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Assertion as a Normative Act. How Assertoric Speech Shapes Social Reality

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“Thus the conceptual framework of persons is the framework in which we think of one another as sharing the community intentions which provide the ambience of principles and standards (above all, those which make meaningful discourse and rationality itself possible) within which we live our own individual lives. A person can almost be defined as a being that has intentions. Thus the conceptual framework of persons is not something that needs to be *reconciled with* the scientific image, but rather something to be *joined* to it. Thus, to complete the scientific image we need to enrich it *not* with more ways of saying what is the case, but with the language of community and individual intentions, so that by construing the actions we intend to do and the circumstances in which we intend to do them in scientific terms, we *directly* relate the world as conceived by scientific theory to our purposes, and make it *our* world and no longer an alien appendage to the world in which we do our living.”

Wilfrid Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of a Man.* In Published in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, edited by Robert Colodny (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962): 35-78

Dedicated to all those who respect truth, without presuming to holding it in their pockets.

Introduction and summary

. Main themes and goals of the thesis

The goal of this thesis is to provide an account of assertion (roughly speaking, the act of presenting a proposition as true) as a *normative act;* that is, as an act which has the characteristic effect of updating the normative relationship between the speaker and the audience. The idea of assertion as a normative act has been widely discussed and defended in the literature, drawing from Austin's (Austin, 1975) idea of speech-acts as "social acts", that is, as acts which bring about characteristic effects regarding the social status of the agents involved. Specifically, assertion is understood as an act which produces certain commitments and entitlements which affect the relationship between the speakers and her audience. For instance, a speaker who asserts *p* is liable to criticism in case *p* turns out to be false. The core of Austin's idea is that under certain circumstances, utterances can produce a certain *normative state of affairs*. The fact that a token utterance, in a given context, has the force of an assertion amounts to the fact that the utterance produces a certain normative state of affairs.

The Austinian idea of assertion as an act creating obligations and entitlements suggests a parallel between assertion and entities like moves within a game or legal acts within a normative system. This parallel has been challenged on the grounds that assertions can be performed in ordinary contexts without the agents involved having accepted a pre-established rule clearly stating the normative significance of assertion (Pagin, 2011). In the first part of this thesis, I set out to rescue the idea of assertion as a normative act by showing that how a speech-act like assertion can have normative significance without the previous explicit stipulation and acceptance of relevant rules. I will argue that a speaker's assertion entitles the audience to certain normative expectations. The legitimacy of these expectations is grounded on the existence of an *equilibrium* in a game – i.e. a strategic profile of interaction towards which agents have an interest converge, given that the utterance has been performed. Furthermore, I will explain how these equilibria reflect the way the utterance acquires its conventional meaning and are grounded on the mutual interest of agents, within the community, to pursue truth and exchange truthful information. Using concepts from game-theory, I will explain the emergence of assertion as a *social act* with reference to this sort of cooperative endeavor.

The notion of strategic cooperation in pursuing truth is central in my work. As I said, in the first part of the thesis I employ it to explain the possibility of assertion as a normative act. In the second part of the thesis I apply the same theoretical model in reverse and explain how when agents cease pursuing the mutual goal of exchanging through information, the possibility of assertion as a normative act is consequently undermined. I work on two major case-studies where the normative state of affairs characteristically brought about by assertion is undermined by features of the context related to how agents treat each other.

The first one involves what I call "dialectical obstructionism". The concept is meant to describe cases how by preventing certain questions to enter the focus of conversation, agents can make it more difficult for their peers to perform certain assertions. The phenomenon illustrates a case where a conversation does not feature cooperation of all their agents towards answering a certain question and it shows how lack of cooperation undermines the capacity of an utterance to acquire assertoric force. In the second case-study I shift the focus on political discussion. I examine the effects of phenomena like post-truth rhetoric and polarization in political speech with respect to the social practice of assertion. I argue that these phenomena reflect unwillingness of participants to political discussion to treat their opponents as subjects interested in truth. As such, they undermine the sort of normative state of affairs which characterize assertoric practice. Said normative state of affairs crucially involves factual accountability on the speaker's part. The decay of factual accountability in political speech can, as I will explain, be exploited for political ends, while having significant negative repercussions on policy making.

. Contents of the chapters

The first chapter introduces the reader to the notion of assertion as a normative act, as developed in the literature. This chapter will explain what is meant by entitlements and commitments, and what role notions of this sort play in explaining what does it mean for an utterance to have the force of an assertion. In this sense, it provides the basic conceptual framework needed in order to understand further developments of the discussion, in addition to explaining *why* the normative account of assertion appears theoretically valuable, based on our intuitions of *what* counts as assertion.

In the second chapter I provide a review of the main problems highlighted in the literature regarding the normative account. After I reviewing them, and pointing out the weakness of some criticisms, I single out two main objections the normative account has to challenge. First, it must account for the fact that the normative effects characteristic of assertion can sometimes be produced by speech-acts which are not assertions (Pagin, 2004). Second, it must account for how assertoric utterances bring about normative states of affairs in the first place, since there seems to be no explicit agreement in place between ordinary speakers which ascribe to them the capacity to bring about said effects (Pagin, 2011).

In the third chapter I address the two problems which I have singled out in the second chapter by proposing an account of how utterances acquire the capacity to bring about the normative state of affairs which, in the traditional normative account, are associated to assertoric force. My account combines the perspective of game-theory (hence, looking at the sort of patterns of strategic interaction towards which agents converge) and Austin's perspective of speech-acts as *social*, *conventional* acts (i.e., acts which create a new normative state of affairs). I propose to read the normative state of affair characteristically brought about by assertion as linked to an equilibrium in strategic interaction; in particular, it is linked to an equilibrium in cooperative interaction where agents cooperate in pursuing the truth. One of the relevant conclusions of the third chapter is that one the things which sustains the capacity of utterances of producing the characteristic normative effects of assertion is the subsistence of a cooperative attitude amongst the subjects involved regarding the truthful exchange of information.

The fourth and the fifth chapter deals, respectively, with the phenomenon of dialectical obstructionism and the phenomenon of decay of factual accountability in political speech which I have mentioned earlier.

The fourth chapter describes the phenomenon of dialectical obstructionism and illustrates the conceptual framework through which it can be understood. Said framework combines the normative approach to assertion we previously mentioned with the conversational-analysis approach developed by Lewis (1979) and Stalnaker (1978). Through this framework we are able to understand not only how assertion affects the normative relations between participants to a discussion, but also how the capacity of an assertion to successfully produce its normative effects is dependent upon the current goal of conversation. Using the concept of question-under-discussion (developed by Roberts, 2018) we are able to understand how the force of an assertion is linked about its capacity to address the current question-under-discussion and therefore how preventing a certain question from becoming under discussion affects the participants capacity to successfully perform certain assertions. This has significant ethical implications when the majority of participants to a conversation become hostile towards a certain potential question-under-discussion. Dialectical obstructionism is the discursive phenomenon which happens when the behavior of participants to the conversation prevents a certain question from being addressed in the discussion. As I will explain, one possible way is by systematically lying in order to keep certain presuppositions out of the common ground of discussion. I will highlight how dialectical obstructionism sheds light on a way in which lies can have negative effects which has not been previously discussed. Moreover, I will compare obstructionism to a form of harmful speech which has been discussed in the literature, that is blocking, which operates in a specular way – by forcing presuppositions into the common ground of discussion, instead of forcing them out.

The final chapter deals with political speech and examines how the well-documented phenomenon of uncooperativeness in political discussion (where political opponents are systematically labeled as untrustworthy via what is called "post-truth rhetoric"), can be linked to another well-documented phenomenon, that of decay of factual accountability in political speech. I will argue that we can link these two phenomenon based on the evolutionary approach to the normativity of assertion I outlined in chapter 3. This allows us to understand a negative effect of post-truth rhetoric which has not yet been analyzed. The decline of factual accountability has significant implications in terms of policy making and in particular the way politicians are held accountable regarding the social costs of their policies. In particular, by looking at a specific case study (that of political polarization over the climate change issue in US politics) I will show how post-truth rhetoric fuels lack of accountability and populism on both sides of the spectrum.

1. Assertion as a normative act

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the question about what is to assert a proposition. I will provide an overview of the main ways in which the question has been addressed in recent debate. In particular, we will distinguish between *naturalistic* and normative *approaches* to assertion. Naturalistic approaches are mostly derived from the work of H. P. Grice (1957), who focused on what agents in conversation intend to communicate, and attempted to define assertion in terms of beliefs and desires of the agents involved. Normative approaches attempt to characterize assertion with reference to how it affects the normative status of the agents involved, by creating entitlements and commitments. As we shall see, the normative approach fares better than the former when it comes to explaining our intuitions about what counts as an assertion. The chapter will conclude by showing how the normative approach, as traditionally understood, provides an adequate, albeit partial, characterization of what is to assert a proposition.

1.1 Assertion: beyond what is said

A good starting point for a discussion on assertion is the acknowledgment that there is an intuitive difference between asserting a proposition[1] *p* and merely *uttering p.* A proposition can be uttered in the context of a stage play or when someone is reading a text written by someone else out loud. In neither context the speaker's utterance is typically taken to amount to asserting the proposition.

Readers familiar with the work of J. L. Austin, 1975 will be able to track this intuitive distinction to his conceptual distinction between locutionary acts and illocutionary acts. The locutionary act

[1] We will take for granted that the reader has at least an intuitive grasp of what a proposition is, without committing to a technical definition. Our discussion will develop in a way which is theoretically neutral with respect to the philosophical discussion on such definitions. Suffices to say that a proposition can be said to be true or false and that can be expressed by a well-formed sentence in a natural language.

performed by making an utterance basically amounts to *what is said*. When we say something, we utter a sentence with a meaning, i.e. a sentence which in natural language represents a possible state of affairs. However, as Austin noticed (Austin, 1972:I) by means of linguistic utterances we do not only represent state of affairs, but we also *do things*, i.e. we perform certain specific types of actions: asserting, promising, commanding, asking, etc. These are what Austin calls *illocutionary* acts.[2]Basically, Austin's lesson is that there is more to language than just representing a certain state of affairs. Of course assertion is, intuitively, an act which aims at providing a representation of the world, but the point is that when we make an assertion, we are not simply putting forward a proposition, we are also engaging in an act of sort (Austin, 1975: 44-47).

Even before Austin, Gottlob Frege put emphasis on the distinction between expressing a proposition and asserting it (Frege, 1897, Frege, 1918). This distinction[3] reflects for Frege the conceptual difference between *force* (*Kraft*) and *content* (*Inhalt*). For Frege, the content of an utterance is proposition, or thought, which is expressed by the uttered sentence. However, the force with which the same proposition can be put forward can differ. For instance, when I assert "The door is closed" and when I ask "Is the door closed?" I am operating with the same proposition, but the force attached is different.

It is important to notice that in Frege's view, force *cannot* be reduced to content. This is proven by him through showing that predicating the truth of a proposition does not amount per se to asserting the proposition (Frege 1897, 1918, 1923). Consider the following proposition:

"p is true"

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[2] I will have more to say in detail about Austin's notion of illocutionary act (in particular, about how these acts are *conventional*) in chapter 3. For now it is enough to stick with Austin's general idea that there is more than we can do with language than simply provide a representation of the world.

[3] The distinction is presented as early as in *Begriffschrift* 1879; see Geach, 1965 and Green, 1997 for an overview of his stance on the matter.

This proposition can be without asserting *p*, as in:

"If *p* is true, then *q*"

This is what has become known as Frege's thesis of the linguistic autonomy of meaning (i.e. autonomy of meaning from force, Green 1997): there is no force intrinsically attached to any kind of propositional content.

The conceptual distinction between force and content and the difficulty of reducing on to another, originally introduced by Frege, are at the basis of most of the subsequent inquiry on assertion and are essential in order to understand the nature of the goal of defining the act of assertion. To use Frege's language, we can say that the goal of a theory of assertion is to explain in detail what happens when a proposition is put forward with assertoric force. Typically, this has been attempted by means of a definition of the type

An utterance *u* amounts to asserting *p* if and only if xYz

In this thesis we will attempt to develop a theory of assertion in the same way. The goal is to provide an account of xYz which yields neither false positives nor false negatives, based on our intuitions. That is, there must be no cases of utterances which satisfy the requirements of the definition and whichm intuitively, are not assertions that *p*. Also, there must be no cases of utterances which do not satisfy the requirements of the definition and intuitively strike as assertions that *p*.

We will first assess the strengths and weaknesses of accounts featured in the existing literature. In this first chapter, in particular, I will explain what the normative account of assertion is and how it highlights an important aspect of assertion.

1.2 Approaches to the analysis of assertion. Naturalism vs normativism

Stalnaker, 1978 distinguishes between naturalistic and normative approaches to the analysis of assertion. Both approaches are aimed at providing a characterization of the speech-act of assertion. Naturalistic approaches characterize assertion in terms of its role within communication, which is seen as a cooperative endeavor – i.e. interlocutors share a common goal and cooperate to achieve it. Hence, accounts of this sort employ non-normative notions like intentions, beliefs and goals. In order to assert *p*, an utterance must have the effect of communicating *p*, which in turn depends on the speaker's capacity to convey this intent to the hearer.

Normative approaches focus instead on how the utterance impacts the social context where it is produced, particularly for what concerns the production of commitments and entitlements. So the idea is that in order to count as asserting *p*, an utterance must produce certain entitlements and commitments regarding *p*. These entitlements and commitments apply to the agents involved, the speaker and the audience. In particular, as we shall see, a prominent idea is that asserting *p* involves the speaker undertaking a commitment to *p*. As we shall see, the idea traces as far back as C. S. Pierce. Related to this view, there is the perspective defended by Austin, according to which what we do with words (when asserting, promising, commanding, etc.) has to do with the *social* dimension of language use.

These two approaches are typically perceived as in contrast (see Bach & Harnish, 1979; more recently, Harris, 2020). One reason is that sometimes an utterance satisfies the requirements of one approach and not the requirements of the other. In particular, as we shall see, there are utterances which do not match the criteria stated by the intentionalist approach but which do match the requirements stated by the normative one.

More in general, the contrast appears to stem from the perceived contrast between facts and norms. Naturalism focuses on psychological and attitudinal *facts* related to assertion. Normativism focuses on the *normative* properties of the speech-act. Social normativity is regarded as distinct from empirical facts about human behavior, since it has to do with what *ought* to be rather than what *is*. As we shall see later in this thesis (chapter 3), the contrast is probably over-emphasized, and the approach based on rational cooperation can help shed some light on the normative aspects of assertion.

1.2.1 The naturalistic account of assertion

Naturalistic approaches to assertion draw from the account of human communication played out elaborated by H. P. Grice (1957) . Grice draws a picture of human communication where information is conveyed from a speaker to a hearer by means of the speaker making it intelligible to the hearer that she (the speaker) *intends* to convey a certain piece of information. For this reason, naturalistic approaches to assertion inspired by Grice are generally labeled as *intentionalist* accounts of assertion (Harris, Fogal & Moss, 2018). A prominent neo-Gricean account of this sort is the one defended by Bach & Harnish, 1979; more recent re-construction of this sort of account can be found in Siebel, 2003; Siebel, 2019. According to this sort of account, a speaker's asserting *p* amounts to the speaker expressing

a. The belief that *p.*
b. The intent to have the audience believe that *p.*

The speaker's goal of getting the hearer to believe *p* is achieved by relying on a certain amount of common knowledge with the hearer about the context of the interaction, including common knowledge about the fact that both speaker and hearer are rational actors and that they are cooperative, in the sense that they both have an interest in exchanging truthful information. Based on this picture, asserting *p* involves the fact that the speaker makes it intelligible to the hearer that the speaker intends the hearer to come to believe that *p*, and she makes this intention intelligible by means of uttering *p*. From my perspective, an intentionalist account of assertion has the advantage of providing a definition of assertion which can be incorporated in a general, empirical theory which (purports to) explain how human beings interact and exchange information (as pointed out by Harris, 2020). However, the intentionalist account also exhibits some problems.

1.2.2 Shortcomings of the intentionalist account

The intentionalist account of assertion has been subjected to different sort of criticisms; here I will survey the main ones. As I will explain, criticisms point out that the intentionalist account provides both false positives (it wrongly predicts that certain acts count as asserting *p* while they do not) and false negatives (it fails to acknowledge cases of asserting *p* as such).

Searle (1969:44-47) has observed that intentionalism does not provide *sufficient* conditions for defining the act of assertion. In fact, there can be cases where a subject's actions involve the intent to pursue the goal of communicating *p* (and the successful implementation of the same goal) *without* asserting *p* – for instance, by silently showing evidence for *p.*

Moreover, it has been argued that the intentionalist account fails to provide *necessary* conditions for the act of asserting a proposition. Alston (2000: 44-50) has argued that a speaker can assert a proposition without possessing the intentions we previously described. For instance, an agent might speak out of habit, out of pressure or as she makes a careless or unreflective statement. Siebel (2003, 2020) has made some similar arguments, by pointing out that a speaker may make an assertion in front of an hostile audience, or one which is not expected to believe or understand the claim.

Finally, related to the problem of false negatives, some authors have pointed out cases where the speaker asserts *p* and it is common knowledge between the speaker and the hearer that *p* is false (Carson, 2006; Sorensen, 2007). These are cases of so-called "bald-faced lying". If these are cases of genuine assertions then the intentionalist account is threatened (Goldberg, 2015; Harris, 2020).

Let us see in detail what kind of utterances are featured in cases of bald-faced lying. Bald-faced lies are, roughly speaking, non-facetious claims which are obviously false and are clearly taken as such by everyone involved in the context of the utterance, speaker included (Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Fallis 2009). Examples involve a questioned culprit categorically denying her guilt after having being caught in flagrancy (Carson 2006); a prosecution witness which denies in courtroom the content of a previously sworn *affidavit* out of fear of being subjected to retaliation by the mob (Keiser 2016); a supporter of a regime denying the crimes of the dictator of this country (Sorensen 2007). According to most authors, bald-faced lies are assertions (see in particular Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Goldberg, 2015 and more recently Marques 2020, for an articulated defense of the claim).

If one accepts the intuition that bald-faced lies are assertions, then one must conclude that the intentionalist account of assertion yields false negatives. To make it intelligible that the speaker intends to communicate *p* is *not* a necessary condition for asserting *p*. Of course, a strenuous supporter of intentionalism can reject the intuition that bald-faced lies are assertions. Harris, 2020 is a proponent of this line of thought. According to him, our definition of assertion should not answer some pre-theoretical intuitions about what is assertion and what is not. Instead, the concept of assertion ought to be subordinated to our best available theory of how humans exchange information, i.e. Gricean intentionalism. On this grounds, Harris rejects the hypothesis that bald-faced lies are genuine assertions; since normativism entails that bald-faced lies are genuine assertions, Harris rejects normativism as well.

Some authors have rejected the proposition that bald-faced lies are genuine assertions (Harris, 2020; Keiser, 2016; Maitra, 2018) while others (Carson, 2006, Sorensen, 2007, Fallis, 2009, Lackey, 2013, Leland, 2015, Goldberg, 2015, Marques, 2020, Rudnicki, J., & Odrowąż-Sypniewska, 2023) have defended the idea that bald-faced lies are genuine assertions. Acceptance of the latter position weakens the position of the intentionalist account, thus making the discussion on bald-faced lies as a major point of contention between different theories of assertion (again, see Harris, 2020, for an overview of the dialectical importance of the issue).

I will now present my view on the issue. Going beyond the specific case of bald-faced lying, it appears that, on a general level, criticism of the intentionalist account can be broken down into two major lines of attack. On one hand, a criticism like Searle's stresses on the difference between the mere act of conveying information that *p* and the act of *asserting p.* This in turn suggests that there is something more about assertion than mere conveying information. After all, there are many information-conveying systems which do not rely on speech. Instead, Searle's criticism brings us to consider that through speech, humans can enact a particular kind of communication. The idea is that humans can communicate between themselves as *social agents,* that is, as agents who mutually regard each other as carrying certain roles, entitlements, responsibilities and authorizations. This is an idea which comes from Austin, 1975: the idea is that speech-acts (like assertion) are not simple means of *saying* something, but they are acts which agents involved in conversation mutually understand through a shared view of the social roles connected with the speaker and the audience, in a way analogous to the roles assumed by players in a game.

This view of speech as a *social* phenomenon also brings us to the second type of criticism that we have examined regarding the standard intentionalist account. We have seen how according to certain authors there are cases (bald-faced lying, addressing an hostile audience, claims made as a result of habit or pressure) where the conditions stated as necessary by the intentionalist account are not met, and yet intuition suggests that the utterance is an assertion. If we accept the idea that there is a significant social and normative aspect of assertion, we can make sense of the intuitions we mentioned by arguing that even if an utterance does not involve intent to inform the audience, it can still exhibit the fundamental social significance that we ascribe to assertion (what this social significance precisely amounts to, we will see in the next section).

This brings us to my contention (and partial agreement) with Harris' meta-theoretical claim about what relationship ought to be between our analysis of assertion and our general understanding of human communication. I agree with Harris when he says that our analysis of assertion ought to in line with our understanding of human communication. However, this does not diminish the fact that human communication appears have the capacity to involve certain elements which are distinctively *normative.* In making this claim I am drawing from a tradition developed by Sellars, 1953 and Brandom 1983, 1994, which points out that the communication systems of humans are perhaps unique in the sense that they have developed particularly sophisticated modalities of interaction, through which subjects provide reasons for their claims and ask their interlocutors for reasons. The idea that a subject can be expected to back-up her claim with evidence, or the idea that speech can be used not only to convey information, but to articulate epistemic relations of support between pieces of information, suggests that human communication has reached a high-order level of complexity which cannot be fully captured only via the conceptual framework offered by the intentionalist account. For this reason, I believe it is important to turn towards the conceptual framework offered by the normative account of assertion – although, as I will explain in detail in chapter 3, this does not mean that the intentionalist account must entirely rejected as misguided; the analysis of how humans convey and exchange information can and should be integrated with a normative account of assertion.

1.2.3 The normative account of assertion

In contemporary debate, a prominent approach is that of characterizing assertion in terms of its normative effects. Specifically, assertion is seen by many authors as an act through which the speaker undertakes certain commitments. More specifically, "to make an assertion is a free action that incurs a commitment that is not under the discretion of the speaker. The speaker cannot cancel the commitment short of retracting the assertion" (Marsili, 2021a).

1.2.3.1 Assertion and accountability for truth

There are two main traditions following within this category as Shapiro,2020 has recounted in a detailed reconstruction (see also Marsili, 2021a for a discussion on this two-fold tradition). In both cases, asserting *p* is seen, essentially, as the act through which a speaker commits herself to *p* being the case. However, the two traditions take different approaches in terms of accounting for what this exactly means. The two accounts are, as we shall see, not incompatible and can be easily combined in a single characterization of assertion (Marsili, 2021).

The first tradition essentially originates with some remarks by C. S. Pierce and is reflected by the views of Searle, 1979, Alston, 2000, Carson, 2006, Watson, 2004, Moran, 2005, Hinchman, 2013. The idea is that by asserting *p* a speaker voluntarily[4] incurs in *liability to social sanctions* in case *p* turns out to be false. This concept can be differently expressed as assertion being a way in which the speaker takes responsibility for the truth of *p* (Alston, 2000), as assertion being a way through a speaker guarantees the truth of the proposition (Watson, 2004), or as assertion being a an act or providing a warrant (Carson, 2006). The essential idea remains the same: the fundamental feature of asserting *p* is that the speaker produces an alteration in her own *normative* status within the social context where assertion happens.

