their illocutionary point is not to assert a state of affairs; it is to bring about a state of affairs. Hence their natural linguistic form is a directive (e.g., an imperative) or a commissive. However, they may assume the linguistic form of assertions, typically containing *must*, such as *We must reduce CO_2 emissions*; or they may appear as assertions that the proposed policy is definitely superior to any alternative.

In such cases the assertive form of the proposal is rather unproblematically convertible into its directive or commissive form, such as, e.g., *Let us reduce CO_2 emissions* (category 5)—and conversely.

This may explain why few have challenged the sophisticated assertive theory, according to which all subjects of argument must be reconstructed and treated as assertives. There is admittedly a practical synonymy between an assertive and a directive/commissive—*if*, and only if, the assertive states that the action referred to is necessary, or the only advisable one. An argument with such an assertive as its claim would for all practical purposes imply the corresponding directive/commissive.

However, as we saw above, there are many arguments for a directive or commissive that is *not* synonymous with an assertive stating that an action is necessary or the only advisable one. This is category 6 in the table.

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6
Types of claim	Assertives: factual claims	Assertives: interpretive claims	Assertives: normative (value) claims	Assertives: practical (policy) claims	Directives /commissives convertible into assertives	Directives/ Commissives *not* convertible into assertives
Examples	*Harry is a British citizen*	[Toulmin's argument theory]	*Bullfighting is evil*	*We must reduce CO_2 emissions*	*Let us reduce CO_2 emissions*	*Come live with me and be my love* *Try Camels* *We suggest you place your order for early delivery*
Comments	Propositions with clear truth conditions	No clear truth conditions; normative and practical considerations involved	No clear truth conditions	Proposals	The Directive/ Commissive is practically synonymous with an implicit or explicit general claim that a certain policy is unconditionally necessary or, all things considered, objectively better than all the alternatives	The Directive/ Commissive is *not* practically synonymous with any implicit or explicit general claim that, etc.

3. AGAINST THE SOPHISTICATED ASSERTIVE THEORY

The most elaborate representative of the sophisticated assertive theory is pragma-dialectics, which insists that any standpoint, if it is not already an assertive, should be reconstructed as one. The principle is stated categorically in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984):

> the argumentatively relevant moves must be assertives with some identifiable propositional content connected in some accountable way to the speech acts actually performed in the dialogue (1984, p. 92).

> Expressed opinions and argumentations consisting superficially of illocutions of some other type must first be analysed in such a way that it is clearly exactly what *assertives* are involved (1984, p. 98).

Similarly, van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs (1993) rule out directives as standpoints:

> Where directives occur within a critical discussion, their role must be either to challenge a standpoint, request argumentation in defense of a standpoint, or to request information so as to clarify some issue (1993, p. 29).

Why does pragma-dialectics consider this prescription necessary? The answer has to do with commitment or "committedness": pragma-dialectics regards it "as the illocutionary point of the members of the classes of *assertives* to *commit the speaker (to a greater or lesser degree) to the acceptability of the expressed position*" (1984, p. 97). And:

> If these expressed opinions and argumentations could not be construed as *assertives* a resolution of the dispute would be impossible, since it is only possible to resolve disputes thanks to the specific committedness associated with the performance of *assertives* (1984, 98).

This "committedness" is essentially the same feature that Searle describes as follows:

> The point or purpose of the assertive class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed position. All of the members of the assertive class are assessable on the dimension of assessment which includes *true* and *false* (1979, p. 12).

The pragma-dialectical insistence on treating all standpoints as assertives in this sense reflects the interpretive axiom that

> argumentative discourse is conceived as aimed at resolving a difference of opinion by putting the acceptability of the 'standpoints' at issue to the test by applying criteria that are both problem-valid as well as intersubjectively valid (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2003, p. 387; similar formulations in many other writings).

So the need to convert other speech act types into assertives is dictated by the axiom that all argumentation should be held against the ideal of dispute resolution. There is a qualification: just as Searle speaks about commitment to truth "in varying degrees" and the dimension which "includes" true and false, so the pragma-dialecticians' committedness is to the "acceptability" of an "identifiable propositional content," not necessarily to its "truth"; they rightly point out that there are many "ethical, aesthetic, or other normative statements to which the *true/false* criterion does not apply" (1984, p. 96; these are our category 3). But such a statement is nevertheless an assertive, and in arguing for it an arguer is committed to some "identifiable propositional content." This is necessary if there are to be intersubjectively valid criteria by which the acceptability of the conflicting standpoints can be put to the test. Pragma-dialectical principles demand two standpoints that are incompatible because one makes an assertion with identifiable propositional content that is denied or doubted by the other. Only then is it guaranteed that critical discussion can lead towards one of the standpoints being retracted and the dispute thus being resolved, because only assertives have the necessary committedness to an identifiable propositional content.

The problem with the assertive reconstruction is that it neutralizes a difference of kind. Reconstructing directives and commissives as assertives does not merely add a missing feature: it basically changes a speech act of one type into its contrary opposite. This sometimes has little practical relevance, namely when an argument for a directive or commissive presents an action as necessary or the only advisable one. But severe

problems with the assertive reconstruction arise when this is not the case, that is, when the directive or commissive presents the action referred to as a *choice*—a choice which it urges upon the hearer.

The difference of kind between assertives and other speech act types has to do with what Austin (1953), Anscombe (1957), Searle (1975, 1979, 1983), and others have called their "direction of fit." Assertives have a *word-to-world* direction-of-fit. Directives and commissives have a *world-to-word* direction of fit. The difference, to use a formulation by Bernard Williams (1966), is between discourse which "has to fit the world" and discourse which "the world has to fit." Humberstone (1992, p. 60) has proposed the terms "thetic" for the word-to-world direction of fit and "telic" for the world-to-word direction of fit; commissives and directives are telic, whereas assertives are thetic; that is why the illocutionary point of a directive or a commissive is not a commitment to any "identifiable propositional content." The contrary opposition thetic-telic is precisely what the assertive reconstruction is meant to suspend.