It is clear how this conception can deal, for instance, with the intuition that bald-faced lying is asserting. When the student for Carson's example is saying that she is innocent, she is not *communicating* that she is innocent to the headmaster – in the technical sense of intending to get the hearer believe that she is innocent. Nonetheless, she is clearly responsible for the truth of what she is saying. The utterance entitles us to criticize the speaker based on the fact that what she says is false. So the commitment-to-truth account does not yield false negatives in this sense: it can effectively account with cases of assertions where what is asserted is not communicated. Same reasoning can be applied to cases of speakers making assertions without conviction, due to habit or pressure, or addressing an hostile audience: despite lack of an actual intent of conveying information, the token utterance still has the effect of committing the speaker to the truth of the proposition. For all intents and purposes of the social interaction, the speaker is treated as accountable for the truth of the proposition which has been asserted.

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[4] The absence of duress in making the utterance is generally considered necessary in order for the speaker to incur liability. See Sorensen, 2007, for a defense of this idea. According to the thesis, if the speaker is forced to make the utterance under duress, the utterance does not commit the speaker to the proposition.

Based on this notion of commitment, one can propose the following definition of assertoric force:

An utterance u amounts to asserting *p* if and only if by making *u* the speaker becomes liable to criticism in case *p* is not true

Naturally, the above definition must account for the fact that there are *other* speech-acts which characteristically commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition, e.g. swearing, arguing, deducing, etc. These speech-acts are grouped by Searle, 1979 into the class of so-called "representatives" or "assertives", to which assertion belongs too. Marsili, 2015, Green, 2013, argue that assertion can be distinguished from other representatives by postulating that asserting involves a certain *degree* of commitment, which is weaker than the one involved in swearing and stronger than the one involved, e.g., in guessing.

1.2.3.2 Assertion and discursive commitments

There is also a tradition dealing with a second type of commitment. In this case we are not talking about a commitment to the truth of the proposition, but rather about commitments and entitlements to *act* in a certain way within the context of conversation. In most cases, the underlying idea is that conversation as a whole is a rule-governed practice, and asserting a proposition entails the creation of a certain amount of obligations and permissions applying to the participants of the conversation.

Some authors (Hamblin, 1970, Geurts, 2019) have observed that asserting *p* entails that the speaker is liable to criticism if she does not behave in a certain way; for example, she is liable to criticism if she subsequently says something which contradicts *p* without having previously retracted her assertion. However, the sort of discursive commitments which is most prominently discussed today regarding assertion (Marsili, 2021) is the kind originally introduced by Brandom, 1983, 1994. These commitments (and entitlements) are related to the role of assertion within the wider discursive practice of giving and asking for reasons (Sellars, 1963). Essentially, assertion is seen as the main move within the social practice of exchanging arguments in favor or against the truth of certain propositions (see Rescorla, 2009, for an overview of this tradition and a defense of the view itself). Brandom, for instance, observes that asserting *p* entails that the speaker is committed to defending *p* against legitimate challenges from other participants to the conversation. In other words, by asserting a proposition the speaker voluntarily takes upon herself the burden of having to justify her own assertion. Moreover, asserting *p* generates certain *entitlements* on the audience's part: hearers are *entitled* to assert what follows from *p* and are entitled to challenge *p*. Finally, the speaker is also committed to *retract* her assertion if *p* turns out to be false. The thesis that discursive commitments of this sort are an essential feature of assertion has been defended, more recently, by Rescorla (2009) and MacFarlane (2011).

We can see how discursive commitments are something involved in assertion regardless of its effectiveness in communicating its content. A bald-faced liar is committed to justify her claim despite the fact that it is common knowledge that the claim is false.

More recently, Shapiro, 2020, Marsili, 2021 and Marsili & Green, 2021, have argued that *both* these types of commitments are characteristic features of assertion. They therefore propose to define asserting *p* as the speech-act which characteristically produces accountability for the truth of *p and* produces the relevant kind of discursive entitlements and commitments regarding *p*. The definition would be something like the following:

An utterance *u* amounts to asserting *p* if and only if

- *u* commits the speaker to the truth of *p*
- *u* entitles the audience to infer what follows from *p*, commits the speaker to defend *p* against appropriate challenges and to retract her utterance if *p* turns out to be false.

Concluding this first chapter, I shall point to how the normative account of assertion frames the speech-act of assertion as a distinctively *social* one. One's capacity to perform an assertion by uttering certain words depends on the impact the utterance will have on his social standing; that is, depends on whether the utterance is publicly intelligible signal that certain normative expectations are warranted with regard to the speaker (Goldberg, 2015). By making an assertion, a speaker issues a warrant directed towards her audience and becomes accountable for what she said. This accountability is reflected in the idea that the speaker can be made to *answer* for what she says. All of this cannot be made sense of by sticking to a mere conception of assertion as an act through which a speaker intends to convey information. It must, instead, presuppose, a certain normative relationship between the speaker and her audience.

2. Criticism of the normative account of assertion

In the previous chapter we have seen how the account of assertion in terms of commitments and entitlements captures a relevant aspect of assertoric force. Indeed, it is a *necessary* condition for asserting *p* that the speaker produces the relevant commitments regarding *p*. Assertion plays a key role in a distinctively human form of communication, one which involves undertaking responsibility for what is communicated and being held accountable and made to answer for the information which is conveyed. There have been, however, those that have raised criticism against the attempt to analyze assertion *only* in terms of production of commitments.

There are two main lines of criticism regarding the hypothesis of reducing assertion to its normative effects. In this chapter I shall provide an overview of both. The first one is that the commitment-based account gives an incomplete picture of assertion. In other words, it is not sufficient, in order for an utterance to amount to asserting *p* that the utterance commits the speaker to *p*. This idea has been defended, in different ways, by Pagin, 2004, Alston, 2000, Marsili & Green, 2021.

The second kind of criticism is the idea that the commitment-based account can be entirely substituted by a non-normative account which is less demanding in terms of attitudes ascribed to the agents involved and it is as explanatorily powerful as the normative one. This point has been argued for by Pagin, 2011, 2016. This sort of argument counters the one I have made in the first chapter against a strictly naturalistic account. In chapter 1 I have argued that a strictly naturalistic account cannot make sense of the capacity of humans to communicate in a way which is distinctively *normative* (it involves accountability, a commitment to provide reasons for one's claim, etc.). As I will, explain, the counter-argument made by Pagin suggests that there is no clear explanation for the emergence of these high-order, normative structures in ordinary linguistic practice; hence, assertion, being an element of ordinary linguistic practice, cannot be defined as intrinsically *normative,* but must be defined merely with reference to its role in conveying information.

The first objection against the standard commitment account claims that producing said commitments and entitlements regarding *p* is not a *sufficient* condition for asserting *p*. This is supposedly shown by the fact that it is possible to produce the commitments about *p* which are produced when asserting *p* (accountability for the truth of *p*; discursive commitments regarding *p*) *without* asserting *p*, that is, by making an utterance which does not amount to asserting *p*. Proponents of this sort of objection argue that the commitment-based account gives only a *partial* characterization; in order to provide a definition of assertion strong enough, we must integrate the commitment-requirements with other conditions.

Motivated by these sorts of concerns, some authors have proposed mixed definitions of assertion (Alston, 2000, Marsili & Green, 2021, Marsili, 2024). These definitions combine the requirement that the utterance produces certain entitlement and commitments with a further requirement. For instance, Alston proposes to combine the normative condition with a requirement regarding what proposition is explicitly expressed by the utterance. Marsili & Green, instead, argue that asserting a proposition not only commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition and to articulate an appropriate justification, but *presents said proposition as true*.

The second objection is built upon the argument that the commitment-based account does not reflect ordinary conversational patterns, especially in terms of the agents' attitudes. Therefore, it must and can be rejected entirely. In its place, we can adopt a *dispositional* account of assertion which instead of postulating the existence of normative properties of assertion, analyzes assertion in terms of the agents' dispositions which are typically associated with said normative properties. This point has been argued by Pagin, 2011, 2016, and is illustrated at the end of the chapter.

I conclude the chapter by arguing that amongst the amended normative accounts, the one proposed by Marsili & Green is the most promising one, at least in terms of appeal to our intuitions. According to this view, assertion is the speech-act which characteristically a) presents a proposition as true and b) commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition. At the same time, I recognize that Pagin's counter-proposal of a non-normative account must be taken seriously. Pagin argues that a normative account of assertion rests upon assumptions which are very implausible regarding ordinary speakers. The moral I draw from Pagin is that a good philosophical account of assertion must not only appeal to our intuitions, but can also be derived from plausible assumptions about ordinary speakers. Chapter 3 will be devoted to providing a comprehensive account of assertion which works the intuitions discussed by Marsili & Green into the picture and at the same time deals with problem raised by Pagin.

2.1 Pagin's argument against a strictly normative account

In this section, I will present Pagin's challenge (Pagin 2004, 2009) to the idea that assertion can be reduced to its social effects. Although some details of his strategy and conclusions have been contested (see Marsili & Green, 2021), his essential point (asserting does not only amount to producing entitlements and commitments) is widely agreed upon and constitutes a valid premise from which the philosophical discussion on assertion should develop.

According to Pagin, although it is very plausible that in order to assert that *p* one must produce certain entitlements and commitments regarding *p* (becoming liable to sanctions if *p* is not the case, etc.), it is not sufficient that these social effects are produced in order for one to assert that *p*. There are indeed speech-acts (like promising and commanding) the illocutionary force of which can be entirely characterized in terms of normative effects. Assertion is not like these speech-acts (Pagin, 2004:834-5).

In order to prove his point, Pagin proposes a test based on intuitions: if assertion merely amounts to producing certain normative effects, any utterance producing said effects would count as assertion. Pagin goes on to show that theories which reduces assertion to the production of accountability for truth and/or discursive commitments yield false positives – i.e. there are utterances which produce said effects and are, intuitively, not assertions (Pagin, 2004:837-8).

Consider, for instance, a theory of assertion according to which asserting that *p* is producing an utterance which commits the speaker to the truth of *p*.

. To assert *p* is to commit oneself to the truth of *p*.

Consider now the utterance:

ii. I hereby commit myself to *p*

Pagin argues that by uttering the above sentence the speaker does in fact commit herself to the truth of p. If i) is a correct and *exhaustive* analysis of assertion, then uttering ii)- assuming that uttering ii) does indeed produce the relevant social effects- would amount to asserting that *p*. However, uttering ii), according to Pagin, hardly amounts to asserting *p*, based on intuition (Pagin, 2004: 838-9).
The same argument is made by Pagin regarding an account of assertion in terms of discursive commitments.

. To assert that *p* is to authorize the audience to claim whatever follows from *p* and to undertake the responsibility to justifying *p*

Does uttering:

ii. I hereby authorize you to claim whatever follows from *p* and I undertake the responsibility to justifying *p*

amount to asserting *p* (again, assuming that iv) does indeed produce the intended effects in terms of discursive commitments)? Again, Pagin (2004: 839-40) supports the intuition according to which to utter iv) is not to assert that *p.*
If we assume – as Pagin does - that ii) and iv) indeed satisfy the requirements stated, respectively, by i) and iii) (that is, the utterances manage to bring about the relevant commitments and entitlements), and if we assume that ii) and iv) are *not* assertions that *p* (as Pagin does), based on his intuitions, then we must conclude that asserting *p* cannot be reduced to the production of entitlements and

commitments regarding *p* – let that be accountability for the truth of *p* or discursive commitments regarding *p*.

The methodology adopted by Pagin's to carry out his argument has been the subject of criticism. For instance, Marsili & Green, 2021 have challenged the validity of the sort of counter-examples Pagin brings against the commitment-based definition. They argue that utterance-types like *ii)* do not really amount to undertaking a commitment to the truth of *p* in ordinary discursive practice. So the counter-examples brought by Pagin to make his point are, according to this view, highly questionable. Nonetheless, even them agree with the general thesis that assertion cannot be simply reduced to its normative effects (Marsili & Green, 2021, Marsili, 2024). These authors have brought further considerations in favor of this point, which are immune to the criticism they have raised against Pagin's argumentation. For instance, Marsili 2024 notices that both implying *p* and presupposing *p* commit (or at least can commit) the speaker to the truth of *p*. If I am asked whether Luca is coming to the party and I answer that he is sick with the flue, I am implying (and not asserting) he is not coming. Nonetheless, suppose Luca is indeed at the party (in fact, I saw him a few minutes before), he is simply able to handle a flue quite well. Intuition suggests that in this case I am liable to blame in virtue of the fact that it is not true that Luca is not coming to the party.

Problems of this sort have prompted authors like Marsili & Green to advocate for a "partly social" account of assertion (Marsili & Green, 2021), which acknowledges the normative aspect as fundamental but not sufficient in order to characterize assertion. The "partly social" view shares some analogies with the views already defended by Pagin, 2004, 2009 and Alston, 2000. These authors have also argued that what characterizes assertion is not simply the production of normative effects, but some other additional features, and have provided a characterization of these features. In the following paragraphs, I will give an overview of their views.

2.2.1 Linguistic and inferential conditions

As we have seen, Pagin argues that "the significance of assertion isn't exhausted by its social significance. Any description of the social significance will leave out the core of the assertion, *that it articulates a judgment about the world*." (Pagin 2004:836; italics is mine). Pagin's idea seems to draw from Frege's traditional view that assertion is essentially the outward expression of judgment, the latter to be understood as the thought process of acknowledging a proposition as true.

Pagin further articulates the view that assertion is an articulation of judgment by listing two necessary conditions that an assertoric utterance must exhibit. By postulating these conditions we are able, according to him, to explain why speech-acts like *ii)* and *iv)* do not amount to assertions of *p*. In other words, our intuitions that *ii)* and *iv)* do not strike as assertions can be explained assuming that speech-acts like *ii)* and *iv)* do not satisfy some requirements needed for an utterance in order to amount to asserting *p*. Pagin argues for two non-normative requirements which an utterance must comply with in order to amount to asserting *p*. These are:

- The logical incompatibility requirement: if an utterance amounts to an assertion that *p*, what is said through the utterance is logically incompatible with the falsity of *p*.

- The inferential integration requirement: an utterance amounts to an assertion that *p* only if the utterance "integrate[s] inferentially with other assertions of the speaker. By that I mean that any assertion should provide a premise for inferences *jointly* with the other assertions, of the same speaker or of other speakers taking part in the conversation" (Pagin, 2004:851).

Let us look at these requirements in detail. The logical incompatibility condition requires the speaker to say something incompatible with the falsity of the asserted proposition. This means that the uttered sentence must be a sentence which expresses the proposition. More simply, the idea is that when we assert *p,* we explicitly say *p* – which is not the case when we are implying or presupposing the proposition. Other than Pagin, an idea of this sort is defended by several authors (Stainton, 2016, Alston, 2000, Searle, 1969, Borg, 2019, Marsili, 2024). Alston, 2000, argues for a definition of assertion which combines an explicitness-condition and a commitment-condition. The explicitness condition is described by Alston in the following terms: in order to amount to asserting *p*, an utterance must involve a sentence which is in a one-to-one correspondence with the proposition *p*. This means that any sub-sentential component of the sentence can be mapped to a component of the proposition and the other way around. This supposedly rules out cases of utterances like "I hereby commit myself to *p*", since in this case there are elements of the sentence (such as "I hereby commit myself to-") which cannot be mapped to any component of the proposition *p*. On the contrary, the sentence "Lucio is a mammal" is isomorphic to the proposition that Lucio is a mammal, and therefore one can assert that Lucio is a mammal by uttering this sentence. The logical incompatibility requirement proposed by Pagin is reminiscent of the explicitness condition defended by Alston. In both cases, the condition rules out cases where the proposition is merely implied or presupposed.

Turning to the inferential-integration requirement, Pagin defends the idea that a unique feature of assertion is the fact that an assertion can be integrated with other assertions in order to articulate valid inferences. A valid inference requires that "the truth of the propositions that are asserted by utterances of the premises guarantees the truth of the proposition that is asserted by the utterance of the conclusion" (Pagin, 2004:851-2).

The important point here is that, according to Pagin, the role of assertion in guaranteeing the truth of a premise *p* in an inference cannot be fulfilled by a non-assertoric utterance which nonetheless commits the speaker to *p.* According to Pagin, an inference like the following does not strike as correct

"If *p* then *q*. I hereby commit myself to *p*. Therefore, *q*"

The fact that the inference is (according to Pagin) intuitively not correct is explained on the basis of the fact that the utterance "I hereby commit myself to *p*" does not assert *p* – if it did, the inference would be provided with all the premises needed to reach the asserted conclusion and it would strike as correct.

2.2.2 Liability to incorrectness

A different route is taken by Marsili & Green 2021 (see also Marsili 2024). First of all, the authors argue that what differentiate asserting from implying or merely presupposing is the fact that asserting *p* entails presenting *p* as true. The idea that asserting a proposition characteristically involves presenting it as true is not new (see Wright 1992, Adler 2002). However, if un-analyzed, the concept of presenting a proposition as true is not very informative and it provides little insight about what we actually do when we assert (Marsili 2024). Thus, the authors propose to characterize the notion in terms of *liability to incorrectness* (Green, 2017, Marsili, 2018). In turn, this characterization provides the basis for a mixed theory of assertion as a *"partly social"* speech-act (Marsili & Green, 2021, Marsili, 2024).

Essentially, to present *p* as true has the effect of making the utterance liable of being deemed as incorrect in case *p* is not true – i.e., in case the state of affairs represented by *p* does not occur in the actual world. Marsili, 2018 articulates the idea in the following way. A proposition *p, per se*, merely represents a state of affairs, without indicating whether it obtains or not. Presenting a proposition as true is not the same as expressing the proposition. In Marsili's words, to present a proposition as true amounts to claiming that the state of affairs represented by *p* obtains. Another way to put it is to say that presenting *p* as true assigns to *p* a "word-to-world" *direction of fit* (Anscombe, 1956). This means that not only the act of presenting as true produces liability to incorrectness, but also specifies the *criterion* upon which it should be determined whether the speaker is correct or incorrect: not only assertions ought be evaluated using the actual world as a standard, asserting *p* also indicates that the standard of incorrectness is in fact provided by the actual world.

It is worth noticing that this account seems to draw from the idea already presented by Austin, 1975. According to this idea, some speech-acts are characterized by the standard of evaluation to which they are subjected by participants to the conversation. For instance, advice is, by definition, assessed on the basis of whether it is good or bad. Assertions are evaluated depending on whether they are correct or not. Austin's idea is also reflected in Searle's (Searle, 1969, 1979) thesis that when one is asserting *p*, one is representing a certain state of affairs as being the case.

We can sum up Marsili & Green's theory in terms of the following bi-conditional definition of assertion:

An utterance *u* presents a proposition *p* as true iff the speaker becomes liable of incorrectness, as a result of uttering *u* , depending on whether *p* is true or not in the actual world.

Furthermore, the authors argue for the following definition of asserting *p*

An utterance u amounts to asserting p iff a) the utterance presents p as true and b) the utterance commits the speaker to the truth of p, entitles members of the audience to assert what follows from p and commits the speaker to justify p against appropriate challenges

This definition, based on the account of presenting as true previously sketched, allows, according to the authors, to distinguish assertion from speech-acts like implying and presupposing. The idea is that in a case like:

"Do you still have the flu?"
"I haven't gone to work in a week by now"

where "I have the flu" is merely implied, the speaker's utterance is not liable to be incorrect depending on whether he has the flu or not. Same goes, according to the authors, for cases of presupposing. For instance, in the above case, the answering speaker is presupposing the proposition "If did not have the flu anymore, I would have gone to work". However, according to the authors, this proposition is not presented as true: the speaker's utterance is not *liable to be incorrect* depending on whether the proposition is true or not.

2.3 Remarks on the accounts presented above

I will now provide my assessment of the different proposals I have discussed so far. I will present the problems with the accounts proposed by Pagin, Alston, and Marsili & Green. The overall assessment is that Pagin's and Alston's account are unsatisfactory, while Marsili & Green's account correctly identifies the nature of assertion as being a *dual* one: on one hand, assertion is characterized by the fact that it brings about a new normative state of affairs in the social context where it is performed; on one hand, assertion is characterized as an act which can be assessed as correct or incorrect depending on whether the relevant proposition is true or false.

2.3.1 Shortcoming of linguistic accounts

Let us look at Pagin's logical incompatibility requirement and Alston's explicitness condition. In both cases we are talking about a constraint on *what is said*. The fundamental idea shared by the two authors is that, roughly speaking, when in order to assert *p* one must necessarily say *p*. Here I am employing a very standard definition of saying *p*, whereas saying *p* consists in uttering a sentence *S* which expresses the proposition *p*. Obviously, expressing *p* is not a *sufficient* condition for asserting *p*, as we have seen in the first chapter. On the other hand it is, according to Pagin and Alston, a *necessary* condition for asserting *p*.

First of all, I will concede that these requirements are ruling out cases where a proposition is not asserted but just merely implied or presupposed. If assume that

> If an utterance *u* amounts to asserting *p*, then what is expressed by the uttered sentence amounts to *p*

then all cases of implicature and presupposition are ruled out. The idea is reflected in a full-fledged definition of assertion like the one proposed by Alston, 2000, who proposes two necessary and sufficient conditions for asserting a proposition.

An utterance *u* amounts to asserting *p* if and only if

a) *u* explicitly expresses *p*

b) *u* commits the speaker to the truth of *p*

Take the example of *p* being "Napoleon won at Wagram". If I read out loud the sentence when asked what is written on a book I am not asserting that Napoleon won at Wagram, because while a) is satisfied, b) is not. Similarly, if I utter "Previously I did not know that Napoleon won at Wagram", I am not asserting that Napoleon won at Wagram, because while b) is satisfied (if Napoleon did not won at Wagram, it is safe to say that I would be liable to criticism), a) is not (*p* being merely presupposed).

The problem with the sort of account proposed by Alston is that it makes indirect assertion impossible. This has been observed by MacFarlane, 2011 and Garcia-Carpintero, 2016. The same criticism can be applied to what Pagin proposes. In particular, Garcia-Carpintero argues that it is very intuitive to think about *implicatures* (of the sort discussed by Grice, 1957) as *indirect* assertions. According to Garcia-Carpintero, in ordinary cases uttering "I did not know that Napoleon won at Wagram" involves an indirect assertion that Napoleon won at Wagram.

Garcia-Carpintero defends a very basic normative account of assertion, according to which any utterance which commits the speaker to *p* involves asserting *p,* whether it is directly or indirectly. The fact that an assertion is indirect simply means that the performance of said assertion depends upon the performance of another illocutionary act. For example, the indirect assertion that Napoleon won at Wagram depends upon the explicit assertion that the speaker did not know that Napoleon won at Wagram. Based on this view, introducing the "explicitness" requirement is treated by Garcia-Carpintero as an *ad hoc* requirement, which rules out cases where an utterance communicates *p* and commits the speaker to *p.*

2.3.2 Shortcomings of the inferential integration requirement

As for the second requirement stated by Pagin, I will argue that the inferential-integration requirement is substantially correct. However, as I will show, the acceptance of the inferential integration requirement does not compel us to abandon the commitment-definition of assertion. This is because any utterance which commits the speaker to the truth of a proposition by means of a *conventional* formula satisfies the inferential requirement. This is an argument made by Marsili & Green, 2021.
The conclusion is that a definition based on the inferential integration requirement does not tell us much more about the speech-act of assertion than what a standard commitment-view already does.

It seems correct to say that an utterance *u* counts as asserting *p* if and only if *u* can serve as a basis for inferring whatever follows from *p*. Now, this is characterization of assertion which essentially shifts the burden towards explaining what inferring means. Moreover, it is not obvious that presenting a proposition as a premise for an inference is *not* something which can be characterized in terms of entitlements and commitments produced by the utterance. Brandom, 1994, famously argued that the notion of presenting a proposition as a premise for an inference is best understood in terms of producing the relevant discursive commitments.

Pagin, as we have seen, argues that the inferential-integration requirement cannot be reduced to the production of the normative effects typical of assertion, since there are cases of utterances which produce said effects and fail to pass the inferential-integration test.

This brings us to a general problem in Pagin's argument that has been brought up by Marsili & Green, (2021:21-22). The authors argue that the cases brought up by Pagin are not genuine counterexamples to the standard, normative definition of assertion, since they are not actual cases of speech-acts which successfully bring about the commitments characteristically associated with asserting *p*. As a result, Pagin's attempt to show that there are utterances which produce assertoric commitments and fail the inferential test is not too successful. Furthermore, still following the argument developed by Marsili & Green, we can see that utterances which conventionally commit the speaker to the truth of *p* do in fact pass the inferential test regarding *p*. The ultimate conclusion is that the inferential-integration requirement does not motivate us to abandon the standard normative definition, nor, if the standard normative definition is to be abandoned for independent reasons, provide us with tools for a new definition.

Let us now take a look at the criticism developed by Marsili & Green. According to the authors, simply manifesting the intent to produce certain normative effects via an utterance is not sufficient; the utterance must also adhere to the accepted conventional procedure for producing those effects. They in turn draw from the idea defended by Austin, 1975 (Austin 1975:18-19) that one can make a manifest attempt to perform an illocutionary act *I* while failing to do so in virtue of flaws in the execution of the conventional procedure. In this case, Austin talks about this sort of infelicities as "*misinvocations"*.

Marsili & Green argue that infelicities of this sort can arise when the speaker does not manifest her intent using an ordinary and intelligible vocabulary. They argue that utterances like "I commit myself to *p*" do not qualify as assertions because they fail to effectively commit the speaker to *p*. This failure comes from the speaker's use of non-conventional vocabulary; laypeople unfamiliar with philosophical discourse aren't accustomed to the concept of "commitment to the truth of a proposition". Marsili & Green notice that as soon as we turn to more ordinary expressions, such as the following, then we have an utterance which more clearly resembles an *indirect* assertion of the relevant proposition.

"You can criticize me if the following is false: dinosaurs are not extinct."

I find this strategy effective. Indeed, when we successfully communicate our intent to commit ourselves to the truth of *p* we are in fact asserting *p*. It is true that the most common, conventional procedure of asserting *p* is to simply utter the declarative sentence *p* (Dummett, 1981). However, we can also assert *p* by means of utterance-type which are less common but nonetheless conventionally accepted as means of asserting the given proposition[5].

In light of these considerations, Pagin's two purported requirements for an utterance to count as assertion lose all their strength against a commitment-based view of assertion. As we saw in chapter 2, Pagin starts from the assumption that in order to amount to an assertion that *p* , an utterance must abide by two requirements:

- Logical-incompatibility requirement: the utterance must amount to saying something logically incompatible with non-*p*
- Inferential-integration requirement: the utterance can be integrated in an inference as an effective way to present *p* as a premise for an inference.

We can also see now that the logical incompatibility requirement can be rejected because it is counter-intuitive. There are clearly conventionally accepted ways of asserting *p* which do *not* involve saying something logically incompatible with non-*p*. In light of this, the logical-incompatibility requirement appears merely as an hypothesis adopted *ad hoc* in order to dismiss the commitment-based view.

As for the inferential-integration requirement, any utterance which does in fact commit the speaker to *p in virtue of linguistic convention* clearly passes the inferential-integration test. For instance, the following intuitively strikes as a correctly articulated inference:

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[5] This discussion developed by Marsili & Green brings up an extremely relevant point, which the authors surprisingly overlook, except for the purposes of challenging Pagin, and do not incorporate in the ultimate definition of assertion. Namely, it is the idea that assertion produces commitment to the truth of the relevant proposition in virtue of the fact that the utterance is in fact one which is conventionally used to produce said commitments. As I will explain in chapter 3, I will center my definition of assertion around this notion. It is notable that while utterances which commit the speaker to *p* by means of convention pass the inferential integration requirement, while utterances which commit the speaker through non-conventional means (implicature, presuppositions) do not, which indicates that the element of convention is a fundamental one in assertion.

If Luca will be there, Anna will not come. You can bet that Luca will be there. Therefore Anna will not come.

In my and Marsili & Green's reading this is because "You can bet that *p"* is indeed a conventional way through which one commits to the truth of *p,* and therefore counts as asserting *p.* This is in contrast with the view defended by Pagin, according to whom the utterance "You can be that Luca will be there", while committing "Luca will be there", in Pagin's view. Pagin's view is untenable. It forces us to reject our intuitions that "You can bet that *p"* is a legitimate way of asserting *p* – this despite the fact that the utterance is used in standard contexts to undertake commitment towards *p* and passes the inferential integration test with flying colors. To see this, just compare with this other case:

"If Luca will be there, Anna will not come. I hereby commit myself to the truth of the proposition that Luca will be there. Therefore Anna will not come."

This does not strike as a correct inference, and it is likely because "I hereby commit myself to the truth of *p*" is not a conventional formula, for ordinary speakers, through which one commits herself to the truth of *p*. As a result, the utterance fails to present "Luca will be there" as a premise for the inference.
The conclusion is that, as whole, Pagin's two requirements do not tell us anything about the pragmatic significance of assertion which the commitment-based account could not already tell us.

2.3.3 The mixed account of assertion: assertion as a partly social speech-act

Finally, we turn to the "partly social" account presented by Marsili & Green 2021. As we saw in the preceding paragraphs, Marsili & Green understand assertion as an act which both a) presents a proposition as true and b) commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition.

Let us start by looking at whether their characterization of "presenting a proposition as true" effectively distinguishes the speech-act of assertion from others. The authors argue that a speech-act which presents *p* as true can be deemed as correct or incorrect depending on whether *p* is true or not. To test the effectiveness of their view we can look at the case of a command. If I say:

"Close the door!"

I am clearly presupposing that the door is open (Garcia-Carpintero, 2016); as a result, I am also committed to the truth of the proposition "The door is open". However, it would be incorrect to deem the command as incorrect because the door is not open. When uttering those words, I am issuing a command, and commands cannot be regarded as correct or incorrect depending in relation to the truth of a proposition. At best, the act of issuing said command can be seen as void due to the fact that a relevant presupposition of the command is false (Austin, 1975). So Marsili & Green's criterion of liability to incorrectness successfully rules out cases of illocutionary acts which commit the speaker to the truth of *p* but which do not, intuitively, amount to asserting *p*.

Moreover, unlike Alston's explicitness condition, their view does not make it impossible to assert a proposition *p* indirectly. Marsili & Green acknowledge that indirect assertions are possible. For instance, according to the view sketched by the authors (Marsili & Green, 2021:21-22), the following utterance is, ordinarily, an indirect way of asserting that Beijing is the capital of China.

"You can criticize me if the following is false: Beijing is the capital of China."

The authors specify that this is an utterance which presents the proposition "Beijing is the capital China" in an indirect way. They contend that this is because a formula like "You can criticize me if *p* is false" is "idiomatic in everyday discourse" (ibid.). The authors broadly refer to Austin's idea of infelicity – that is, of failure of perform an illocutionary act due to some feature of the context, the speaker or what is said. In this case, failure of using layman vocabulary in a speaker's attempt to commit herself to the truth of *p* causes a misinvocation, that is, a failure to perform the illocutionary act that the speaker intended to perform.

Overall, the conception of assertion as a "partly social" speech-act is meant to express the idea that while assertion does have indeed a *social* component (it affects the commitments and entitlements of the agents involved) it also has a component (being liable to be deemed as incorrect) which is not social. As the authors explain (Marsili & Green, 2021:24, note), liability to incorrectness of an assertoric utterance does not depend upon the effect the utterance in terms of bringing about a normative state of affairs related to the social standing of the agents. It is indeed a *normative* notion, it simply does not revolve around any *social* conception of normativity (instead, the authors argue that it is constitutive of an assertion to be liable of being assessed as incorrect just in the same way a *belief* can be assessed as correct or incorrect).

I believe that the mixed account proposed by Marsili & Green is the one which best captures the peculiar essence of assertion, and therefore the best one in order to provide an adequate definition of assertoric force.

2.4 Normative accounts vs dispositional accounts of assertion

So far we have seen objections to the idea that assertion can be *purely* characterized in terms of the production of entitlements and commitments. We have seen how the best characterization of assertion in this sense is the one which acknowledges its double nature: on one hand, assertion is an act which can be deemed as correct or incorrect depending on whether what is asserted is false or not; on the other hand, assertion affects the normative relations of the agents involved in the context.

Now we shall turn to a different kind of objection, according to which the normative account ought to be rejected entirely. The argument is that we can explain the same data about assertion that the normative account purports to explain by adopting a non-normative account, which states requirements (especially regarding the agents' attitudes) which match ordinary conversational practice more than the normative account does. The essential idea is that it is unrealistic to assume that agents involved in the ordinary practice of assertion have elaborate normative conceptions regarding the significance of their utterances. Instead, the phenomenon of assertion is best understood in terms of non-normative attitudes.

Let us see the argument in detail. Pagin, 2011, 2012 argues that agents who engage in the practice of assertion are not required to possess normative attitudes, and he does so by what he calls "appeal to *conversational patterns*" (Pagin, 2016)[6]. In essence, Pagin argues that *if* assertion was an essentially normative act, then it would be the case that agents engaging in the practice of assertion have stipulated certain kinds of norms and have agreed that certain members of the community are authorized to sanction violations of the normative obligations involved in assertion. This is, after all, how we think about norms in general. Moreover, still according to Pagin, if the normative conception of assertion is true, then it is reasonable to expect that ordinary agents engaging in the practice of assertion have some form of awareness of what these norms are. However, Pagin argues that ordinary speakers typically do not think about assertion in normative terms.[7]

Pagin concedes that the normative account of assertion appears to explain many intuitions about assertion (see Goldberg, 2015:6-19, for a defense of the normative account in this sense). However, the problem is that the account does not rest upon assumptions which are plausible with regards to

[6] Pagin 2011, 2012 does not make substantial call backs to Pagin 2004, so this proposal is best understood as an independent attempt to analyze assertion in cognitive terms, rather than as a proposal in continuity with the discussion on the logical incompatibility and the inferential integration requirement.

[7] Another way to look at this is to say that the concept of assertion as a normative act is an invention of philosophers prone to over-intellectualize ordinary linguistic practice, and is not matched by the conception of assertion shared by ordinary speakers. This conception is brought to an extreme by Cappellen, 2011, who goes as far as saying that the mere idea of assertion, as a concept defining a specific illocutionary type, is an invention of philosophers and that ordinary speakers do not behave or think by making reference to said concept.

ordinary speakers. As a result, Pagin proposes what he regards as a more simple account in terms of the attitudes and dispositions ascribed to the agents. More specifically, he analyzes assertion in terms of the cognitive dispositions of the agents involved (as we shall see, a significant role is played by the disposition to increase one's degree of credence in the relevant proposition).

Going to the specific definition, we can say that according to Pagin 2011, an utterance *u* amounts to asserting *p* if and only if *u* is *prima facie* informative that *p*. Both "informativeness" and "*prima facie* informativeness" are technical notions developed by Pagin which need explanation.

The notion of informativeness is defined on the basis of the notion of (a state or event) being *information-giving*. This notion is also given a technical definition by Pagin. According to Pagin, an event or state *e* gives information that *p* if and only if *p* is there is a process π and there is a function μ, such that π

- μ maps a set of E of possibly-information-giving states to a set of possibly true propositions S
- π generates or selects elements of E *reliably* – i.e. most of the events produced/selected by π are mapped by μ onto true propositions.
- *e* is produced by π.

For example, let it be E the set of "smoke-propositions" (propositions of the type "there is smoke at location and time") and S the set of "fire-propositions" (propositions of the type "There is fire at location and time"). Each smoke proposition is mapped to a (possibly false) fire proposition by function μ. For instance, the proposition that there is smoke in Lakeshore Drive at 9 pm is mapped to the proposition that there is fire in Lakeshore Drive at 9 pm. The method or process π can be described informally, in this case, as that of *generation of smoke*. The process of generation of smoke is such that it makes some smoke-propositions true and for *most* of these smoke-propositions, the value of the function μ is a true fire-proposition. So in this case we say that the event of smoke rising from Lakeshore Drive at 9 pm possibly gives the information that there is a fire at Lakeshore Drive at 9 pm, because it is the result of a process (the process of generation of smoke) which makes smoke-propositions true *and* there is a function μ such that for most smoke-propositions, the corresponding fire-proposition is true.

As we have seen, Pagin's account of information is based on the idea of a reliable process which selects or generates *states* which are described by a proposition from domain E which is in turn mapped to a proposition of domain S, such that most of the time the value of the function in E is a *true* proposition. Now, sometimes the state/event not only gives-information that *p* (where *p* is a true proposition belonging to E) but it also *represents p*. In cases where the state/event is both information-giving with respect to *p and* it is informative that *p*, we say that the event/state is *informative* with respect to E. Examples of states/events which are (potentially) informative that there is a fire at Lakeshore Drive are a visual depiction of fire at Lakeshore Drive and an utterance saying "There is a fire at Lakeshore Drive". In this case we say that the function μ from states/events to (possibly) true propositions is a *semantic function*. Arguably an utterance *u* such that μ (*p*) is a *semantic function* is an utterance which amounts to saying *p* explicitly.

An utterance is informative that *p* if and only if the utterance represents (i.e., express explicitly) *p* and the speaker makes the utterance that *p because p* is true; more specifically, *p* is the case and the utterance is an output of a reliable method which selects utterances based on the truth of their content. Moreover, an utterance can be *taken as* informative by a hearer; that is, the hearer increases her degree of credence in *p* as a result of hearing the utterance. Notice that this condition alone (being taken as informative) can be satisfied by some token speech-acts which are not assertions. For instance, a speaker can *imply* that *p* because *p* is true and implying *p* can result in the hearer increasing her degree of credence in *p*. Moreover, the condition of *mere* informativeness is *not* satisfied in several instances of assertion. For example, consider a case of bald-faced lying by means of asserting *p*. The speaker certainly does not make the utterance because *p* is true and the hearer does not increase her credence in *p* because of the utterance.

This is where the *prima facie* condition comes in. An utterance is *prima facie* informative regarding *p* if an utterance of that sort (featuring the given mood, intonation, etc.) is *typically* made by a speaker because *p* is true. Unlike mere informativeness, *prima facie* informativeness does not entail truth of the proposition of which the event or state gives information about. Nonetheless, it entails that the event is an output of a reliable process: it is the output of a process which reliably selects utterances which express a true proposition. Reliability means that typically an utterance of that sort is made because the state it represents does in fact obtain.

Moreover, an utterance-type which is *prima facie* informative that *p typically* results in the hearer increasing her degree of credence in *p*. So not only the production of the utterance-type is a reliable indicator that *p* is true, but hearers' cognitive dispositions are somewhat sensitive to this reliability, and this is reflected in a typical increase of credence that *p.*

To summarize, an utterance-type has assertoric force regarding *p* if the speaker has a disposition to produce it because *p* is true and the hearer has the disposition to increase her degree of credence in *p* as a result of the utterance being made.

Let us see a specific case in order to understand how the account differentiates between assertion and other speech-acts. Consider the case of implicature. Suppose that I utter *p:*"Franco's car is here" when asked whether Franco left. While in this specific case, the utterance communicates that *p* by means of implicature, the utterance clearly does no amount to asserting *p.* This is accurately predicted by Pagin's theory. The sentence "Franco's car is here" is not uttered because it is true that Franco left, nor uttering it typically causes the hearer to increase her degree of credence that Franco's car is here.

Notably, Pagin's account also accommodates the intuition that bald-faced lies are genuine assertions. Cases of bald-faced lying are cases where the utterance is only *prima facie* informative that *p* but is, ultimately, not. When the student from Carson's example claims that she is innocent (*p*), she produces an utterance-type which is *typically* made because *p* is true, and which in normal circumstances would lead the hearer to her degree of credence in *p*. However, in this particular case, the utterance is *not* made because *p* is true and does *not* increase the hearer's degree of credence in *p.*

In summary, Pagin's account of assertion describes assertoric force in terms of cognitive patterns linked with certain *surface features* of utterances. One of these surface features typically associated with informativeness is the declarative sentence type: declarative utterances are *prima facie* informative regarding the proposition expressed by the given declarative sentence.

This is how Pagin characterizes assertion in terms of non-normative dispositions of the agents involved in the practice. In his view, assertion is primarily seen as a way of conveying information, rather than a means to alter the normative relationships between agents. The main reason for Pagin to dismiss the latter view is, as we have said before, that it would require to ascribe to the agents a certain level of awareness regarding the purported normative character of assertion, a level of awareness which ordinary agents seemingly do not possess.

In Pagin, 2016, this criticism of a normative approach is reiterated in terms of a criticism of the explanatory value of a normative account of assertion. Namely, "the explanatory value of a norm in force in a population is completely exhausted by the preferences and beliefs, among the members, that are associated with the norm" (Pagin, 2016:30). For instance, when we think of a speaker committing herself to *p* by means of uttering *u,* it is natural to think that the hearer has a disposition to increase her credence in *p* after having heard *u.* So in this sense we are talking about a non-normative attitude associated with a normative property. Pagin argues that we can do without the latter kind of notion in order to characterize assertion. Our intuitions regarding assertion can be explained via non-normative notions as successfully as they are using normative notions. The important difference is that non-normative elements fare well when it comes to appeal to conversational patterns, while a normative conception requires to ascribe to agents engaging in conversation attitudes which they do not ordinarily possess. In particular, it requires to assume that ordinary conversations involve a system of enforcement of social sanctions, and that ordinary agents are aware of it.

I believe Pagin's criticism of the normative account as too demanding in terms of assumption regarding ordinary speakers should be taken seriously. That is, I believe that the normative account of assertion has traditionally fallen short of addressing a certain question: is the normative account plausible with regards to ordinary conversational practice? As I will show in the next chapter, a normative account of assertion does require unrealistic assumptions regarding the dispositions of ordinary speakers. Traditionally, this sort of argument has not been articulated by supporters of the normative account, by I believe it is fundamental to do so in order to show that a normative theory of assertion is not at clash with the standard picture of ordinary speakers. I will do this in the next chapter. What is notable is that I will do this by starting from a picture similar to that described by Pagin. That is, I will start by considering the idea that utterances acquire a stable use correlated with the speaker's tendency to produce theme when the information is true and the hearer's tendency to accept the information. My argument is that when we accept and understand this picture, the image of assertion as a social, normative act is not that far away – certainly less than Pagin suggests.

2.5 Conclusions: rescuing the normative account

In this chapter I explained how recent literature has brought up two problems with the standard normative account of assertion, as presented in the literature. The first is that the account seems unable to distinguish instances of asserting *p* from instances of utterances which produce the same normative effects as asserting *p* without amounting to asserting *p*. The second is that it seems that our intuitions about cases of assertion which the normative approach purports to explain can be addressed by non-normative approaches which are far less demanding in terms of assumptions. This is the idea defended by Pagin, 2011, 2012, 2016. The key assumption of this objection is that a normative account of assertion entails assuming that ordinary conversational dynamics comes equipped with a system of enforcement of sanctions of which ordinary agents are aware, something which is very detached from ordinary linguistic practice.

In the next chapter I will propose a theory which explains the emergence of the normativity of assertion using a game-theoretical approach. The model predicts the emergence of assertion as a normative act based on the assumption that typically presenting *p* as true is a reliable device for signaling that *p* in human communication systems. This is a relatively simple assumption which does not require any enforcement or elaborate conception of normativity on the agents part. I will argue that it is by looking at this basic premises about human cooperation in exchanging information that we can make sense of Austin's idea of assertion as an illocutionary act which is performed via a conventional procedure. In this sense, the idea of communication as a social, normative process can be seen as the natural evolution of communication as a cooperative process.

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3. An Evolutionary Account of the Normativity of Assertion

3.1 Overview of chapter

In the previous chapter, I presented the theory of Marsili & Green, 2021, according to which an utterance *u* counts as an assertion that *p* if and only if:

- *u* presents *p* as true.
- *u* commits the speaker to the truth of *p* and produces the related discursive commitments.

I consider this to be a satisfactory definition of assertoric force. In this chapter I will focus on addressing a different but related problem, which I have already introduced in the second chapter. Namely: how can we make sense of the idea of assertion as a normative act if participants to ordinary discursive practice have not stipulated a pre-existence norm which establishes that certain utterances produce certain obligations and entitlements? The answer I provide to this problem can be articulated in two main steps.

First, the notion that assertion is a normative act does not entail that there are rigid, pre-established and explicit norms stating the deontic effects of assertion. Illocutionary acts can in principle be conceived as intrinsically normative without reference to pre-established, explicitly stipulated rules. This issue is addressed in 3.2, where I make the case, following suggestions by Sbisà, 2009, 2019, 2024, that, from a conceptual standpoint, it is possible to see illocutionary as conventional, whereas said conventions are to be understood as recognizable patterns of usage which determine broad standards of appropriateness of behavior in light of the performance of the relevant illocutionary act. This is what Sbisà calls the “Gestalt-like” model of illocutionary conventions. Based on this picture, the normative significance of illocutionary acts is chiefly related to the capacity of the act to coordinate the expectations of agents involved regarding acceptable behavior.

In 3.3 I argue that we can make sense of the "Gestalt-like" model for assertion through an evolutionary model. Relying on Lewis' (1969) technical, game-theoretical account of convention and to basic concepts of evolutionary signal theory, we can map the emergence of the normativity of assertion to the emergence of conventional meanings of utterances in contexts where agents have a mutual interest in cooperating in exchanging truthful information. In this sense, the capacity of speech-act of assertion to coordinate normative expectations in a social context is the derived from the capacity of utterances to enable coordination in game-theoretical context. I will explain in detail how the need to coordinate arises from the mutual goal of pursuing and exchanging true information, and how the game-theoretical, evolutionary approach allows us to explain the emergence of normative structures without postulating the explicit formulation and acceptance of those rules by the agents involved. Ultimately, my model shows that conception of assertion as a device to exchange information is not be seen as in contrast with the conception of assertion as a normative act; instead, it is by looking at the role of assertion in exchanging information that we can make sense of the idea of assertion as an act which brings about a certain normative state of affairs – this is possible once we understand both information exchange and the notion of normative state of affairs as related to the issue of *coordination* between agents.

3.2. Illocutionary acts as conventional acts

In the first part of the chapter, I will outline a conception of illocutionary acts as *conventional acts* which in turn reads the idea of conventional acts as acts which in order to be successfully performed, must be recognized as part of a pattern which sets broads standards of appropriateness applying to the agents involved. Through conventional acts, agents are able to coordinate their expectations of what is considered acceptable behavior in the given circumstance.

I will start from Austin's outline of the conception of illocutionary acts as *conventional acts*, which makes reference to the existence of an accepted procedure to perform the act, which must be executed correctly and completely in order to perform the act . As I will point out, Austin's fundamental intuition seems to be that the performance of an illocutionary acts cannot be reduced to accordance with some descriptive patterns, but is possible and can possibly be framed only against the backdrop of some kind of social normative structure.