However, in the examples above the suspension of this difference is at least questionable and in some cases impossible; that is, we cannot formulate any one assertion which fittingly represents the arguer's standpoint.

The Cadillac ad, for instance, argues for a directive to place an "order for early delivery" of the new Fleetwood. How can we reconstruct this directive as an assertive? It would be ludicrous to say that the ad asserts that for the reasons given, it is *necessary* to buy this car. Does it assert that it is *reasonable* or *advisable* to buy it? No, General Motors hardly intends to make the potential customer consider the purchase in terms of what's "reasonable." Pragma-dialectics would reconstruct the text as asserting that the purchase is "acceptable." But what could that mean? That the offer of this car (at the current price, which is not mentioned) is acceptable? That only defers the problem. Does it mean that the purchase *should* be accepted? By this reading the ad asserts that it is somehow necessary for the reader of this ad to buy this car, a claim we found ludicrous just before. Or does the phrase mean that the purchase *may* be accepted by some readers? Probably the ad in 1958 did make some readers accept the purchase; but that is irrelevant, for the reconstruction with *may* is not an empirical assertion, but a judgement. Could it mean that *some* readers are justified in finding the purchase acceptable? Then why only some, but not all? On what grounds can we decide that the purchase would be acceptable for some, and who would they be? Or does it mean that the purchase is acceptable for its specific reader just now? That opens the assumption, unusual in argumentation theory, that acceptability varies from one individual to the next, in other words, that acceptability is subjective; yet the assertion "buying this car is acceptable for me" is still unacceptably vague. Does it mean "I must buy it"? We have already rejected that interpretation twice. Does it mean "I could buy it"? Well, maybe I could if I had the money, but on money the ad is naturally silent. So what else could be the meaning of the assertion that I *could* buy this car?

Of course there are no answers to all these questions. What the ad tries to do is not to make me accept an assertion, but to make me buy the car by making me *want* to buy it. The reconstruction of the directive as an assertive saying "the purchase of this car is acceptable" makes the speech act performed by the ad meaningless; this assertive has no "identifiable propositional content," and there are no the "intersubjectively valid criteria" by which to put the dispute (if dispute it is) between the carmaker and the reader to the

test.[1] Like many directives or commissives in advertising, everyday talk, workplace conversation, lovemaking, religious or instructional language, this ad is telic, not thetic; it urges the reader or hearer to make the world conform to the speaker's word in a certain respect. The illocutionary act performed by such discourse is to try to make the hearer follow a call to a personal choice, not to commit its speaker to the assertion of an identifiable propositional content. Whether the reasons offered for the directive or commissive give it enough aggregate strength to make the individual hearer actually follow the call is that individual's personal (that is, subjective) decision.

4. CONCLUSION

An argument for a directive or commissive is, in many cases, simply a meeting and perhaps a clash of wills. The subject of the dispute, if indeed we can call it a dispute, is not an assertion to whose acceptability or non-acceptability the two parties, respectively, are committed. There are no intersubjectively valid criteria that will help solve the dispute; and there is no necessity for either party to retract. In arguments over such directives or commissives, there is no implication that a resolution of the dispute is possible; that is precisely why pragma-dialectics insists that directive or commissive standpoints expressed be reconstructed as assertives. But the criteria by which the hearer accepts or rejects the call to buy the Cadillac cannot be made "intersubjectively valid" by any reconstruction. If a reader of the Cadillac ad accepts its proposal, then that is tantamount to saying that he now *wants* to buy the car. It is definitely not tantamount to saying, e.g., that it is reasonable or acceptable for anyone to buy the car, let alone that he thinks everybody ought to buy it. (In fact, he might find that very undesirable because part of some people's desire to own a Cadillac probably stems from the fact that few people do.)

What directives or commissives do is to exert a certain influence on the hearer, and if there is argument, this influence is backed up, and presumably fortified, by reasons. To substitute a directive or commissive with an assertive, for example one containing the predicate "acceptable," is to replace a speech act whose validity or non-validity resides in the subjective domain (because it is each individual's decision) with a speech act whose validity or non-validity resides in an objective domain—but which is unfortunately meaningless. To reconstruct the call for this subjective choice with an intersubjective assertion falsifies it and/or makes it vacuous, as when the term "acceptable" is used.

To at least some extent, a similar point could be made about all the other examples. True enough, in much discourse arguing for a directive or commissive the latter may, for all practical purposes, be reconstructed as an assertive; but there is also a lot of discourse where this is not the case. To dictate that all arguments for non-assertive speech acts must be reconstructed by theory as arguments for assertives, even if that

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[1] I do not deny that the copy in the ad makes several assertions with identifiable propositional content. I deny that the directive *standpoint* which the assertions made in the ad are meant to argue for has identifiable propositional content. Also, I propose that my above analysis, which aims to show the vacuity of assertive reconstructions of this standpoint, applies equally to reconstructions along the lines of "My standpoint is that the assertion 'You will place your order for early delivery' is acceptable"—the kind of reconstruction suggsted by Houtlosser (1994).

theory is just an ideal model and not an empirical claim, runs the risk of blinding us to an essential fact about argument: namely that much argument represents attempts by some people to exert influence on the will of other people and hence on their free choice. Such influence is an essential function of human language and should not be ruled out by definition as illegitimate or less than ideal; where the borderline might be between legitimate and illegitimate influence is another story.

Link to commentary

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