We shall then show how several commentators have pointed out that Austin's conventionalism, as a theory, is vague, problematic and/or needs revision. The main difficulties, as we shall see, can be summarized by saying that a) there seems to be no *explicit* rules laying out said procedures and b) the absence of said rules make it difficult to understand in which sense illocutionary acts are only made possible by social structures.

I will then conclude that the best way to preserve Austin's fundamental intuition while avoiding the salient problems highlighted by critics is by following the suggestion made by Sbisà, 2009, 2019, 2024 to read conventional illocutionary procedures as "Gestalt-like" patterns, that is, as patterns which cannot be reduced to the mere description of agents' behavior and context and which, despite not being laid out by explicit rules, are nonetheless intrinsically *normative,* as they involve expectations of appropriate responses and elements of accountability, in addition to the fact that deviations from the patterns are perceived as incorrect behavior on the agent's part.

3.2.1 Austin's view on conventionalism

According to Austin, 1975, a speech-act ϕ is conventional if and only if in order to perform ϕ it is necessary and sufficient to abide by a certain linguistic convention, i.e. to execute completely and correctly a certain existing conventional procedure (Austin, 1975:25-38). Linguistic acts of this sort are referred to by Austin as *illocutionary acts*, distinct from *perlocutionary* acts. Asserting, promising and baptizing are examples of illocutionary acts. The act of *convincing* someone that *p* is the case, is instead, an example of a perlocutionary act. The implementation of a perlocutionary act (e.g. convincing someone that *p* is the case) does not depend upon the execution of a conventional procedure – as there is no conventional procedure for convincing someone of something. What is necessary (and sufficient) in order to convince someone of something through an utterance is instead that our utterance produces a certain contingent effect (namely, to cause the hearer to believe something).

On the opposite, in order to be carried out, the act of baptism requires the speaker to abide by the existing and accepted conventional procedure required for baptizing someone. Notice that the conventional procedure for a speech-act ϕ does not only specify which features an utterance *u* (mood, intonation, words) must exhibit in order to perform ϕ via *u.* It also specifies which circumstances are appropriate for the performance of the act ϕ (Austin, 1975:34). For instance, a baptism cannot be performed by other than an ordained priest, and cannot be performed outside the context of a specific kind of ceremony, involving a godfather, a godmother, etc.

Moreover, Austin (Austin, 1975:4-7) notices that *illocutionary* acts like promising and asserting can be carried out through the so-called performative formula (e.g. “I hereby promise to do so”) . That is, illocutionary acts can be performed by uttering performative formulas like “I assert that the grass is green” or “I promise that I will fix your car”. Again, using the performative formula is typically *not* sufficient in order to successfully perform the act. Context and agents involved must be appropriate in accordance with the convention. Nonetheless, this marks a significant difference with perlocutionary acts like convincing: under no circumstances uttering the words “I convince you that the sky is red” makes it so that the speaker has actually convinced the hearer that the sky is red.

To sum up Austin’s view about speech-acts and convention, we can say that at least some speech-acts (illocutionary acts) are *conventional*, in the sense that in order to perform the act it is necessary and sufficient that certain conditions are obtained. Said conditions are dictated by an existing, socially accepted convention.

Austin’s fundamental idea of illocutionary acts as conventional is reflected in Searle’s view of illocutionary acts in terms of constitutive rules (Searle, 1969, 1979). Searle argues that Austin’s speech-act conventionalism enables us to think about illocutionary acts in terms of acts made possible *tout court* by constitutive rules of the type:

X counts as Y

Here, Y stands for a certain illocutionary-type (e.g. promising) and X indicates the conditions which, according to the relevant convention, must be obtained in order for the speaker to perform said type. Re-thinking Austin's conventionalism in terms of constitutive rules on Searle's part seems appropriate for several reasons. First, the "counts as" relation has traditionally been understood as a *conventional* one (i.e. "X counts as Y" because the community has collectively accepted that to be the case, as a form of social convention). Second, there is a striking parallelism in terms of the ontological status of illocutionary acts and Y-entities. By conceiving illocutionary-types as Y-concepts, Searle reinforces Austin's idea that illocutionary act are ontologically distinct from the mere uttering of some words, just like a check to the king is ontologically distinct from the mere movement of carved pieces on a board.

Searle further develops Austin's idea by putting emphasis on the notion of a *force-indicating device*. According to Searle, the conditions indicated by X (the set of descriptive conditions conventionally required to perform an illocutionary act Y of a certain kind) work as function-indicating devices. A function-indicating device is a feature which works as a conventional signal that the speaker is performing an illocutionary of a certain kind. The occurrence of a force-indicating device may involve the use of certain words, mood, intonation, etc. It is not difficult to see the use of the above mentioned performative formulas as a sort of very explicit force-indicating device. By uttering the words "I promise you that I will fix the car", the speaker is employing a very clear, conventional signal that he is making a promise to fix the car. The force-indicating device is a publicly intelligible and accepted signal that a certain act is being performed. The existence of socially accepted conventions for performing certain illocutionary acts rests upon the existence of such signals.[8]

The conventionalism defended by Austin-Searle is meant to apply to several speech-acts, including assertion. The conventionalist view of *assertion* has been defended by several authors (chiefly, Austin, 1975, Searle, 1969a, Dummett, 1981, and, more recently, Kölbel, 2010). The idea is that whenever an utterance *u* amounts to asserting *p* it is because producing *u* in the given context matches a conventional procedure for asserting *p*. The view seems plausible in light of some features of ordinary linguistic practice. For instance, as noted by Dummett, declarative utterances are conventionally associated with assertoric force. In a standard context, uttering "Dinosaurs are extinct" amounts to asserting *that* dinosaurs are extinct. This suggests that *conventionally*, the declarative mood of an utterance is associated, in standard contexts, with assertoric force. This is parallel to the conventional association of the interrogative mood with questions and of the imperative mood with commands.[9]

Another indication of the conventional nature of assertion is the fact, noticed by Austin, that assertions can be performed via a *performative* formula, i.e. in a standard context, a speaker can typically assert *p* simply by explicitly stating that she is asserting *p* (Austin, 1975: 134-5). In standard contexts, uttering "I assert that dinosaurs are extinct" amounts to asserting that dinosaurs are extinct[10].

[8] We shall see later in this chapter how force-indicating devices likely draw their origins from a pre-institutional item, that of "correlating device" (a signal which allows agent to coordinate in virtue of correlation between the signal and repeated interaction).

[9] This hypothesis is supported by cross-linguistic studies; see Roberts, 2018.

[10] Non-standard contexts are the ones discussed by Garcia-Carpintero, 2013. These are contexts where uttering "I assert that *p*" does not amount to asserting *p*. For example, suppose that a teenager asks a friend "What do you do when they ask your age at the liquor store?" and the friend utters the answer "I assert that I am 21." In that case, the speaker has *not* asserted that she is 21 years old, despite the locution has the same syntax of a performative formula.

Said performative formula can be regarded as a conventional indicating-device of assertoric force. Again, the Austin-Searle view sees conventions of this sort as being adopted by a community so that members of the community can rely on a publicly intelligible signal of when the act of assertion is being performed.

3.2.2 Criticism of Austin's conventionalism

Austin's conventionalism has been subjected to several criticisms. Here we will concentrate on a fundamental problem which can be deduced from the various criticisms and which appears to undermine the idea of illocutionary conventions as a normative blueprint for how speech-acts ought to be performed. The problem can be summed up in the following way: the existence of a precisely stipulated formula to perform a speech-act is a rather implausible; because of that, it makes more sense to determine illocutionary force on the basis of non-normative elements like usage and context. Strawson (1964) has argued that the role of pre-established conventions is limited in determining the illocutionary force of an utterance. Speech-acts can be performed without the speaker abiding by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. For instance, the capacity of a speaker to perform a speech-act indirectly (as we saw with indirect assertions) is indication of the absence of a strict formula which prescribes how to perform the act. The moral which can be drawn from this criticism is that we do not need to assume the existence of stipulated norms in order to explain how illocutionary acts are possible, but we can simply determine the illocutionary force of an utterance based on context and usage.

Alston (2000), who nonetheless shares with Austin many fundamental views regarding speech-act theory, has observed a significant lack of clarity on Austin's part when discussing the purported conventional nature of speech-acts. Namely, Austin fails to distinguish illocutionary conventions from patterns of use in communication. For instance, it might be the case the declarative mood is often featured in assertions. However, this can be merely understood as a descriptive regularity in the behavior of agents, rather than the indication of acceptance of a procedure which must be abided by in order to perform an illocutionary acts. This relates to point raised by Strawson. Austin's failure to provide a characterization of illocutionary conventions as something different than descriptive regularities can lead to the conclusion that we do not actually need anything else other than descriptive regularities in usage in order to broadly determine the illocutionary force of an utterance. This, in turn, undermines the idea of conventional speech-acts as intrinsically *normative.* Notably, this is consistent with the criticism by Pagin which we are addressing in this chapter: Pagin's criticism of the normative conception of assertion is precisely based on the idea that there are no pre-established normative stipulations regarding assertion.

3.2.3 Illocutionary conventions as Gestalt-like patterns

To rescue the idea of illocutionary conventions as normative, one must make sense of this idea without referring to the notion of explicitly, pre-established rules. A solution of this sort is proposed by Sbisà, 2009, 2019, 2024, who argued that illocutionary conventions are to be read as "Gestalt-like" patterns. The notion of "Gestalt-like" pattern is meant to describe a pattern which cannot be quite reduced to the sum of the descriptive features of the agents' behavior, and which instead constitute an open-ended blueprint for what is considered an acceptable behavior of subjects. As such, Gestalt-like patterns of linguistic conventions are not the same as prescriptive models laid out by explicit, pre-established rules, but neither they are mere descriptive patterns of usage. Sbisà insists that these patterns are nonetheless normative, as the characteristic effect of illocutionary acts is that of creating entitlements and commitments (Sbisà, 2007): illocutionary acts are something for which agents are accountable. Moreover, responses to speech-acts can be perceived as more or less appropriate – although, consistently with the lack of a pre-established normative model, standards of appropriateness are shifty.

While not established by an explicit, pre-existing rule, the effects of illocutionary acts are nonetheless normative in the sense that they enable some degree of coordination of the normative expectations of the agents involved. When a speaker successfully performs an assertion, a promise or a command in front of an audience, the agents involved recognize the sort of act which has been performed against the backdrop of an existing pattern; this recognition allows some degree of coordination between the normative expectations of the agents involved (Goldberg, 2023, who in turn draws from Sbisà): the agents involved have a broad idea of what behavior is considered acceptable in the given context and also know that the other agents have said idea, since it is common knowledge that the linguistic pattern has been acknowledged by participants The *coordination* of normative expectations is the key notion to understand the notion of conventional illocutionary acts, based on this reading of Austin's conventionalism. For instance, an assertion has the effect of making it appropriate for interlocutors to raise legitimate challenges, while the speaker is accountable for the truth of what is said. These commitments and entitlements are common knowledge amongst the participants to the linguistic practice once the assertion is publicly recognized as such, and it is recognized as such on the basis of an established pattern of usage of certain utterance-types in certain circumstances. Thus, illocutionary acts can be seen as intrinsically normative, even without the stipulation of pre-existing rules, granted that successful performance of a speech-act causes a certain degree of mutual awareness, amongst agents involved, that certain forms of behavior are *expected* given the circumstances. As Goldberg, 2018,2023 specifies, these expectations are *normative,* not merely epistemic. We can normatively expect an agent to answer for her assertion even though we know that she is not willing or able to do so. Consider the case of challenging the grounds for an assertion that we know to be false and lacking supporting evidence. We feel entitled to an answer from the speaker, even though we know very well that she will not provide any. In order to claim the answer we feel entitled to, we appeal to certain normative standards. The fact that said standards appeal to the present case can be acknowledged by all participants to the conversation.

Here, I think, remains an important open question. As much as the picture drawn by Sbisà and Goldberg is persuasive, I believe that the picture is still not complete as long as we do not explain upon which grounds we can appeal to other participants to the conversations in order to argue that certain things are to be expected. The answers provided by Sbisà and Goldberg are rather vague and inconclusive. Sbisà, as we have already seen, described conventions as Gestalt-like patterns, merely suggesting that our normative expectations are grounded upon mutual recognition of a pattern. Goldberg speaks of implicit common knowledge of a constitutive, epistemic norm of assertion (Goldberg, 2015); notice that Goldberg is careful in describing this knowledge as merely implicit, since talk of explicitness would lead to the sort of problems we mentioned earlier. However, it is not clear upon which grounds this implicit common knowledge is based (or, to use Sbisà's vocabulary, how pattern recognition justifies normative claims). In the remaining part of the chapter, I will argue that standard of normative appropriateness in communication can be mapped to strategic profiles of coordination which emerge as a result of evolutionary dynamics in the exchange of information. Hence, the validity of normative claims regarding what can be expected in light of a speaker's assertion is grounded upon the existence of rational profiles of coordination between cooperating agents. In fact, as we shall see, the normative state of affairs brought about by assertion can be mapped to the structures of coordination which are enabled by the relevant utterance from a game-theoretical perspective.

3.3 Assertion, coordination and convention

In this section, I will provide a genealogical explanation of the emergence of the normative structures related to assertion which I have discussed in the previous section. This explanation refers to an evolutionary, game-theoretical model of how human exchange information through declarative utterances. This model of exchange of information between humans relies on the general model proposed Lewis (1969) regarding how utterances acquire their conventional meaning and is consistent with standard signal theory, in particular as developed by Skyrms (2010). In keeping with the Gestalt-like model, I will argue that the agents perception of this self-sustaining pattern ultimately sees the emergence of conceptions of accountability, commitments and entitlements linked to the strategic profile of pattern, and it will show how we can make sense of the idea of assertion as a normative act without relying on the assumption that agents stipulate and accept explicit rules regarding linguistic practice. This will provide a defense against the claim made by Pagin, 2011 that the normative account of assertion is empirically implausible. I will show that once we assume that humans have a need to exchange information and are able to find rational ways to do so through language, we can expect them to develop normative structures analogous to those described in 3.1.

The model will also make sense of the idea defended by Marsili & Green that assertion is a "partly social" speech-act. This is done by describing a two-step process. At the first step, humans develop conventional signals that *p* is the case: at this embryonal stage of assertion, humans become capable of presenting a proposition as true (pre-normative component of assertion). Once humans become able to conceptualize the role of the signal in enabling coordination, and map it to social risks and penalties, they develop a constitutive rule of assertion in the full sense.

3.3.1 Signals, information and network interaction

In this section I will first introduce the general concept of signal, referencing in particular the work of Skyrms, 2010. I will then focus on how conventional signals work in humans possessing language, and explain how the concept applies to the notion of presenting a proposition as true.

Signals are not a peculiarity of humans. Signals are ubiquitous and can be found in networks of any sort: wherever there is a somewhat complex organization (even in networks of micro-organisms, or in the networks made up by the internal components of a single organism) we witness sending of inputs from one element of the network to the other, which in turn optimizes the outcome of the interaction between parts in relation to a certain standard of efficiency. Signals can therefore be exchanged (and exploited for coordination) in systems which do not feature agents which can grasp propositional contents. This is because in order to possess informational content, a signal does not need to frame said content in the form of a proposition. As Skyrms, 2010 has emphatically argued, " the familiar notion of propositional content […] is a rather special case of the much richer information-theoretic account of content." Here Skyrms is using a notion of content which draws from Shannon's traditional view of information in terms of probability: the informational content of a signal *s* tells us how the signal affects the probability of certain events.

For instance, there is a significant correlation between insects exhibiting bright colors and the same insects being venomous. Therefore, exhibiting bright colors works as a signal to the predators that the insect is venomous. In that case, the signal input is obviously *not* framed in propositional terms, as we are dealing with non-human animals who do not possess propositional language. Nonetheless, the signal allows for an interaction between predators and insects the outcome of which is optimal for both: the insect is not eaten, and the predator is not poisoned.

Here, I will go along with Skyrm's view regarding informational content. I do not think that human animals grasping propositional language differs from non-human animals in terms of the sort of *content* they are able to convey with their signals. Instead, the difference is in terms of the *attitudes* that the agents can take towards the signal. When a speaker presents a proposition *p* as true, the audience can respond by rejecting that *p* is true, or by suspending judgment and demanding reasons for *p*.

Let us see in more detail how *conventional* signals work. As I mentioned, signals enable coordination in both human and non-human animals. Presenting a proposition as true is no exception. Conventional signals in force within humans as described by Lewis, 1969 share important similarities with signs emerged through natural selections – we will use again, as a reference, the case of insects signaling the presence of poison through bright colors.

When an utterance like "There is a tiger out there" works as a conventional signal, it is because, in the past history of the interaction between the individuals, there is a pattern, such that if a speaker says "There is a tiger out there" there is a good probability that there is indeed a tiger out there. Thus, the utterance is a statistically reliable indicator that there is a tiger out there, in the same way that the feature of bright color is a statistically reliable indicator of presence of poison in the insects. The information that there is a tiger out there is relevant for the hearer, just like the information that the insect is poisonous is relevant for the predator. Thus, the hearer typically reacts to the information by behaving in a way which brings her advantage. The hearer's behavior, in this case, maximizes the hearer's utility outcome precisely because the information is true. When she is told that there is a tiger out there, the hearer will react by avoiding to go outside, just like the predator avoids eating the insect when it sees bright colors. In both cases, the truth of the information (there is a tiger out there; the insect is poisonous) is what makes the receiver's reaction to the signal (not going outside; not eating the insect) a preferable strategy (based on the receiver's interests). In cases where there is no threat outside, the hearer is not better off by staying inside her hut. By staying inside, she cannot pick up berries and feed herself. So, unless she receives relevant information (the presence of a tiger) she will not prefer to remain inside.

A convention of this sort (a pattern in the use of the signal) is established also because the speaker has a certain conditional preference. The speaker has an interest in telling the hearer that there is a tiger out there *only if* there is in fact a tiger out there, because the speaker prefers to convey true information to the hearer. The assumption here is that for the speaker there is an evolutionary advantage in signaling threats to her peers. At the same time, the speaker has no interest in sending false information to the hearer: the assumption here is that the speaker wants her peers to be well fed and productive, and so she would not induce them to stay inside the hut if there was not a good reason to do so.

It is therefore correct to say that when it comes to presenting a proposition as true, both the speaker and the hearer have what game-theorists call *conditional preferences* related to the truth of the proposition: if the information is true, the speaker has an interest to produce the signal; if the information is true, the hearer has an interest in acting in a certain way.

Of course, the dispositions and preferences of a population only need to *approximately* match those which I have just described in order for a conventional signal to exist in the population. In order for an utterance to work as a conventional signal in this way it is necessary that the majority of speakers and hearers have these preferences and dispositions, and it is necessary that the content of the information is true in the majority of cases. Statistical exceptions are allowed: a speaker can sometimes be mistaken, or simply lying. A hearer can sometimes be mistrustful of the signal. The fact that an utterance works as a conventional signal that *p* does not mean that every time the hearer uncritically accepts the information as true. The typical, immediate response to the speaker's act of presenting a proposition as true is instead the hearer's entering an inquisitive state regarding the truth of the proposition which can but will not necessarily end with the hearer's accepting the proposition as true.

If we define the speech-act of presenting a proposition as true as a conventional signal that *p*, we are able to mark a distinction between the act of presenting a proposition as true and acts like implicature and presupposition. An utterance which implies or presupposes *p* also works as a signal that *p* is the case, but it does not so in virtue of convention. As we have already seen in this chapter, the fact that an utterance communicates *p* via presupposition/implicature is by definition in virtue of features of the local context rather than in virtue of the conventional use of the utterance-type.

3.3.2 Signals, coordination and norms

We saw how signals can coordinate behavior within networks of both human and non-human animals. They do so by enabling modes of interaction based on conditional preferences of the agents involved. When both A and B are exposed to the signal, both A and B have a preference to act in a certain way. If A and B act in accordance with their preferences, both of them are better off. For instance, predators avoid bright-colored insects because there is a correlation between the insect's color and the presence of poison, and because evolution has allowed the predators to develop instincts which makes them react to the bright colors in potential prey by avoiding the prey altogether. Just like natural selection has rewarded predators developing said capacity to respond to the signal, so natural selection has rewarded insects exhibiting said colors. Naturally, the advantage of exhibiting bright colors is conditional upon the predator's tendency to avoid prey exhibiting bright colors. At the same time, the advantage of avoiding prey exhibiting bright colors is conditional upon the existence of a correlation between bright colors and poison.

A similar mechanism of signals and incentives works in many cases of human practices. Among these cases, there are those where certain norms and institutions are involved. Take the example of a contract regulating the relationship between a supplier and a customer. Once the contract is signed, it dictates that the customer must provide payment and that in exchange the supplier must provide goods to the customer. The signing of the contract produces some conditional preferences, just like in the case of the bright-colored insects. It does so by working as a mutually intelligible signal: the customer, by signing the contract, signals to the supplier that she will pay her due. Based on this information, the supplier will provide the goods required.

In this case, the coordination of the behavior of the agents is regulated and described in terms of *entitlements and commitments*. Specifically, we have a rule of the following sort:

The signing of the document such and such (X) counts as undertaking a contract. (Y)

In cases like this, as observed by Hindriks & Guala (2015), we have a rule of the type "X counts as Y" where X is a signal and Y is an institutional concept amounting to certain rights and obligations (see also Hindriks, 2009). This rules are of the same type traditionally discussed by Rawls, 1955 and Searle, 1969. The validity of these rules is recognized by those who frame the act of X as an instance of Y. Specifically, to recognize that X counts as Y amounts to recognize that an occurrence of X in the appropriate context has certain binding and enabling effects on the behavior of agents (Hindriks, 2009).

The important point here is the explanation the authors provide for *why* communities develop institutional concepts of this sort: according to Hindriks & Guala, it is in order to provide collective representations of certain modes of coordination. By following the strategic profile described by the institutional concept, agents fulfill their mutual goals.

Noticeably, Sbisà has made a similar argument regarding the commitment and entitlements produced by illocutionary acts. According to her, when an illocutionary act produces its characteristic entitlements and commitments (e.g. a promise), it does so in virtue of there being local (possibly tacit) agreement amongst participants of that being the case (Sbisà 2007:471). Since the agents involved agree about the rights and obligations being in place, they can coordinate their "legitimate expectations" about how individuals will behave.

Therefore, the "social" state of affairs characteristically brought up by an illocutionary act of a certain sort is a state which maps to a certain pattern of interaction between agents, which has in turn become normative – i.e. it is perceived by participants to the practice as setting a standard of appropriateness. More importantly, when occasionally agents deviate from the pattern, their peers can appeal to certain mutual, normative expectations regarding the appropriate behavior

3.3.3 Illocutionary force, signals and normative expectations

Based on the definition I presented in the first part of the chapter, which is inspired by the work of J. L. Austin (and by the exegesis of Austin's work made by Sbisà) , an assertoric utterance is an utterance which, in virtue of *convention*, produces certain entitlements and commitments. This means that through mutual recognition of a certain pattern of which the given utterance is a manifestation, agents involved become aware that certain normative expectations are warranted.

What is the relationship between mutually recognizable pattern and legitimacy of normative expectations? I believe we can explain this relationship by reading illocutionary conventions through the lenses of Lewis' technical definition of convention, which we have already explained. Lewis' framework is useful, as it suggests that certain pattern of interaction are self-reinforcing (through repeated interaction) because agents tend to exploit recurring devices to coordinate amongst themselves. This model can be applied to the specific case of conventions regarding *signals*, which involve patterns of behavior of senders and receivers of items carrying information. *This,* I believe, plays a key role in grounding the normative claims of participants to the discursive practice regarding what agents are expected to do. My hypothesis is that the mutual normative expectations typically warranted by a speech-act are a reflection of the evolutionary role of the speech-act in enabling coordination and exchange of information.

To summarize my proposal in this chapter, I started by the assumption that when a speaker presents a proposition *p* as true, she is sending a signal containing the information that *p* by expressing the proposition *p*. Specifically, when one presents *p* as true, the utterance works a signal because of the conventional use of the utterance as said signal in the past. The convention is a regularity which is sustained by the fact that the behavior triggered by the signal in the receiver is one which a) brings a positive outcome to the receiver and b) brings a positive outcome to the sender. Both a) and b) obtain because the information is true. In this sense, the signal creates *conditional preferences*: since the hearer will remain inside if there is a tiger outside, then the hearer will remain inside if the speaker says that there is a tiger outside, since there is a statistical correlation between the state of affairs of there being a tiger outside and the speaker saying that there is a tiger outside.
Given this premise, I drew from the suggestions made by Hindriks & Guala, 2015, who argue that signals which create conditional preferences (X) are often mapped by constitutive rules to certain institutional concepts (Y), which basically amounts to say that they are mapped to certain entitlements and commitments (that is to say, certain social expectations). This way, utterances possessing a

certain conventional force can be said to produce a certain state of affairs which is *social*, as Sbisà would put it, because it is characterized by the legitimacy of certain social expectations. The legitimacy of these expectations emerged through time in light of an established, conventional pattern of behavior which has served well the goals of the agents.

Combining the analysis of assertion based on signaling theory *and* Hindriks & Guala's theory about how signals and conditional preferences can be represented via constitutive rules, we can provide the following interpretation to the idea of the hypothesis of a constitutive rule of assertion. The fact that uttering *u* commits the speaker to the truth of *p* by means of convention is a fact which emerges from the fact that, conventionally, uttering *u* signals that *p* is the case. The role of the utterance *u* as a signal rests upon an established convention of truthfulness and trust on the sender's and receiver's part respectively.

We can now articulate a two-level picture of the practice of assertion. At a more basic level, the practice of assertion is grounded on the existence of a signal network featuring a particular kind of signaling device (propositional utterances). In terms of providing informational content, this system behaves like the signaling systems of non-human animals, where signals affect the interaction of elements of the network.

Going to a higher level, there is the image of assertion conveyed by the Austinian tradition: an illocutionary act made possible by convention, which when performed brings about a new state of affairs in terms of normative and social relations between members of the group. This new level comes in when patterns of interaction are elaborated and implicitly codified by the community at a social level. At this level, the production of the signal generates expectations which are not merely empirical (based on statistical correlation between signaling items and truth of the information) but are *social and normative*. Normative expectations (Golberg 2015,2018) are not such that they are assessed based on whether the state of the world matches them. Instead, the status of agents within a community is assessed based on whether they match the social and normative expectations of the community.

This higher-level of the practice is where the role of the token (e.g. an utterance) as a signal is explicitly recognized in relation to a wider pattern within the community. At this level, agents do not merely react to the token signal, but also *conceive* the token as belonging to a type. When an audience member hears a speaker saying "There is a tiger out there", she is not merely assessing the token utterance *per se*; instead, she is aware of the abovementioned pattern of preferences and dispositions in a way which, for instance, the predator chasing bugs is not. In this sense, the social level of assertion represents a way of interacting with signals which is possible only for human animals. This is because only humans are capable of producing "symbolic representations of salient equilibria" (Hindriks & Guala, 2015:475)[11]. Hindriks & Guala refer in turn to a conception of social institutions already expressed by Aoki, 2007, 2011: "An institution is a self-sustaining, salient pattern of social interaction, *as represented by* [italics mine] meaningful rules that every agent knows, and incorporated as agents' shared beliefs about the ways the game is to be played." (Aoki, 2007:6).

I believe this distinction between the mere existence of a pattern of intersubjective interaction *and* the agents' ability to develop a collective representation of said pattern, when applied to conventional illocutionary acts, captures an important aspect of Austin's notion of illocution (especially in the way analyzed by Sbisà) as opposed to mere locution. When confronted with a conventional signal (e.g., an utterance with conventional assertoric force), there is a tacit agreement amongst agents regarding the pattern of social interaction which is expected in relation to the signal. This is what the notion of illocution essentially amounts to: the creation, via a public, conventional sign, of a possibility of interaction, matching a pattern, which is recognized as such by members of the community (Sbisà, 2007).

[11] Hindriks & Guala refer in turn to a conception of social institutions already expressed by Aoki, 2007, 2011: "An institution is a self-sustaining, salient pattern of social interaction, as represented by meaningful rules that every agent knows, and incorporated as agents' shared beliefs about the ways the game is to be played." (Aoki, 2007:6).

Signal theory and game-theory allow us to understand the emergence of the social conventions Austin talks about. This in turn allows us to fully understand the theoretical significance of an account like Austin's in interpreting the phenomenon of assertion. Reading under this perspective, Austin's account can be seen as an account of how humans can codify, at a social level, the significance of certain naturally developed signaling devices. At the same time, Austin's view complements a standard information-based account of assertion by putting emphasis on the capacity of human animals to represent and codify patterns of interaction, thus creating a structure of expectations which is distinctively *social*. I will have more to say about this in the next section, where I compare in detail the account I propose with the dispositional, information-based account of Pagin, 2011.

3.3.4 Comparison with Pagin's dispositional account

It is now important to compare the account of assertion I have proposed to the non-social, dispositional, and information-based account proposed by Pagin, 2011, 2016, which we saw in chapter 2. As I explained there, Pagin challenges the assumption that ordinary agents engaging in the practice of assertion are in a state of agreement and common knowledge regarding the normative significance of assertion. Instead, these agents merely possess the dispositions associated with treating assertoric utterances as *prima facie* informative. According to Pagin, an account of this sort is to be preferred to a normative account. His reasoning is that the dispositional account explains all the salient features of assertion, and unlike

In this section I will counter Pagin's point on two fronts. First, the dispositional account provides only a partial account of the phenomenon of assertion. Second, the normative account (as I sketched it) does not require us to make unrealistic assumptions about ordinary speakers. Instead, starting with some plausible assumptions about how signals naturally develop in human communities, we can derive the existence of norms and conventions of the sort I described, which are then understood as emerging from the naturalistic process of signal development.

First, it must be noted that Pagin's account features some important elements which are also present in mine. Like me, Pagin conceives assertoric utterances as token which are reliable (but defeasible) signals that certain propositions are true and which the hearers have the disposition to treat as true. What Pagin's account does not acknowledge is that these dispositions are incentivized and stabilized because of the existence of conditional preferences, which lead to the emergence of a conventional pattern of the sort described by Lewis, 1969. These dispositions are self-sustaining, because intersubjective interaction tends to evolve and stabilize towards modes of interaction which satisfy the preferences of the agents involved. Pagin does not pay much attention to the role of informative utterances in the wider context of the evolution of intersubjective interaction, and this is crucial: as we have seen, this aspect is what provides the gateway to the social dimension of assertion.

Let us now turn to the normative, conventional account of assertion. As I have shown, this account is adequately grounded on a picture of assertion as a type of signal carrying information and shaping interaction between humans. So it provides a more comprehensive account of the role of assertion as a carrier of information than Pagin's does. Moreover, it allows to explain the existence of norms and conventions of assertion

This is a novel approach to the hypothesis of assertion as a normative act. Traditionally, the normative approach to assertion has been argued for on the basis that it can get the cases right and explain our salient intuitions about assertion (see Goldberg, 2015, for a detailed and programmatic defense of this line of approach). This approach is best characterized in terms of *inference to the best explanation*: we are justified in adopting the assumption that assertion is a normative act, since in this way we can explain our intuitions regarding assertions. I am sympathetic to this line of approach: we do need a definition of assertion which matches our intuitions about the concept of assertion. At the same time, the normative approach must be defended against objections like Pagin's, who claim the existence of norm(s) of assertion does not match ordinary conversational patterns. This means that it is not enough to argue that the normative conception does a good job at explaining our intuitions. It must also be explained in what sense the normative account is plausible given our understanding of how humans interact in standard conversations.

My answer – which I provided in the second part of this chapter - is that the emergence and acceptance of constitutive rules of assertion can be explained in terms of two realistic assumptions about how humans interact. These assumptions are:

a) the patterns of interaction which accompany the development of a propositional signal in a community

b) the development, by members of the community, of collective forms of representations of said patterns of interaction, and the capacity to associate them to instances of the signal for practical purposes. This ultimately leads to the emergence of mutual normative expectations which map to the evolutionary function of coordinating devices.

If we take these to be sufficient conditions for the existence of constitutive norms of assertion, then we can derive the existence of these norms from basic assumptions regarding the behavioral patterns and cognitive capacities of ordinary agents. These basic assumptions are about:

c) the tendency to stabilize social interaction in relation to a reliable conventional signal.

d) the capacity to *recognize* at some level the impact of the signal on social interaction.

Pagin argues that ordinary agents do not know about the existence of norms of assertion. But we can re-interpret (as I have suggested) the hypothesis of the norms of assertion in terms of agents being somewhat aware of the way a signal like asserting *p* impacts social interaction. This way, the hypothesis that ordinary speakers are sensitive to the existence of norms is much more plausible.

Pagin also argues that purported norms of assertion do not seem to behave like ordinary norms in legal and social systems, since there seems to be no explicit agreement between agents engaging in the ordinary practice of assertion regarding the existence of said norms. However, it seems to me that this objection overstates the importance of explicit agreement in generating norms and underestimates the role that tacit agreement can play in such a case. Here, I am again referencing Sbisà, 2007, who argued that in order for an illocutionary act to produce entitlements and commitments, it is not necessary for agents to reach an explicit agreement about that being the case. It is sufficient that there is “tacit agreement” amongst participants about that being the case. This is a very plausible view. Consider for instance the case of promises: promises have normative effect despite never having been an explicit agreement about it amongst the relevant agents. When a promise is made, by definition, all participants implicitly recognize the social significance of the act. The same view can be applied to assertion.

At the same time, by comparing it with my model, we can see how Pagin’s model, while getting some relevant aspects right, is lacking in certain respects. Pagin is right in saying that there is a pattern according to which certain utterances are made because they are true, and a pattern according to which the hearer’s cognitive dispositions are sensitive to this reliability in carrying information. This is what makes the utterances assertoric. This is in line with the game-theoretical model which I adopt. At the same time, Pagin does not discuss *why* these patterns emerge and self-stabilize. The reason why is provided by signaling theory: speakers have a conditional preference to produce certain utterances (they prefer to do so when the utterance expresses a true proposition *and* when the hearer will trust the information) and the hearers have a conditional preference to believe what is said (they prefer to do so when the proposition is true, hence they prefer to do so only if the speaker is trustworthy).

As a final consideration, I will argue that my model can explain in which sense there are social penalties associated with assertion. In doing so, I will take an idea from Brandom, 1994 and show how integrating signaling theory into the normative account of assertion makes the idea much more plausible.

3.3.5 Accounting for social penalties in assertoric practice

As we have seen in chapter 1, the commitment-account of assertion originated with Pierce, who argued that asserting a proposition amounts to undertaking the risk to incur in certain social penalties. This idea has informed all the subsequent commitment-based accounts of assertion.

In this chapter I have argued that the commitment account of assertion is best understood with reference to an Austinian framework, which in turn should be read as a theory of how agents develop collective representations of the way utterances shape social interaction and coordination. Nonetheless, the idea of assertoric commitment was, originally (as far back as in Pierce's view) linked to the idea of liability to incur social sanctions. How do these sanctions fit in the Austinian picture I have described? So far we have only discussed entitlements and commitments in terms of ways of representing patterns of interaction. But this does not mean that the idea of social sanctions should be removed from the picture.

Here, I will refer to an idea advanced by Brandom, 1994, according to which the social sanctions of the discursive practice of assertion have to be understood primarily in terms of exclusion from the practice of those agents who have repeatedly violated assertoric commitments. I will show how this is a very plausible hypothesis in light of my conventional account of assertion grounded on signal theory which I have proposed in this chapter.

Let us start by presenting Brandom's idea regarding social sanctions. Brandom regards the act of assertion as constitutively characterized by the production of commitments and entitlements. Commitment is in turn understood as "liability to punishment of some kind" in case of violation (Brandom 1994:179). Here comes a question, which we have not addressed in detail so far: what do these sanctions *precisely* amount to? To answer this question is important for two reasons. First, failing to answer would leave the account of assertion as vague. Second, the sort of sanctions linked to assertoric commitments must satisfy the criterion of appeal to ordinary conversational practice. This is an important aspect of defending our new normative account from Pagin's criticism as in Pagin, 2011.

Let us start with how Brandom conceives the penalties linked with assertion. He claims that

"such punishment need not consist in *external* sanctions – responses such as beating with sticks, which are interpretable as punishments (perhaps in virtue of functioning as negative reinforcement in a behavioral-statistical sense) […]. One can coherently interpret a community as engaging in practices in which performances are treated as having the significance of promises […] even if the *only* sanction for failing to perform as one has committed oneself to do is to disqualify oneself from counting in the future as eligible to undertake such commitments."

[Brandom, 1994:179-180]

Furthermore, Brandom brings an interesting example to better explain the idea:

"Something like this is what happened to the boy who cried "Wolf!". Having several times committed himself to the claim that a wolf as present (thereby licensing and indeed obliging others to draw various conclusions, both practical and theoretical) under circumstances in which he was not entitled by the evident presence of a wolf to undertake such commitment and to exercise such authority, the boy was punished – his conduct practically acknowledged as inappropriate – by withdrawal of his franchise to have his performances treated as normatively significant."

[Brandom, ibid.]

According to Brandom, repeated violations of assertoric commitments lead to a point where the violator's utterances are no longer treated as *genuine* assertions. Brandom is careful to specify that this sort of consequence is not to be confused with the phenomenon of someone who is not believed. A speaker who is not believed is a speaker whose assertions fail to produce a certain *perlocutionary* effect (i.e. to generate belief). However, just because we do not regard an assertion as true, that does not mean that we do not regard the utterance as a *genuine* assertion, nor that we stop regarding the speaker as an agent which is capable of making genuine assertions.

Brandom talks about a different case. The case he describes is that of a speaker who is no longer able to perform assertions, i.e., she is no longer able to produce a certain *illocution.* This is because of the status which is collectively ascribed to her utterances: the community as whole stop treating the speaker as someone who is capable of making serious contributions to the discussion, i.e., the utterances made by the speaker have no longer the effect of producing commitment to the truth of the proposition and to entitle the audience to treat the content of the utterance as a discursive premise.

The idea is suggestive. However, it remains to be explained how the social dynamic of "franchise withdrawal" (as Brandom calls the withdrawal of one's capacity to undertake assertoric commitments and produce assertoric entitlements) is managed. In particular, how is this possible considering that there is typically no mechanism of explicit agreement ? How do tacit agreement of "franchise-withdrawal" work?

I believe this phenomenon can be explained on the basis of the signal-model which I have sketched. In this chapter, I have argued that the conventional force of an assertoric utterance (an utterance amounting to asserting that *p*) is grounded on the fact that the utterance-type works as a conventional signal that *p* is the case. In turn, based on a standard, technical definition of signal, I have established that a token works as a signal that *p* is the case only if the occurrence of the token is a reliable indicator that *p* is the case. In the case of the boy crying "Wolf!", there is no statistical correlation between the speaker saying that there is a wolf and actually there being a wolf – on the contrary! Hence, his utterances no longer work as conventional signals that there is a wolf. By extent, they can no longer work as conventional means to produce assertoric commitments. This is because they no longer enable coordination. This means that they no longer create the social expectations which codify that sort of coordination.

According to this view, the phenomenon of franchise withdrawal described by Brandom is grounded on a natural evolution of signaling systems, where the dispositions of agents evolve in response to the actual reliability of signals. This makes sense of Brandom's idea that these sanctions are "internal": it is *constitutive* of the act of assertion that repeated, public violations of assertoric commitments lead to a loss in the capacity to perform assertions *tout court*. Before, we characterized illocution in terms of the act made when an utterance is produced and all participants can associate a social pattern to the utterance. This social pattern involves, in the case of assertion, the fact that the speaker says *p* when *p* is true. If this pattern ceases to exist, then there is no pattern to be recognized and there is no illocution. The boy cannot be regarded as presenting the proposition that there is a wolf as true, because his utterances are not even regarded as carrying any information which can be assessed as true or false, but simply ceases to be treated as carrying information.

3.3.6 Comparison with Green's evolutionary account of the normativity of assertion

Within existing literature, the main evolutionary account of the normativity of assertion is that of Green (Green 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2025). I intend now to measure the originality of my contribution against Green's proposal.

Green's evolutionary perspective on the normativity of assertion can be summarize in two main points. First, Green argues that the social sanctions linked with assertion can be framed through the conceptual framework of evolutionary signal theory. Second, he argues that the illocutionary effects of assertion amount to the production of liability to social sanctions, and since social sanctions are determined by evolutionary mechanisms, the illocutionary effects of assertion are non-conventional, *contra* Austin. This is because Green assumes an interpretation of the notion of *speech-act conventionalism* according to which the claim that the relation between an utterance and a certain force is conventional means that the relation is *arbitrary.* In what follows, I will go into details regarding both claims. I will then explain how my game-theoretical view of assertion provides a better insight regarding both social sanctions and conventionalism.

Green argues that the social sanctions associated with violating assertoric commitments can be seen as what in evolutionary signal theory is called *handicap* (Zahavi, 1975; see also Maynard-Smith & Harper, 2004). The concept of handicap features in a theory elaborated by Zahavi to explain the persistence of costly features in some animal species, such as the presence of flamboyant feathered tails in male peacock. Such features are linked to some evolutionary disadvantages (e.g. flamboyant tails force male peacocks to consume more calories). In order to explain the evolutionary success of such seeming liabilities, Zahavi hypothesized that features like the flamboyant tail work as signal of the fitness of male, and therefore attract females of the same species.

The relevant takeaway from Zahavi's theory for the purpose of Green's evolutionary account of assertion is that the presence of a significant evolutionary cost associated with developing a signal ensure the reliability of signal. *If* there was no cost, the signal could be easily faked, ending up being ignored, since in evolutionary systems, individuals end up ceasing to be respondent towards unreliable signals. In other words, difficulty of faking a signal ensure its "honesty". Green argues that social costs in terms of loss of social status are also an handicap, as they ensure the reliability of assertion as form of communication. They are not biological costs, as they do not threaten the survival of the individual, but they work as a disincentives on the social and cultural level.

Regarding conventionalism, Green understands the idea that speech-acts are conventional in terms of the idea that the relationship between utterance and force is arbitrary and due to contingent stipulations. Specifically, he does not regard the relationship between assertoric utterances and normative effects as contingent, but rather the result of an adaptational mechanism of cultural evolution.

Comparing my evolutionary account to Green, I must observe that my account provides a more comprehensive and substantial integration between the normative account of assertoric force and evolutionary signal theory, by analyzing the concept of *normative act itself* (i.e. an act which brings about a certain normative state of affairs) with reference to the notion of *equilibrium* in evolutionary signal theory. On the other hand Green purports to explain the notion of assertoric commitment with reference to the very controversial notion of handicap (see Grafen, 1990; Számadó, S., & Penn, D. J., 2015 for a criticism of the principle in evolutionary biology), while also keeping it vague regarding what the loss of social status due to the repeated violation of assertoric commitments actually amounts to. In my account, loss of social status corresponds to the normative conceptualization of what happens when an agents' behavior changes the preferences of other agents interacting with her by behaving in a way which does not reflect the coordination equilibrium. This change in preferences and optimal strategies ends up undermining the signal and therefore undermining the agents' capacity to engage in the normative practice of assertion.

Moreover, I have shown how Austin's conventionalism can be read through the lenses of evolutionary signal theory. This means that conventionalism ought not to be rejected on the basis of an evolutionary perspective: quite the opposite is true. While Green's reading of the notion of speech-act conventionalism rests upon a broad and superficial understanding of the notion of "conventional", mine rests upon the technical analysis of the concept of convention proposed by Lewis, 1969. This game-theoretical analysis of the notion of conception allows us to bridge Austin's theory with evolutionary signal theory.

3.3.7 Conclusions. The pursuit of truth and the normativity of assertion

In the first three chapters of this thesis I addressed the issue of providing a good definition of assertion. The conclusion I reached in this chapter is that assertion is best characterized in terms of a conventional illocutionary act à la Austin, where illocution is to be understood as the act of updating the normative relations of the agents within the context, following an interpretation of Austin's theory developed by Sbisà. Furthermore, I have argued that the capacity of assertoric utterances to update the normative relations of agents (i.e., the capacity of utterances to produce illocutions) is to be understood with reference to the role of said utterances as conventional signs. This role is grounded on the practical interactions of the members of the community as mediated by the utterances.

As we have seen, developing Brandom's idea of "internal sanctions" within the practice of assertion, speakers who are repeatedly untruthful are gradually excluded from the practice of assertion. This dynamic of exclusion, which is not – necessarily – mediated by material sanctions, is not rooted in some metaphysical feature of the notion of assertion. Instead, it is rooted in the dynamics of evolution and involution of conventional signals. The model describing these dynamics presupposes that when signals cease to be reliable carriers of information, they cease to mediate the interaction between individuals. This presupposes that members of the community have an interest in exchanging true information.

Williams, 2002 famously argued that the status of *truth* as a value within a community is grounded on the fact that exchanging true information matches the mutual interests of members of the community, at least for the most part. We can therefore draw a connection between *truth-as-a-value* (in a broad sense which echoes Williams, 2002) and the possibility to perform an assertion *tout-court*. In order to frame this idea, I cannot think of a better theoretical framework than the one provided by Roversi (2014) to analyze social practices. Roversi starts from the already familiar notion of institutional concepts (one which we already discussed in chapter 3: examples are the concept of checkmate, the concept of money, the concept of home-run, and, of course, the concept of assertion) and links it to two further notions: the notion of *meta-institutional* concepts and the notion of *para-institutional* concepts. Here, I am mostly interested in the former[12]. An example of a meta-institutional concept is the concept of victory in a game like chess. Institutional concepts from chess (e.g. checkmate) can be analyzed without making reference to the concept of victory. However, the moves of chess only make sense within a context where the players are engaged in the pursuit of victory.

Truth can be regarded as the meta-institutional concept linked with the institutional concept of assertion[13]. This matches with the analysis of the normativity of assertion which I provided, which is

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[12] Para-institutional concepts describe strategies which are made possible by the existence of institutional entities but which are not part of the institutional concept itself. Roversi (2014:210) makes the example of *chess strategies,* which are made possible by the constitutive rules of chess but are not described by them.

[13] Roversi never applies his theoretical framework to assertion in his work. I owe the idea from a direct suggestion from Roversi himself, who commented that truth could be considered the meta-institutional concept of assertion. My idea that common pursuit of truth is the pre-normative condition upon which the normativity of assertion is grounded is my development of Roversi's suggestion.

based on the idea that patterns of truthfulness are directly linked with the existence of conventional signals and, by extent, of conventional acts of assertion.[14]

In this chapter I employed a model centered on cooperative exchange of information to explain how assertion emerges as an institution. This model explains the genealogy of the normative act of assertion but, as it should be noted, it does not postulate that each and every instance of assertion involves cooperation at a local level; the case of bald-faced lying shows us that an utterance can be used to perform an assertion even when there is no pretense of cooperation in exchanging information. All that it is necessary is that in the broader context, the utterance-type is conventionally used to convey information[15].

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[14] The idea that the social role of assertion (its role as a publicly intelligible act for creating entitlements and commitments) is linked to its epistemic role in enabling the spread of knowledge is central in Labinaz's account of assertion (Labinaz, 2019). My account can be read as providing a technical, evolutionary explanation of the link between the normative and epistemic role of assertion. Also, compare to the analysis of assertion as a joint action proposed by Miller (2016). Miller describes assertion as an act which is only possible within the context of the relevant social practice, a practice which has the epistemic goal of the pursuit of knowledge. However, he does not provide an evolutionary explanation of the emergence of the practice. Moreover, much like Green, he insists that the notion of convention is not useful in analyzing the social practice of assertion, his argument being that a normative social practice like assertion is a more complex form of interaction compared to mere convention. I do agree that conventions (based on the definition of Lewis, 1969) are not intrinsically normative phenomena. However, I believe them to be an intermediate step towards the emergence of normative practices proper. By postulating a conventional root to the normative practice of assertion we are able to explain from an evolutionary standpoint phenomena like the emergence of normative expectations related to assertion, the nature of the social sanctions related to violation of assertoric commitments and, ultimately, the collapse of the normative practice of assertion in non-cooperative contexts.

[15] Sandy Goldberg suggested to me that the notion of "exaptation" can be used to describe the normative character of assertion and its relationship with the exchange of information. Exaptation (Gould & Vrba, 1982) is a concept from evolutionary biology. The theory of natural selection states that natural selection awards a biological feature when the feature makes the organism more fit to survival (*adaptation*). It is also possible that the same feature later plays an

In the last two chapters of the thesis, we shall see how assertion can play a significant social role in contexts of this sort. In chapter 4 I will discuss the concept of *dialectical obstructionism,* which I introduce in order to account for how assertion can be used to manipulate and obstruct the development of a conversation, making it more difficult for certain speakers to make certain assertions. In chapter 5, I will discuss the evolution of assertion in political speech through by looking at how in polarized contexts, cooperation in communication is undermined by the use of post-truth rhetoric.

evolutionary role different from the adaptive role it played originally, when selection initially determined the emergence of the feature. For instance, it is commonly accepted that dinosaurs originally developed feathers because feathers allowed for survival in a colder climate. It was only later that feathers played a role in allowing certain types of dinosaurs (birds) to fly. This is an example of *exaptation.*

The idea would be that assertion emerged as a social act because of the need of humans to exchange information. However, assertion as a normative act does not necessarily rely on the mutual need of exchanging information to be performed at all. It can acquire a social purpose different from the one which originally determined its emergence.

4. Undermining the normative act of assertion: dialectical obstructionism

In this previous chapter I have argued that the social practice of assertion emerges from the mutual need of humans to exchange true information. What happens then when humans openly cease to be cooperative in this sense? Here I will build a scenario where collective effort is made in order to counter the pursuit of truth at a discursive level and show how it becomes more difficult for a speaker to make certain assertions in this scenario. In the scenario, the majority of the community of speakers does not regard a question as worth discussing. This means that the minority of people who are willing to address the question encounter more difficulty in making certain assertions and, overall, engaging in the space of reasons. I frame the phenomenon in terms of an effect implemented collectively by the agents, related to the question, which I call "dialectical obstructionism". This harm has not been discussed so far in the literature. I argue that it can be analyzed through the normative model of assertion, applied to the model of conversational pragmatics originally developed by Lewis, 1979 and Stalnaker, 1978 – with major contributions from the QUD-model developed by Roberts, 2012.

As I will show, obstructionism can be implemented through systematic, collective lying. The concept of obstructionism represents a significant addition to the discussion on the ethical badness of lying, which I present in the first section. In particular, it shows one possible way in which lies can be harmful even when they lack intent to deceive. In the second section of the chapter I introduce the concept of dialectical obstructionism. Finally, in the third part I will contrast the phenomenon of dialectical obstructionism with another sort of harm inflicted by speech, one contemporary philosophers of language are already familiar with. When it comes to accommodation of presuppositions and harm, philosophers typically focus on cases where an utterance conveys and accommodates a problematic presupposition. This presupposition can inflict social harm, for example by consolidating implicit stereotypes against minorities, or by consolidating unjust forms of authority. In these cases, disrupting the accommodation of the presupposition is seen as a way to counter the harm (Langton, 2016). I will argue that philosophers should *also* focus on a different sort of cases, one where the harm *is inflicted* by disrupting the accommodation of a presupposition.

4.1 The many aspects of the moral badness of lying

The thesis that lying is *prima facie* wrong traces back to Augustine's *De Mendacio* (3.3) and has been defended by Kant (see Mahon, 2009 for an overview). Traditionally, the wrongness of lying has been associated with the intent to deceive. The view implies that all lies clearly involve the intent to persuade the audience of the truth of a proposition which the speaker believes to be false.

The phenomenon of bald-faced lying has somewhat shaken this traditional view. Bald-faced lies are insincere statements that *p* which are not intended to deceive because it is common knowledge amongst the speaker and the hearer that *p* is false. Paradigmatic examples involve the case of a student who, caught in flagrancy of cheating by the teacher, denies any wrongdoing when she is later summoned to be questioned (Carson 2006) ; a prosecution witness denying the content of a previously signed sworn *affidavit* because he has by now been led to comply with the mafia code of silence (Keiser 2016); an Iraqi soldier who claims to a reporter that Saddam's government is respectful of civil rights (Sorensen 2007). Bald-faced lies have been a polarizing issue in the philosophical debate for a long time, with authors presenting competing conceptual and/or moral accounts of these utterances.

What is wrong (if anything) with bald-faced lies? The idea is that if anything is wrong with bald-faced lies, it cannot be related to deception, since bald-faced lies are seemingly not deceptive. Assuming that bald-faced lies are indeed lies, and that lies *qua* lies are always *prima facie* morally bad, we must conclude that what makes lies *prima facie* morally bad is not deception, as not all lies are deceptive. This last proposition has led several philosophers to consider moral aspects of the badness of lying which go beyond deception.

The goal of this section is not to argue in favor of a specific account of the moral badness of lying as better than others in capturing the salient moral reprehensible aspect of lying. Instead, the goal is to show that there are several different moral aspects of lying, and that the concept of dialectical obstructionism sheds light on one which has not been discussed before.

In giving the overview I will distinguish between two main moral aspects of lying which have been highlighted in the literature (beyond the phenomenon of deception). One hand, we have the conception of lying as a violation of some sort of sincerity or truth-norm (Carson, 2006; Fallis, 2009; Marsili, 2022; linked to this there is the idea of lying as a potential way to not only violate but also *undermine* truth-related norms, Lynch, 2021). On the other hand we have the idea of lying in political speech as a way of exercising power and undermining political agency (Hyska, 2022).

4.1.1 Lying as norm-violation

Authors who defend an account of the moral badness of lying in terms of norm violation tend to do so in order to accommodate cases of lying not involving deception. The idea is that even if a lie does not involve intent to deceive (e.g. bald-faced lying), it represents a violation of a norm of speech - typically, a norm prescribing agents to be sincere and truthful.

Carson (2006) for instance, starts off from a definition of lying as the uttering of a proposition in a *warranting context* (i.e. a context where uttering "*p*" counts as guaranteeing for the truth of *p* on the speaker's part)[16]. This definition does not require intent to deceive and account for bald-faced lies as genuine lies. In this sense, lying is *prima facie* wrong (regardless of whether there is intent to deceive) in a way analogous in which, according to Ross (2022), not keeping promises is *prima facie* wrong. Marsili (2022) and Fallis (2009) each defend an account of lying in terms of violation of some

[16] This pretty much amounts to the definition of assertion which we defended in the first three chapters.

kind of a sincerity norm. Carson, Fallis and Marsili can all be seen as defending a *deontological* account of the wrongness of (bald-faced) lies: lies are wrong *qua* violations of norms and can be compared to broken promises. To put it more simply, lying is *intrinsically* morally wrong, because lying is, by definition, the violation of a norm.

Beyond this deontological approaches, we have an approach which can be regarded as *meta*-deontological, which is the one developed Lynch (2021a). Lynch has argued that not only the violation of norms of sincerity is bad in itself, but also that its open violation can have harmful effects on the way the community values truth and reasonableness.

Lynch starts from the scenario of a rule-governed practice where some participants make *blatant* violations of the rule of the game, while at the same time claiming they are still playing the game correctly. Moreover, assume that the author of the violation is a powerful figure, i.e. she can count on supporters amongst the community who will not sanction her, nor even acknowledge that she broke the rules. The idea is that if certain subjects and only certain subjects (i.e. those powerful enough to gather support for their violations) can get away with openly violating the norm, it becomes clear that said norm does not really apply for all. This in turn leads members of the society in general to become disillusioned with the norm and with value the norm is supposed to defend.

The relevant practice regarding political bald-faced lies is public debate, which is purportedly ruled by some social epistemic norms of reasonableness: speakers ought to assert only what is true, or at least supported by evidence, etc. Lynch suggests to consider the case in which a powerful subject (e.g. a politician) blatantly lies *and* a large portion of the community (i.e. her supports) refuse to sanction her for this violation of the norms of debate (or even outright refuse to acknowledge the violation). Now, Lynch argues that if enough members of the community keep showing contempt for the social norms of reasonable debate, these norms will lose appeal with respect to the community. Moreover, the value in itself which norms are supposed to uphold - that of truth - will no longer be kept in regard within the community.[17]

4.1.2 Lying and power-wielding

Hyska (2022, 2023) has recently argued that some cases of blatantly false assertions in political propaganda (so-called *hard-propaganda,* Huang, 2018) inflict a particular kind of harm. Hyska focuses on cases of dictatorships like the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, where the regime often produces propaganda which is preposterously false. Hyska argues that this is an example of how lies can be used to harm in a way which does not involve deception. Instead, by making hard-propaganda, a regime actually conveys true information to the audience (the citizens) about the power of the regime: the power to command the media to spread preposterous contents; and the power to withstand potential backlash against the obviously false propaganda. In this way, according to Hyska, the regime discourages citizens from speaking up against authority. This is morally bad since it represents a way through which an authoritarian regime consolidates its power.

4.1.3 Summarizing the debate on the moral dimensions of lying

This overview gives an idea of how the debate on the ethics of lying has expanded in the last years. Philosophers have started to look for possible ways through which lies can harm and do wrong beyond

[17] An which shares some similarities with Lynch's is that of Berstler (2019), who argues instead that the moral wrongness of lying is to be understood in relation to the violation of the maxim of truthfulness, which in turn sustain the sort of conventions through which utterances acquire meaning. Berstler argues that by lying, agents fail to conform to the conventions which all agents exploit in order to exchange information with their peers, hence undermining said conventions while other agents comply with them. A subject who utters a bald-faced lie damages her peers even in spite of not deceiving them, simply because she undermines a convention which enables cooperation between humans.

the phenomenon of deception. There are several perspectives through which one can conceive the moral badness of lying.

So far, the literature has explored the following ideas: that lying is bad as a violation of some sincerity norm; that lying can be bad when the agent exploits the purposeful and blatant violation of said norm; that lying can be seen as a way to undermine a useful social practice; that lying can be seen as a way to demonstrate and consolidate political power.

Dialectical obstructionism sheds light on a possible morally problematic aspect of lying which has not been considered so far. Lying can be used to prevent accommodation of *true* presuppositions within a discussion and therefore in order to prevent the discussion to address certain legitimate topics. This sort of harm, we have seen from our case, is independent from deception, and can be carried out by bald-faced lies.

Now that I have given an overview of the discussion on the badness of lying beyond deception, I can present a kind of harm through speech which has not been analyzed before and which constitutes an important contribution to the debate on the moral badness of lying we just went through.

4.2 Dialectical Obstructionism

4.2.1 Presuppositions, questions and assertoric force

In this section I will explain in which sense an assertion can be undermined when an interlocutor challenges what is presupposed by the assertion. By looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of conversational pragmatics, we can see that by challenging a topical presupposition, the interlocutor is rejecting a certain question as a topic of discussion. I will start by looking at the traditional way in which presupposition failure is analyzed by Austin (1975), Frege (1892) and Strawson (1964) and show how this view ties with the conversational analysis framework developed by Lewis (1979) Stalnaker (1978, 2002) and Roberts (2012).

4.2.2 Presupposition failure in Austin and Strawson

In order to understand the concept of dialectical obstructionism, it is important to have a grasp of some traditional notions in the philosophy of language. In particular, it is important to understand in which way the force of an assertion depends on its presuppositions. This has been a topic of interest for philosophers of language for a long time. We already addressed the notion of presupposition in the previous chapters (1-3). As we have seen, when a speaker is presupposing *p*, the speaker is not asserting *p* but it is nonetheless committing herself to the truth of *p*. Moreover, we saw how when a speaker is presupposing *p* by asserting *q*, it is necessary that *p* is treated as factual by all participants to the conversation so that the speaker's assertion that *p* amounts to a relevant contribution to the discussion.

Assume I assert that the king of France is bald. My interlocutor will - likely - reply that there is no king of France. Clearly, what my assertion presupposes is false. Frege, 1892, famously argued that from a *semantic* point of view this makes the sentence "The king of France is bald" as neither true nor false. Later, the perspective of discussion on presupposition shifted from the semantic perspective to the *pragmatic* one. In the view of Austin (1975), Strawson (1950, 1964), Stalnaker (1978), presupposition is something which is carried by a speaker's assertion, rather than an abstract proposition. Thus, the discussion has shifted on the consequence of presupposition failure on the pragmatic force of the main assertion. In particular, Austin and Strawson have made the case that if there is no king of France, then the assertion that the king of France is bald loses its purported force. This is because it does not make sense to ponder whether the king of France is bald. A felicitous assertion is an assertion which manages to shift the conversation towards a certain issue, while presenting an answer to the issue which is in turn open to potential acceptance or rejection by the other participants. In the case where there is no king of France and my interlocutor objects so, my interlocutor's reply counts less as a denial of what I have asserted, and more as an indication that the *question* about the correctness of my assertion does not even arise. It does not make sense to discuss whether the king of France is bald if there is no king of France! As Austin puts it:

> "What is to be said of the statement that "John's children are all bald?" if made when John has no children? It is usual now to say that it is *not* false because it is devoid of reference; reference is necessary for either truth or falsehood .[...] People say that 'the question does not arise'. Here I shall say 'the utterance is void'.[...] Similarly, the question of goodness or badness of advice does not arise if you are not in a position to advise me about the matter."
>
> Austin, 1975, pp. 50-51

According to Austin, an assertion addressing a question which does not and cannot arise is an *infelicitous* speech-acts; that is, a speech-act the performance of which is flawed in some relevant sense and which therefore lacks a proper force. Austin famously distinguishes between different ways in which a speech-act can be infelicitous. The main distinction is the one between *misfires* and *abuses* (Austin, 1975: 18-19). In case of a misfire, the speaker attempts to perform the speech-act Φ but the act is made "null and void". For example, a command is infelicitous when the speaker does not possess the relevant authority. Conventionally, the act of commanding *presupposes* that the speaker possesses the relevant authority. To disobey a legitimate command is one thing. However, in case the command is void - because the speaker lacks authority - it does not even make sense to talk about disobeying the command, because the command in question is not a *real* command.

Austin (1975:19) argues that presupposition failure in assertion is an analogous phenomenon. It does not make sense to assess the assertion "The king of France is bald" as false, just as it does not make sense to disobey a purported command which the speaker had no authority to issue to begin with.

Strawson (1964) defends a similar approach, emphasizing even more the relationship between questions, infelicity and presupposition failure. Strawson pointed out that whether presupposition failure affects the force of an assertion depends on what *question* is addressed by an assertion. For example, if I am asked who went to the pool and I answer "Jack went to the pool", if there is *no* pool my assertion strikes as infelicitous and its content as truth-valueless - the assertion is addressing a question which is not worth being addressed. If instead the question is "Where did Jack go?", the proposition "Jack went to the pool" strikes as merely false, not lacking truth-value. This is because the non-existence of the pool does not make the question "Where did Jack go?" one which does not make sense to address. In the former case, "There is a pool" is a *topical presupposition*, while in the latter case it is not.

4.2.3 The conversational-analysis framework

4.2.3.1 Presupposition within the conversational-analysis framework

Frege, Strawson and Austin regarded presupposition failure in terms of the fact that the relevant presupposition is not *true*. So what causes the assertion to be infelicitous (in particular, what causes the attempted assertion to be "null and void", in Austin's terms, and therefore the relevant question to be unworthy of being addressed) is the way the world actually is. Within the tradition later developed by Lewis (1979) and Stalnaker (1978, 2002)[18], presupposition failure can occur when the

[18] Stalnaker and Lewis defend a model of conversation where the participants speech-acts update a score, a set of abstract entities describing the state of conversation at a given time. The state of conversation represents the complex of mutual relationships entertained by the participants of the conversation *qua* participants of the conversation. One notable example of an element of the score is *common ground* of conversation (Stalnaker, 1978), i.e. the set of propositions which are commonly accepted (hence *presupposed*) by the participants for the sake of conversation.

The characterization of assertion and conversation proposed by Stalnaker and Lewis can be framed through the concept of commitment, as it has been proposed Antonsen (2018) and Geurts (2019). For instance, mutual acceptance of a proposition *p* can be understood as mutual *commitment* of the participants to the discussion towards *p*. When a speaker commits to a proposition *p* by asserting *p,* one of the effects of the utterance is to propose to add *p* to the common ground: the proposal is accepted when the other participants commit to *p* as well by means of more or less explicitly accepting *p.*

presupposition is not *accepted by the participants of the conversations*. Within this tradition, the analysis of the force of speech-acts is based on the features of the conversational context. It is *this* particular approach to presupposition which is relevant in order to analyze the phenomenon of obstructionism.

To give an example, it must be commonly accepted that there is a pool in order for a speaker's assertion that the pool is closed to be felicitous. Here acceptance is to be taken as a very weak notion, weaker than common belief. If it is not commonly *believed* by all the participants that there is a pool, they can just act as if there is a pool (Stalnaker, 2002). In this case we say that the presupposition is commonly accepted for the sake of conversation.

One important element of this conversational-based approach to presupposition is the notion of *accommodation*, as developed by Lewis (1979). The basic idea is that the conversational context (roughly speaking, what is commonly accepted by the participants to the conversation), tends to adjust itself by default in order to make speech-acts felicitous (or, more in general, appropriate). If a speech-act S requires Φ to be commonly accepted, then when a speaker performs S, Φ tends to enter the conversational context by default (if it is not already there). For example, if I assert that Lucia's brother has a new car, and the proposition that Lucia has a brother is not already part of the common ground of conversation, this proposition tends to become part of it. One fundamental requirement for accommodation is that the other participants do not "make a fuss about it", as Lewis puts it; in this case, nobody objects that Lucia has no brother. If the conversation proceeds smoothly after that, the participants are acting as if Lucia had a brother; so by definition the presupposition has become part of the context of conversation. Notice that the same concept applies for speech-acts other than assertions. It also applies, for example, to commands and authority: authority is a felicity condition for the speech-act of *commanding*. Suppose that it has never been explicitly established that John is

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This means that the "conversational score" approach to assertion can be easily represented as an extension of the commitment-based framework we developed from chapter 1 to 3.

the leader of the group in an expedition. However, John starts taking initiative, confidently issuing orders to the others regarding what to do. Nobody objects to his grounds for doing so, and this pattern ends up establishing him as the *de facto* leader of the group: his authority has been accommodated.

4.2.3.2 Question-under-discussion and presupposition

Before we saw that in the Austin-Strawson's tradition, presupposition failure and infelicity are strictly linked to which question is addressed by the assertion. This intuition can be also maintained within the conversational-analysis framework. Within this tradition, Roberts (2012) has expanded on Stalnaker's view introducing, in addition to a common ground of presuppositions, the notion of *question-under-discussion* (QUD). The idea is that the focus of a conversation at a given time can be analyzed in terms of the QUD at the moment. Like common ground, the QUD is a feature of the conversational context which all agents must in some sense accept.

Moreover, QUD and CG are strictly dependent on one another. If "There is no king of France" is part of the common ground, the QUD cannot be "Is the king of France bald?". Consistently, if "Is the king of France bald?" is accepted as QUD, "There is a king of France" must be part of the common ground. We can summarize the relationship between QUD and CG in this way. We assume that questions can be analyzed in terms of a set of propositions, that is, the set of all possible answers to the question (Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1984). If all propositions of a certain question-set semantically presuppose a certain proposition *p*, then the question is said to presuppose *p*. If a question presupposes *p*, then in order for the question to be QUD, *p* must be part of the common ground.

If a speaker asserts that the pool is closed and its interlocutor insists that there is no pool, the QUD cannot be "Who went to the pool?". It is as if the interlocutor is arguing that before addressing the question of who went to the pool we must address the question of whether there *is* a pool. Thus, this approach is consistent with Austin-Strawson's fundamental view: if I assert *p* and *p* presupposes *q* in a way relevant to the topic addressed by asserting p (i.e. if q is not true, it does not make sense to address the question of whether p), then the interlocutor's rejecting q nullifies the force of asserting p in terms of raising and addressing the question of whether p.

4.2.4 Dialectical obstructionism

Suppose a house is set on fire in a small town. There is overwhelming evidence of a case of arson. The owner of the house, who was in a pub when this happened, has very recently moved in from abroad and has no ties with the surrounding community, which in turn is a very close-knit one and suspicious of outsiders. Based on the evidence for arson, the owner has reason to believe the culprit is amongst his neighbors. So he starts an inquiry. He denounces what happened at the town-hall, before a gathering of the whole community. He produces evidence that gasoline was poured into the building and set on fire. Moreover, the village has been cut off from the rest of the country by snow in the last weeks, so the person responsible must have come from within the village.

"The person who set the fire is one from the village!" he asserts, and asks who is the responsible among them. As said, the community is hostile to outsiders. Moreover, it follows a strict code of silence. Most of the villagers do not speak. A few, who are perceived as the main leaders, speak and deny that it is a case of arson. One of them, an elder of the village, replies to the owner: "My dear friend, these are very serious accusations. Do not jump to rushed conclusions. You cannot be sure that it was a case of arson. Accidents like this happen all the time and I am sure this was the case with you. A glitch in the electric system, maybe, who knows…". The owner attempts multiple times to make the case that it was arson, but without success. Later, in the following days, on separate occasions, the owner happens upon some villagers, who individually manifest sympathy, acknowledging that it was indeed a case of arson. However, they have not the courage, nor the influence to speak up in the town-hall. For what concerns the public discussion in the village, it is not settled that it was a case of arson.

What happened in the town-hall is clearly a case of bald-faced lying (Carson, 2006; Sorensen, 2007). The leaders of the village do not hope to deceive the owner into thinking that it was not arson. The elder and the other leaders are telling blatant lies. Everybody can see the evidence that it was a case of arson. While not deceptive, these utterances achieve an important effect: they remove a given question from being QUD[19]. They do not acknowledge as legitimate the question of who in the village set the fire: according to them, there is no evidence that it was a case of arson to begin with, so the question about the identity of the culprit does not arise.

I regard this as an example of dialectical obstructionism. The villagers are rejecting the presupposition of the owner's assertion that one of them is the culprit. They are questioning the presupposition that it was indeed a case of arson – and so, by extent, they are refusing to have it accommodated in the common ground. As a result, they reject q_1 as a QUD:

"Which villager is responsible for the arson?"

They instead introduce a different QUD, namely:

"Was it really a case of arson?"

I define dialectical obstructionism as the act of preventing the accommodation of a certain topical presupposition. The rejection of said presupposition is done in spite of truth and evidence. The most prominent (negative) effect of obstructionism is to prevent the discussion from developing around certain *legitimate* topics. The question about who in the village set the fire is legitimate because it is indeed true that it was a case of arson (Rescher, 2018).

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[19] According to the specific reading, there are two possible readings. The question "Who set the house on fire?" can be regarded as never having been the QUD; the act of bald-faced lying has therefore the effect of preventing the owner from establishing said question as QUD. Alternatively, the question was QUD to begin with and the act of bald-faced lying has the effect of removing it. The ultimate result does not change.

Obstructionism forces speakers to make additional efforts in the attempt to establish a certain question as a QUD. Like political obstructionism, it is done for the sole purpose of stalling the discussion. Moreover, and this is what makes it morally reprehensible, it is done by speakers who know that the question is a legitimate one. Even if challenging the presupposition (e.g. claiming that it was not a case of arson) does not deceive, it negatively impacts the development of the conversation.

A couple of observations. First, realistically, in order for it to be effective, dialectical obstructionism must be carried out by the majority of participants to the discussion and/or by participants whose words have a certain degree of exposure and resonance. The example above, as described, certainly qualifies. Imagine instead if only a lone villager had argued against the assumption that it was a case of arson. Realistically, the discussion on who set the fire would have moved on, gradually excluding the lone dissenter.

Also, dialectical obstructionism needs not to be carried out via assertions. It *can* be produced via assertion, as in the case of villagers outright asserting that it was no case of arson. However, asserting the negation of a presupposition is not the only way one can prevent the accommodation of said presupposition. One can, for example, merely raise the question on whether the presupposition is true. This is what is done by the soft-spoken elderly villager in the example above.

I believe it is intuitive, from this scenario, that in this case a familiar phenomenon in pragmatics (failing to accommodate a presupposition) has effects which are morally problematic. The owner of the house was attempting to address a legitimate question, and the discursive behavior of the villagers prevented it. The undue undermining of one's capacity to act in a certain way is, from a certain perspective, a morally reprehensible act.[20]

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[20] Recently, Keiser (2021) has argued that preventing a certain legitimate question from being QUD can be considered an example of discursive injustice. Keiser does not focus on cases of injustice caused by preventing the accommodation of a certain presupposition. Rather, she focuses on cases where a certain assertion is intentionally misinterpreted, thus changing the question-under-discussion from what the author of the assertion originally intended (on the same issue of

As we saw, obstructionism can be inflicted by lies – even non-deceitful ones. Therefore, the concept of obstructionism enriches the discussion on the several aspects of the moral badness of lying. In certain contexts, lying can be seen as a way of preventing discussion from tackling legitimate questions.

Obstructionism is also relevant for an area of contemporary philosophy of language which involves applying the conversational-analysis framework we've seen before to the study of social reality, with focus on injustice and discrimination. This approach employs notions like accommodation and presupposition to analyze how speech influences the social context of public discussion in a morally relevant way. This line of discussion focuses mainly on when problematic contents are accommodated within the context of discussion. As a consequence, accommodation disruption is seen as a way to counter these harms. The concept of obstructionism sheds light on a different sort of cases: cases where the harm is inflicted because accommodation of a presupposition is prevented. Therefore, I argue that the perspective on the relationship between accommodation and harms inflicted by speech ought to be broadened: we should not *only* focus on cases where speech accommodates problematic assumptions; we should *also* focus on cases where speech prevents valid assumptions from entering the context of public discourse.

4.3 Accommodation and social harms: the contemporary landscape

4.3.1 Back-door speech and its effect on social reality

Before we mentioned the notion of accommodation as elaborated by Lewis (1979). The notion of accommodation, combined with Austin's notion of *felicity*, has been recently employed by philosophers of language to analyze how speech can negatively affect social reality. We saw that,

"distorting debate", see Picazo, 2023). Nonetheless, I share her general point that manipulating the QUD can produce a form of discursive injustice.

according to Lewis, if Φ must be part of the conversational context in order for a token speech-act *I* to be felicitous, then the speaker *S* tends to accommodate Φ within the context of the conversation by default. What happens if Φ amounts to a problematic conception of the social world (such as a wrong stereotype) or to the conferral of an undue social authority? This question has been recently brought to the spotlight in analytic philosophy of language by the work of Stanley, 2015, while being originally introduced by Sbisà's seminal *Ideology and the persuasive use of presupposition* (Sbisà, 1999).

Sbisà argues that some assertions within public discussion accommodate presuppositions which are ideologically problematic - i.e. they reflect a problematic view of social and political reality. This in turn can have the effect of strengthening said worldviews within the political context. An important aspect of this view is that since the contents are merely presupposed and not asserted, this makes the audience more likely to accept them. Sbisà, 1999 argues that in some cases members of the audience are unlikely to challenge an ideological presupposition because they do not wish to disrupt the common ground of discussion. This is because we need to share presuppositions with our interlocutors in order to have a discussion *tout court.*

Stanley (2015) defends an idea similar to Sbisà's, arguing that propaganda operates by introducing problematic assumptions within the conversational context of political discussion. In his view, the accommodation is facilitated because individuals are unconsciously influenced by ideological stances which make them more likely to accept problematic presuppositions. These presuppositions often involve negative prejudices against disadvantaged groups, such as women and ethnic minorities. In this way, propaganda both strengthens negative ideologies and is made more effective by them in shaping the context of political discussion.

Langton (2016) has also focused on this sort of phenomena. Moreover, she has focused on the possible ways to counter this sort of harm. She has observed that since these harms come from contents not explicitly conveyed, it is much more difficult to counter them. She argues that so-called “back-door speech” cannot be simply countered in the way we counter a false assertion (that is, by challenging what is explicitly stated).

For example, the following assertion somewhat presupposes the false sexist stereotype that women are not very good at math:

“This math test is so easy that even a woman could pass it!”

By making the assertion - and by bringing one’s audience to accommodate its problematic presupposition - the speaker can “smuggle” the stereotype into the conversational context without explicitly raising the issue of whether women are good at math or not. Countering this harm is not a matter of challenging the speaker’s take on the question-under-discussion. Langton argues that in order to counter the harm done by the utterance, we must go the extra mile and *expose* the implicit stereotype in the speaker’s utterance.

The considerations we just saw about accommodation and back-door speech-acts do not only apply to assertion. Langton also considers the case of commands, which, as we have seen in 4.1, presuppose that the speaker has the *authority* to issue said commands addressing the hearer. We saw that if a speaker is giving order to a hearer without technically possessing the authority to do so, the speaker is acting as if she has such authority. And if no-one in the audience challenges this presupposition, it is as if the audience is accepting that the speaker does possess the authority. This ultimately leads to the felicity condition being accommodated, leading the speaker to *de facto* acquire said authority.

Now, suppose that this authority is used to enforce an unjust norm. For example, assume that someone orders a black person to leave his seat to a white person. By accommodating the authority of the speaker, by-standers are allowing the establishment of a racist norm within the given context. Therefore, through speech-acts of this sort speakers can “build unjust norms and authority patterns, helped by hearers” (Langton, 2016:33).

In both examples, that of the sexist implication and that of the racist norm, the harm is inflicted by "back-door speech", exploiting the unwillingness or incapacity of audience members to challenge the presupposition of the speaker's speech act.

4.3.2 Disrupting accommodation as counter-speech

Langton then turns on the subject of counter-speech. Broadly speaking, counter-speech is any way through which one counters the harms of any kind inflicted by speech (see Cepollaro et al., 2023, for an overview of the topic). In cases where a falsehood is asserted, counter-speech may take the form of a challenge to the truth of the assertion. If someone lies with the intent to deceive, a bystander who knows the truth can prevent the audience from being deceived by stating the truth. This is an example of counter-speech.

Langton observes that in cases of "back-door speech", a different type of counter-speech is required. For instance, strictly speaking, the sexist speaker in the example above is not asserting any false proposition. The problem lies in what is *presupposed* by the speaker. Similarly, when a speaker is trying to bring her audience to accommodate illegitimate authority the problem does not lie in the stance she is taking within a discussion. In other words, the problem is not the one about truth. Instead, Langton argues, in these cases the required counter-speech must be one targeting the conditions of felicity of the speech-act made by the speaker, rather than its content. By challenging the conditions of felicity of a speech-act, an interlocutor does two things:

- She prevents the condition of felicity from being accommodated within the conversational context.
- She causes the speech-act to *misfire* and lose its pragmatic force.

For instance, if a black person challenges the authority of a speaker commanding her to leave her seat to a white person, the speaker's act of commanding her *misfires*. Moreover, the interlocutor has blocked the accommodation of the authority of white people to command black people to leave bus seats free. Similarly, when it comes to sexist stereotypes implicitly conveyed by assertion, Langton urges hearers to expose said presuppositions and block the accommodation of said content.

4.3.3 Blocking vs obstructionism

What we presented in the previous section is, roughly speaking, what blocking amounts to in Langton's description. In synthesis, blocking is counter-speech in the form of "disruption of accommodation" (Langton, 2016). Now, disruption of accommodation is exactly what happens in the case of obstructionism as well. When agents perform dialectical obstructionism, they prevent the accommodation of the presupposition of the relevant assertion and they block the establishment of a specific question as the question-under-discussion. In that case, accommodation-disruption is harmful because the agents prevent a true proposition from being accommodated and they prevent a *legitimate* question from being addressed. So blocking and obstructionism are practices which work according to the same illocutionary dynamic but obtain opposite effects with respect to the harms inflicted by speech.

In this sense, it is important to specify that I do *not* consider blocking - as characterized by Langton - as a form of obstructionism. Broadly understood, blocking is the act of preventing the accommodation of a problematic presupposition. Obstructionism is an act carried out in bad faith in order to prevent a true, non-problematic presupposition from entering the common ground.

Also, notice that obstructionism prevents, by definition, certain questions from being addressed in the conversation. Blocking does not prevent in every case certain questions from being addressed. When challenging one's authority to issue a command, we are not preventing a certain question from being addressed. And even in some cases of assertions - like the one in the example above, involving the sexist stereotype - blocking does not prevent the relevant question from being discussed. When blocking the assertion "Even a woman could pass this math test", we are not arguing that the question of whether a woman could pass the test does not arise; instead, we are pointing out that the utterance conveys an implicit assumption which is problematic and which we reject. Notice that in *this* case the assumption is not a topical presupposition (in the sense defined by Strawson) and challenging the assumption does not undermine the legitimacy of the QUD addressed by the assertion.

More in general, we have seen throughout recent years, several philosophers of language have focused on how speech can harm by “smuggling” implicit, problematic contents into the conversational and social context where speakers and hearers operate. However, little attention has been paid to the opposite phenomenon. But harmful speech can operate in the opposite direction, by undermining the illocutionary grounding of speech-acts which address legitimate issues. It is not enough that a conversational context is ridden of ideologically problematic assumptions. It must also be possible, in principle, for the conversation to address legitimate issues, without the development towards said questions being stalled by hostile agents. In this sense, I regard the study of obstructionism as complementary with respect to the study of strategies of blocking. The subject of harmful accommodation-disruption has been overlooked so far, in favor of an approach which focuses more on how harms are inflicted on the community by means of accommodating problematic ideological contents, and on how disrupting accommodation can be a solution to the problem.

4.4 Final considerations

In this chapter I defined the concept of dialectical obstructionism. The concept describes cases where certain presuppositions are removed from (or prevented from entering) the common ground of discussion, with the essential effect of undermining the force of assertions which pragmatically rest upon said presuppositions.

The concept of obstructionism is linked to the idea that at least some speech-acts (among these, assertion) are inherently social, meaning that they are conventional (in the sense indicated by Austin) and normative (in the sense that their force is to be understood in terms of creations of entitlements and commitments). So in this sense, that an utterance has a certain force, if one at all, depends on features of the social context, since both conventions and social norms depends upon collective attitudes of the community. I defended this view of assertion as a social act in the course of the first three chapters of this thesis. If we accept this view, then we must accept the fact that alterations in the social context relevant to linguistic pragmatics can have a relevant effect on the capacity to make assertions.

5. Undermining the normative act of assertion: the decline of factual accountability in political speech

5.1 Introduction: assertion, (non)-cooperativeness and political discussion

In the first three chapters of this thesis (and, in particular, in chapter 3), I have argued that the emergence of the social practice of assertion can be explained by the fact that humans have a mutual interest in exchanging truthful information. The notion of a speaker's being responsible for the truth of what she says is something which emerges in a community in order to sustain dynamics of cooperation in exchanging information. It is because agents, in this sort of contexts, have a common interest in pursuing truth that agents become able to held each other responsible *qua* subjects who are capable of undertaking normative commitments.

In the previous chapter I have presented an application of this theory in a negative sense. If cooperation in the pursuit of truth is necessary in order to treat each other as agents capable of undertaking assertoric commitments, then when certain issues are excluded from the context of discussion (as it happens in cases of obstructionism) we make it more difficult for the agents who want to address said issues to perform genuine assertions. If agents do not agree about what the question-under-discussion ought to be, then they cannot cooperate in finding out the truth regarding the same issue. Using the conceptual tool of presupposition failure we were able to argue why this is the case.

In this chapter I present another example of how, if we stop treating our peers as agents interested in pursuing the truth, we risk losing our capacity to engage with them in assertoric practice. I argue that this can be the case in contemporary political discussion, which, as I will explain, is dominated by so-called "post-truth rhetoric", that is, the attitude of labeling peers as subjects who do not care for truth. Contemporary political discussion is dominated by mutual accusation of dishonesty and untrustworthiness between political opponents (whether amongst political elites, the general public or in the media), which ultimately lead to partisan polarization even on issues (like climate change) which ought to be settled based on empirical facts rather than political allegiance.

My argument is that post-truth rhetoric undermines the normative foundations of factual accountability in public discourse. In turn, the weakening of factual accountability is advantageous to politicians who wish to misrepresent their policies in order to hide their social costs and make them more appealing. In this sense, the undermining of factual accountability through post-truth rhetoric can be seen as a political strategy with significant negative outcomes for policy making. I chose the case study of political polarization over climate change in US politics in order to illustrate this intertwining between post-truth rhetoric, polarization and lack of accountability.

This chapters is meant so show how the concept of assertion as a normative act can play a significant role in framing certain phenomena within political discussion. In chapter 3 I explained how the common goal of pursuing truth is at the basis of normative accountability for truth within discursive practice. In this chapter I reverse-engineer the theoretical framework I previously outlined and show how agents who have an interest in undermining accountability can do so by ceasing to treat their peers as subjects interested in truth.

The chapter is structured in the following way. In 5.2 I outline the basic feature of contemporary political discussion, focusing on issues like fake-news polarization. In 5.3 I present what the "post-truth narrative", i.e. the idea that participants to political discussion do not care about truth. In 5.4 I explain how labeling participants to public discussion as "post-truth" can be seen as a rhetorical strategy with negative effects. Specifically, my argument is that such rhetoric can undermine the sort of social normativity I described in chapter 3, hence undermining factual accountability in political discourse. Finally, in 5.5 I explain how politicians can have an interest in undermining factual accountability, hence providing an argument for the idea that post-truth rhetoric can be fueled by political elites in order to be able to misrepresent their policies with more ease. I exemplify this idea by looking at the case of political discussion over climate change in the US.

5.2 Outlining the basic features of contemporary political discussion: fake-news and polarization

In this section I explain how the trends of current mainstream political discussion do not reflect the image of a cooperative discursive practice of the kind we described earlier; that is, a discursive practice where the behavior of agents reflect the patterns of trust and truthfulness. As we saw, such behavioral patterns are fundamental in order for humans to cooperate in the pursuit of truth.

Let us start with truthfulness. Both the debate sparked by politicians' assertions and the online discussion amongst ordinary citizens on contemporary issues is rifle with fake-news (Littrell et al., 2023; Azzimonti et al., 2023; Osmundsen et al. 2021; Stella et al., 2018; Shao et al. 2018). By fake-news, we mean information spread with little regard for its truth and accuracy (here, I follow the sort of definition defended by Mukerij, 2018; Croce & Piazza, 2021; Anderau 2021). Thus, we may say that assertions made within political discussion are more than often made without much care for factual truth.

Moreover, lack of truthfulness is often not sanctioned in public discourse. As Lynch, 2021b, has observed, individuals affiliated with a political group or faction tend to refuse to acknowledge the falsity of a political leader's assertion, if when evidence shows the contrary. Despite the fact that many assertions made by political leaders turn out to be false, these actors are not subjected to "franchise withdrawal" (as Brandom would put it), at least not by their supporters. That is, they do not lose their status, within the community, of agents capable of contributing to public discussion with genuine assertions.

Let us turn now to the issue of trust. We saw that in order to develop the capacity of exchanging information and accumulating knowledge through verbal interaction, humans need to establish a behavioral pattern of trust towards speakers. How else can discursive practice function as a tool through which speakers transmit accurate information to hearers? However, political discussion often features phenomena of unjustified distrust towards testimony. When confronted by factual evidence in political discussion, many agents often dismiss it, especially if it is presented by subjects with a different political affiliation than theirs (Lynch, 2021a; Lynch, 2018; Nadelhoffer et al. 2020; Harris, 2021; Stefanello, 2023).

It seems, therefore, that more than often, in mainstream political discussion is replaced by the tendency of participants to public discussion to express views not based on factual truth but rather on the narrative promulgated by their political group, at the same time vehemently rejecting the views pushed by members of the opposing political side, even when said views are supported by empirical evidence and by the consensus of the relevant experts. This phenomenon is commonly known as political polarization.

One of the results of polarization is that positions on factual issues like the nature of climate change have increasingly acquired a political connotation. Polls shows that ordinary citizens in the US tend to express different opinions regarding the human role in causing climate change depending on whether they support the Democrats or the Republicans (Mullin & Egan, 2017). Politicians from opposite sides of the spectrum also express conflicting empirical views on climate change, with Democrats acknowledging the existence of anthropogenic causes to climate change and Republicans being more skeptical towards the position (Dunlap & McCright, 2010). The phenomenon of polarization perfectly shows that current mainstream political discussion is not structured around a cooperative model, whereas by cooperative model we mean one where citizens and politicians make an effort to spread and exchange true information and work together in the pursuit of truth (Lynch, 2025).

5.3 The post-truth narrative: are participants to public discussion uninterested in truth?

In this section I will present an account of political speech according to which mainstream political discussion is plagued by a substantial lack of concern for truth by those who engage in the discussion;

this general phenomenon has sometimes been labeled as "post-truth" (McIntyre, 2018; Lynch, 2021c, 2025). The fundamental idea is that most individuals who engage in political discussion do not care about whether they believe (and by extent, say) is true or not. In this section I will present the salient features of "post-truth" as a descriptive model to characterize current political discussion.

Throughout recent years, several authors (Fricker, 2012; Cassam, 2019; Broncano-Berrocal & Carter, 2021; Talisse, 2019; Lynch, 2012) have analyzed the relationship between social and political group identity, on one hand, and epistemic vice on the other. An epistemic vice is, roughly speaking, an epistemic character trait or practice reflects a bad epistemic conduct. Examples include arrogance, intellectual cowardice, close-mindedness, wishful thinking and dogmatism (Kidd et al., 2021). For instance, arrogance is a character trait which can prevent a subject from considering the possibility of being wrong, hence keeping her from revising her beliefs in accordance with evidence. Epistemic vices of this sort can be understood as those epistemic attitudes which are antithetical the conduct of a subject which cares about truth and is responsive towards evidence in forming and maintaining her beliefs[21]. The general consensus amongst the authors listed above is that groups characterized by a certain political identity can at times foster the development of bad epistemic traits amongst their members.

The conceptual framework of vice epistemology has also been applied to the understanding of political polarization in particular (Broncano-Berrocal & Carter, 2021; Lynch, 2012, 2018). The idea is that more than often, in forming and maintaining their beliefs, citizens are influenced by their

[21] Vice epistemology originally branched out virtue epistemology (Cassam, 2016). Virtue epistemology is essentially the approach to classical epistemological problems centered on the features of subjects and communities. Specifically, the responsibilist approach in virtue epistemology (see Zagzebski, 1996, for an overview) is the one which focuses on the subject's epistemic conscientiousness (or lack of thereof), that is, on whether the subject is responsive towards normative epistemic standards (e.g. whether the subject is responsive towards evidence in forming and maintaining her beliefs). Conversely, character traits which obstruct the subject's responsiveness to epistemic standards are understood as epistemic vices.

political group identity rather than by available evidence. This sort of reading of polarization is *epistemic,* in the sense that the implicit idea is that polarization is due to the particular way in which group identity can affect one's *beliefs.*

Lynch, in particular, has not only framed political polarization as a product of collective epistemic vice, but he has also stressed on how this sort of epistemic posture represents a corruption of the ideal of democracy (Lynch, 2012, 2018, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2025). In particular Lynch believes polarization to be the product of the loss of status of truth as a value in democratic communities, whereas, according to Lynch (2021b, 2025) truth as a value ought to be the foundation of democratic life. This, in turn, means that the ideal goal of democracy is that of allowing individuals to exchange reasons and arguments so that together they might reach practical and epistemic solutions to the problems the community faces (Lynch, 2012, 2025). Let us see these ideas in detail.

As we mentioned, the problematic attitude towards truth and evidence in contemporary political discussion has been framed by some authors as the manifestation of *epistemic viciousness,* that is, a manifestation of a reproachable attitude in terms of how one forms and maintains her beliefs. Cassam, 2018, has developed the notion of *epistemic insouciance* in order to describe the lack of interest for truth which. Lynch takes this idea a step forward: he argues that the lack of interest in truth, so widespread in modern politics, is not only an epistemic vice, but it represents the abandonment of a certain value around which communities and institutions ought to be structured (Lynch, 2021b, 2021c). Truth is held as a value in a community when people "care if their claims are in accordance with reality" (Lynch, 2025:12). According to Lynch, the decline of truth as a value represents a corruption of the ideals of democracy.

In his words:

"[…] promoting and providing fair access to reliable social-epistemic practices is demanded by the democratic ideals of reason-giving and deliberation. Democracies, at least in theory, should be spaces of reasons where decisions are made without recourse to violence and where the exchange of reasons is encouraged."

Lynch, 2021a, p. 272

Amongst the different problematic phenomena of the post-truth era, Lynch considers political polarization as one the most worrisome (Lynch, 2021a) :

"Typically, we think of political disagreement as being disagreement over either principles or policies. […]. In the last several decades, however, there has been increasing attention paid to the pervasiveness of disagreements over basic facts in contemporary democracies. Many current disputes between the Left and the Right in the U. S., […], seem to involve disagreements over what is true – that is, whether climate change is "a hoax" or whether a former president was even a citizen"

Political polarization has entered a problematic stage once political factions started disagreeing over issues which should be settled on the basis of empirical evidence. In this sense, the ultimate damage inflicted by post-truth (the manifestation of the intellectual vice of epistemic insouciance) is, according to Lynch, the emergence of disagreements which are not the sort of disagreements which are not the sort which should be expected in political discussion. While Democrats and Republicans may very well disagree on which policy proposals ought to be implemented (since uphold have somewhat different conceptions of justice and goodness), they should not disagree upon factual truths.

Against this worrying picture, Lynch advocates a model where truth is a central value in democracy and where political discussion is animated by its ideal goal: the pursuit of truth. Taking inspiration from the pragmatism of Dewey, Lynch regards democracy not merely as a form of government, but first and foremost as a *discursive practice* (Lynch, 2025:xii). Specifically, democracy is a practice of rational, public deliberation. In this sense, the post-truth era, where public discussion is dominated by polarization over factual issues and vicious epistemic attitudes, represents the antithesis of the ideals of democratic society.

It is important to stress on how, according to Lynch, a cooperative model of public discussion is a fundamental element of democracy. This is because, Lynch assumes the goal of democracy to be that of managing the disagreements between members of a community about how to face collective issues. From this, it follows that democratic politics aim at an "inclusive, representative and respectful deliberation between free and equal persons about what society ought to do in the face of collective problems." (Lynch 2025:14). In other words, the model employed by Lynch involves members of a community which face collective problems. However, they might disagree about the best way to solve them. The goal of the democratic practice is precisely, according to Lynch, to solve this disagreement by exchanging rational argumentations in an inquiry about the truth, so to arrive at "better, more just solutions to societal problems" (Lynch, 2025:16). According to Lynch, concordance is the goal of democracy, whereas the notion of concordance is directly taken from the tradition of American pragmatism (again, Dewey, but especially C. S. Pierce), where concordance is seen "as the goal of inquiry". Under ideal conditions (which are expressed by the abovementioned values of inclusivity, representativeness and respect), democratic citizens will come to an agreement about which is the best policy to adopt.

In summary, the democratic space ought to be, according to Lynch "a space where disagreements can be navigated with reasons" and citizens are, *qua* citizens, "participants in the space of reasons" (Lynch, 2021a; see also Lynch, 2018). This is very akin to what is advocated by public reason liberalism (Gaus, 2004; Estlund, 2008; Rawls, 2020), a view which also counts Dewey amongst its influences. While different proponents of the view may have different conceptions regarding specific issues, the basic idea in public reason liberalism is the appeal to justification and rational debate as the preferred way to solve political disagreement.

Looking at this from the perspective of philosophy of language, the sort of discursive practice Lynch and public reason liberals discuss is the one described by Sellars, 1963, Brandom, 1983, 1994 and Rescorla, 2009, that of giving and asking for reasons, a practice in which the speech-act of assertion is central. In this sense, the cooperative model of discussion advocated by Lynch is not much different from the sort of cooperative model of interaction which we employed in chapter 3 to explain the emergence of the social practice of assertion.

This model of public reason is undermined, according to Lynch (see in particular, Lynch, 2021a), whenever political group-identity gets in the way of truth by generating antagonism and epistemic arrogance based on one's political affiliation. Lynch argues that sense of political group identity can lead people belonging to a certain political group to distrust the epistemic strategies employed by the other group. Here is the description of the example regarding climate change:

> "Many Americans on the Right perceive democrats as pushing flawed or politically biased data in service of a " climate change agenda ". Many on the Left perceive those on the Right as relying on non-scientific, religious, and simply unreliable practices."
>
> Lynch, 2021a, p.166

This is an example of how, according to Lynch, group identity generates epistemic attitudes which compromise the cooperative model of discussion which is at the basis of a functioning democracy. When citizens stop sharing the same epistemic practices, it becomes impossible for them to engage in a discussion where they cooperate in the pursuit of truth.

In addition to disagreement over social epistemic practices, identity to a political, social or cultural group can be linked to epistemic arrogance, that is, the attitude of those who already presume to possess knowledge and are unwilling to revise their beliefs. At the level of public discussion, this entails the unwillingness to revise or retract one's claim against a legitimate challenge. More in general, intellectual arrogance on a group level entails that members of the specific group do not regard members of other groups as their peers in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Lynch cites the ideology of white supremacy as a good example of how group identity can fuel with epistemic arrogance[22]. Lynch highlights this phenomenon – along with disagreement over epistemic practices - as the main cause of several salient instances of polarization in contemporary political discussion.

One thing which Lynch himself acknowledges is that it is not obvious how the "space of reasons" model can be implemented (Lynch, 2025:15). His focus is, admittedly, to denounce the decay of truth as a value in contemporary politics.

5.4 The post-truth rhetoric: treating political opponents as non-interested in truth

5.4.1 From post-truth narrative to post-truth rhetoric

There have been two main lines of critical approach to the post-truth account of contemporary politics. The first is a straightforward criticism, according to which the post-truth model does not provide an accurate epistemic description of contemporary politics. The essential idea is that phenomena like fake-news and polarization are not best explained by assuming that participants to public discussion have bad epistemic attitudes.

Within this line of criticism it is worth mentioning the work of Levy, 2023. Levy argues that in order to explain the spread of fake-news we do not need to assume that subjects lack interest in truth; instead, he argues that subjects do care about truth, but form their beliefs on the basis of bad sources of information. This means that assuming citizens' lack of interest in truth is too strong of an epistemic characterization of contemporary politics, whereas we can explain current phenomena like fake-news and polarization by making reference to notions like defective epistemic practices.

[22] For the discussion of another example of epistemic arrogance linked to group identity and feeling of supremacy, see Tanesini, 2016, regarding male chauvinism.

Moreover, Hannon, 2021, has made an ever more radical criticism of the sort of approach adopted by proponents of the post-truth account of politics. The post-truth account purports to explain features of political discussion such as polarization and fake-news by focusing on how subjects form and maintain their beliefs. This implies that phenomena like polarization reflect the actual beliefs of citizens. Hannon challenges this narrative regarding polarization, arguing that polarization do not reflect a genuine epistemic disagreement between citizens of different political groups. Instead, he argues that polarized speech is the mere expression of the affective attitudes of citizens, in terms of loyalty to their political group and hostility towards members of the opposing political group.

The second line of criticism of the post-truth narrative is the one according to which post-truth narrative *itself* can become a problematic element of political discussion (Fuller, 2017; McIntyre, 2018, Farkas & Schou, 2020; Van Zoonen, 2017; Peters, 2017; Marres, 2018 and Hannon, 2023). These authors worry about the way post-truth narrative can be weaponized against political opponents. They focus on the strategies of treating one's political opponents as lacking interest in truth and, more in general, cultivating the public perception that truth and reliability are hard to come by in today systems of information. The claim is that by enacting this sort of political strategy we risk exacerbating the problems of our democracy. This sort of criticism can sometimes overlap with the first kind of criticism we listed, that is, the idea that post-truth narrative is *not* an accurate epistemic characterization of mainstream politics.

My goal in this chapter is *not* to assess the accuracy of the post-truth narrative as an epistemic characterization of politics. I want to focus instead on the effects of the use of this concept in political-speech: what are the consequences of post-truth *rhetoric* in political speech, i.e. labeling interlocutors in political speech as dishonest and not interested in truth? In this sense, I will contribute to the ongoing debate sparked by the authors mentioned in the previous paragraph. As we shall see, these authors have mostly focused on how post-truth rhetoric clashes with democratic values. I will instead focus on the effects post-truth rhetoric has on the pragmatics of political discussion, and I will argue that these effects have significant implications for what concerns political accountability.

5.4.2 Defining post-truth rhetoric

First, we need to make some preliminary remarks, starting with outlining the definition of post-truth rhetoric. By post-truth rhetoric, we mean the act of treating agents engaging in political discussion as not caring about truth. This act can mainly take two shapes.

First, we can think about post-truth rhetoric as featuring explicitly in the way we describe a political opponent in the context of public speaking, e.g. a rally or a tweet. Take the case, amongst many, of president Donald Trump, who during 2019 impeachment inquiry accused Democrats of focusing on "BULLSHIT (sic)" in a tweet, in a clear attempt of discrediting the good faith of the inquiry on him. [23]

However, post-truth rhetoric can also be propagated by more implicit attitudes in political discussion. Take the example how ordinary citizens might avoid seeking information from members of different political group (a phenomenon well-documented by Benkler et al., 2018). This too is an example of individuals treating their peers as unworthy to contribute to the search for truth.

A few more remarks on how we will use the concept of "post-truth" rhetoric. Post-truth rhetoric is not necessarily false or in bad-faith. It might be the case that the subjects accused of being dishonest are indeed dishonest, or at the very least the author of post-truth rhetoric has good reason to believe that they are. What is essential to post-truth rhetoric is the attitude of regarding certain political subjects as not interested in sharing and pursuing truth within conversation.

"Post-truth" rhetoric is well-documented as a wide-spread phenomenon in contemporary politics. Political opponents often frame each other as dishonest (Kavanagh et al., 2018), a mutual attitude which also is exhibited by the opposing groups of voters (Iyvengar & Westwood, 2019); in this sense, post-truth rhetoric is a prominent feature of polarization between ordinary citizens (Lelkes et al.,

[23] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49914704

2018). Ordinary citizens' treatment members of a different political group as "post-truth" is also reflected, as we mentioned by their selective choice of informational ecosystems (Benkler et al., 2018) and in the fact that media also systematically employ post-truth rhetoric in addressing political issues (Levendusky, 2013). Furthermore, there is the growing distrust in expertise, linked to the belief that "experts" are in reality manipulated by political opponents (Nichols, 2017).

Not only post-truth rhetoric is pervasive, but it is also self-reinforcing, as empirical research suggests. The tendency to label political opponents as dishonest and unreliable has typically the effect of fueling in turn polarization in political debate. Since polarization not only involves disagreement in political discussion, but also the tendency to frame the disagreement labeling the opponents as "post-truth", this indicates that post-truth rhetoric is self-reinforcing. This has been widely documented in relation to a variety of salient cases in recent years politics, including Brexit and US elections in 2016 (Tucker et al., 2018; Bail et al., 2018).

This studies also indicate that post-truth rhetoric is a bipartisan phenomenon: it is not tied to a single side of the political spectrum. Instead, evidence suggests that it has become a salient feature of political discussion to move back and forth accusations of dishonesty and untrustworthiness between political sides.

5.4.3 Negative effects of post-truth rhetoric: the current debate

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some commentators have argues that post-truth rhetoric might have negative effects on democracy.So far, the main of criticism of post-truth rhetoric has come from the perspective of political philosophy. The main point of contention is that post-truth rhetoric presupposes a certain normative conception of democracy and politics, and that said conception is at best controversial. Proponents of this kind of view include Fuller, 2017, McIntyre, 2018, Farkas & Schou, 2020, Van Zoonen, 2017, Peters, 2017, Marres, 2018 and Hannon, 2023. Related arguments brought up by the authors refer to issues of morally questionable treatment of fellow citizens when labeling as post-truth and a questionable framing of political issues. In some cases, such as Fuller, 2017 and McIntyre, 2018, criticism of post-truth rhetoric not only is linked to a criticism of a certain normative conception of democracy, but also overlaps with criticism of the post-truth model as a descriptive epistemological account of the current state of politics – a kind of issue which we have already briefly mentioned.

The general idea is that post-truth rhetoric implies a conception of democracy according to which the main goal of democracy is to seek truth and rationality; however it has been argued that this normative conception of democracy is arbitrary and cannot be taken as a neutral basis of the democratic process (Farkas & Schou, 2020:2). As put by Hannon, 2023, post-truth rhetoric turns political discussion into "a clash between truth and the forces of darkness. This rests on particular normative ideas about the nature an function of democracy. In particular, it presupposes that politics is a tool to get things right and that we must respect the authority of truth". Hannon contrasts the normative conception of democracy underlying post-truth rhetoric with idea that the main goal of democracy is to give voice to different perspectives. Instead, post-truth rhetoric suggests an elitist model of politics, since "to denounce others as the misinformed masses establishes a worrying dichotomy between those who are worthy of political influence (the informed elite) and those who are unworthy (the misguided masses)" (ibid.).

It has also been argued that excessive focus on the so-called "post-truth" obfuscates more compelling social and political issues (Hagbood-Coote, 2021). From a more general moral standpoint, it has been argued that post-truth rhetoric fuels an unhealthy "us vs them" relationship between citizens of different political groups (Hannon, 2023) , a claim which from an empirical point of view is supported by the studies we mentioned before regarding the divisive effects of post-truth rhetoric.

5.4.4 Post-truth rhetoric and the decay of the normative act of assertion in political discussion

In this chapter I am not interested in discussing the accuracy of the claims made by the authors listed in the previous sub-section. Instead, I will focus on a significant effect of post-truth rhetoric in terms of pragmatics of political discussion: I will argue that post-truth rhetoric has the effect of undermining the social practice of assertion within political discussion. This, as I will argue, has significant consequences for what concerns factual accountability of politicians.

This assessment of post-truth rhetoric does not depend on a specific epistemic characterization of agents engaging in political discussion, nor on any specific normative conception of democracy or the kind of morals which ought to guide our interactions with our peers in political discussion. It is instead an argument strictly from the perspective of philosophy of language (speech-act theory in particular) and can be summed up in the following way: if we value our capacity to engage in the social practice of assertion within political debate, then post-truth rhetoric ought to be avoided. When I say that my argument does not stem from specific political conception of democracy, this does not mean that there are not interesting political considerations to be made regarding the decay of assertions as a normative act caused by post-truth rhetoric. In fact, I will make some considerations of this sort in the following section of the chapter, where I will make the hypothesis that the decay of assertion as a normative social practice due to post-truth rhetoric in political polarization is linked to a worrisome tendency of politicians of not assuming responsibility for the costs and consequences of their policy proposals.

All I say is that my argument is an argument about what post-truth rhetoric seemingly entails in terms of the illocutionary nature of political discussion. It therefore points to a consequence of post-truth rhetoric understood as a linguistic phenomenon which bears on the pragmatics of political speech. Hence, it is not an argument which aims ascribes a certain normative political conception to post-truth rhetoric. Rather, it aims at showing what are the consequences of post-truth rhetoric in terms of the normative relationships we can expect to maintain with other participants to the political discussion.

My argument is based on the theoretical framework I sketched in chapter 3. According to the conception I defended, the social practice of assertion emerges as the result of the existence of equilibria in a context where agents cooperate in the pursuit of truth; this sort of cooperation in made possible by the fact that said agents *regard* each other as interested in truth. The social act of assertion is essentially a normative conceptualization of these equilibria, and the normativity of assertion (i.e. the capacity of agents to regard each other as accountable for truth) stems from the fact that patterns of trust and truthfulness are stabilized within the relevant community.

Throughout chapter 3, I explained how holding each other responsible for the truth of what we say is something which is possible only in cooperative contexts of this sort. In this context, agents have a conditional preference to converge towards a trust-truthfulness ; this conditional preference is grounded on the subjects' expectation that their peers will do the same and that they are interested in pursuing truth. Without expectations of this sort, there is no equilibrium and therefore there cannot be the social act of assertion. If the social act of assertion is not possible, then speakers' utterances cannot acquire the necessary normative import, i.e. the speakers cannot acquire a certain normative status

This is not too dissimilar, in principle, with the case of the boy crying "Wolf!" discussed by Brandom, which we also mentioned in chapter 3. In the case of the boy, Brandom observed that since the boy repeatedly make an assertion when he was not entitled to, the community ultimately revoked its capacity to undertake assertoric commitments. We made sense of this idea by arguing that the boy's behavior does not conform to the conventional pattern of cooperative interaction, hence the rest of the community has no grounds to ascribe to his utterances the normative import of assertions.

With "post-truth" rhetoric we have similar issue, only in this case it is not one, single individual within the community who stops conforming to the conventions of truthfulness and trust; instead, subjects from opposing sides of the political spectrum stop treating each other as cooperative agents in the pursuit of truth. The result is that not only utterances from the other side of political discussion cease to have the normative import of assertions, but our utterances cease to do the same for our political opponents.

The idea that we cannot perform assertions addressing interlocutors we regard as "post-truth" might not be appear so obvious at first. But we can get a clear grasp of the reason why by looking at the theoretical framework we developed so far. In order to achieve the proper normative effects of an assertion addressing an interlocutor, our utterance must have the effect of entitling the interlocutor to challenge our assertions, as according to Brandom's idea of assertion as an act producing discursive commitments. Obviously, in order to challenge a speaker's assertion, an interlocutor : it is in fact a characteristic of the speech-act of assertion that it can be used to challenge other assertions – a feature not shared by illocutionary acts like promising, congratulating or asking. However, we have already shown how when we regard an interlocutor as "post-truth", we undermine her capacity to perform assertions addressing us – as assertion is grounded on a cooperative pattern within a community where we generally regard the members of the community as interested in truth. Hence, by undermining an interlocutor's capacity to make an assertion addressing us, we also undermine our own capacity to make an assertion addressing her.

Based on this considerations we can say that one political group enacting "post-truth" rhetoric against another group has the effect of undermining the normative status participants of inter-group conversations, so that said subjects cannot undertake assertoric commitments one towards the other. The situation which emerges from this is a decay, within political discussion, of the social practice of holding speakers accountable for the factual accuracy of what they say. As I will explain in the final section of the chapter, the decline of factual accountability in political discussion is a significant and wide-spread phenomenon. I will also extensively reference the case-study of political polarization in the US regarding climate change, in order to illustrate the deep interrelation between post-truth rhetoric, polarization and decline in factual accountability. I argue that philosophical concept of assertion as a normative act is fundamental in order to frame this sort of phenomena.

5.5 Factual accountability, post-truth rhetoric and polarization

5.5.1 The decline of factual accountability in contemporary political discussion

The consequences of post-truth rhetoric we have outlined are, in a way, paradoxical. Post-truth rhetoric presupposes that subjects act like they are concerned for truth (since they accuse others of not caring for it); however, our model predicts that this rhetoric has the precise effect of undermining what has been called call *factual accountability* in political discussion (Graves & Wells, 2019), that is the "mechanisms and incentives that exist to promote fact-based discourse and to hold public figures accountable for false and misleading statements." (Graves & Wells, 2019:3)[24]Said mechanisms apply to three main groups of participants to political discussion: the general public, political elites and news media (ibid.). The normativity of assertion – as we have outlined in it in the first chapters of the thesis – can be seen as a fundamental component of this sort of accountability in discourse. If, as I outlined in the previous section, assertoric normativity is decayed as a social practice in political discussion, then factual accountability should be weakened in contemporary politics.

This is supported by several empirical studies, which show that our contemporary political discussion (which, we have already seen, features wide-spread post-truth rhetoric) factual accountability is weak (Graves & Well, 2019; Papadopoulos, 2024). Politicians are typically not corrected when they say something lacking factual basis, and when they are, that does not seem to entail significant reputational costs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Empirical evidence shows that the political context typically allows politicians to avoid factual accountability for incorrect statements in several ways. What follows is a survey of the main findings.

First, politicians do not incur in significant costs (in term of reputation and electoral support) when their claims are exposed as false (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Voters who typically support a politicians do not withdraw their support when said politicians stand corrected within public discussion and her

[24]Interestingly, the authors emphasize on how their research interest is more focused on factual accountability rather than "information availability" (i.e. the degree of access of citizens to accurate information). This reflects my own interest, which is more focused on the norms of political discourse rather than the cognitive and epistemic roots of political ignorance.

claims are exposed as incorrect. The author explains this phenomenon as possibly due to motivated reasoning on the part of voters, that is, in terms of the voter's genuine belief that the politician is in fact correct, which is in turn due to a bias in their reasoning linked to political affiliation. I am not interested in discussing whether or not this lack of costs for inaccuracy is due or not to politically motivated ignorance on the voters' part. Rather, I am interested in pointing out at the consequences of this lack of sanctioning in terms of normativity of political discourse. The relative lack of costs associated with being exposed as incorrect entails a weakness of assertoric normativity in political speech. This is because the hypothesis of social normativity of assertion entails that there are significant social costs associated with being exposed as incorrect (Green, 1997).

Similar considerations are made by Guriev & Papaioannou., 2022, when they discuss the phenomenon of "tolerance of misrepresentation". Interestingly, here the authors argue that we do not need to assume voters' misperceptions in order to explain their lack of willingness to confront politicians who make inaccurate statements. Instead, they argue that it might be in the citizens' *interest* to avoid confronting politicians about making untrue statements, just as it is in the politicians' interest to avoid accuracy, especially when it comes to overstating the positive effects of their policy proposals and understating the negative ones. The applied model proposed by the authors suggest that tolerance of political misrepresentation is not simply rooted in citizens' political affiliation and cognitive bias, but rather in their lacking a strategic preference in sanctioning politicians who misrepresent policies. The fact that citizens lack a strategic preference in sanctioning said politicians undermines factual accountability in political discussion.

Moreover, there is evidence regarding the phenomenon of *retention of misinformation* (Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2017), which shows that exposure to evidence contrary to politician's statements is broadly ineffective in order to have citizens admit that the politician is wrong and to have them condemn the politician's inaccuracy. Unlike the previously mentioned Brendan & Reifler study – which focused on the fact that citizens do not withdraw voting support on politicians which are proven to be incorrect – this study specifically focuses on the citizens' attitudes in acknowledging politicians as wrong (or lack of thereof). Interestingly, the research shows that sometimes citizens are unwilling to evaluate the politician as incorrect and liable to criticism even if they lack conviction regarding the politician's statement. This shows how unwillingness confront inaccuracy in political speech is not necessarily grounded on epistemic misperception, but can be due to a genuine disinterest in holding political actors factually accountable.

Finally, it is fundamental for my case to cite the hypothesis developed by Reese, 2020 and Kreiss, 2016, according to the role of post-truth rhetoric in the weakening of factual accountability of politicians. Focusing on the rise of Donald Trump in US politics, they argue that by labeling traditionally media outlets as untruthful and untrustworthy, Trump has successfully undermined the social norms of political discourse in a way which undermine factual accountability. This is relevant, because it links post-truth rhetoric to the undermining of factual accountability. By looking at the theoretical framework I sketched before, we are able to understand how this link is not limited to the fact that by doing so, Trump undermines the credibility of media outlets criticizing his statements. By normalizing post-truth rhetoric, Trump contributes to the shifting of political discussion towards a state where communication is no longer structured through mutual commitments which warrant social sanctions. We showed how this is the case by explaining how the sort of mutual commitments and entitlements which constitute assertoric practice are grounded – among other things – on members of the community regarding each other as interested in truth.

All this evidence points into the direction of the hypothesis that lack factual accountability in politics is grounded in a shift of the normative structure of political discussion. As I have argued, this normative decay can be fueled by post-truth rhetoric, based on an intuitive understanding of the social practice of assertion and its emergence. In the remainder of the chapter, I will argue that post-truth rhetoric represents a precise strategy enacted by political factions in today polarized context, since it fuels the decay of factual accountability, which in turn favors the intent of politicians to frame policies as more beneficial and less costly than they really are. First, I will focus on the political significance of avoiding factual accountability, focusing on the way politicians frame policies in a way which hide their social costs.

5.5.2 Framing policies and hiding social costs

As we already briefly mentioned referencing Guriev et al., 2021, lack of factual accountability in political discussion matches the interest of politicians who wishes to misrepresents their policies through exaggerating positive consequences and hiding negative ones. I want to expand on this idea, since it allows us to understand an important political consequence of decay in factual accountability. The tendency of politicians to frame policies in a misrepresenting way, especially in relation to their cost-benefits evaluation, is a wide-spread strategy (Sunstein, 2021). Amongst the reason, there is the fact that policies enacted by politician often allocate resources in a way which disproportionately favor specific groups, while draining resources from others (Olson, 1965). This motivates politicians to downplay negative outcomes of policies - i.e. costs which will be sustained disproportionately by certain political groups – in order to optimize consensus (Alesina et al., 2015; Kammas & Sarantides, 2017; Eliaz et al., 2022 ; Kartik et al., 2024). It is worth mentioning that this practice of concealing misallocation of resources through dishonest framing has the effect of enabling politicians to carry out policies which lack foresight and end up inflicting, in the long term, costs to many of the voters who support them (Bonfiglioli & Gancia, 2013; Jensen et al., 2018).

A good example of this relationship between dishonest framing and lack of foresight is offered by tax policies. Cutting taxes is typically presented as the sort of policy from which everyone benefits; however, cutting taxes without any financial plan to compensate will typically result in a redistribution of wealth from lower-income groups to higher-income groups. The tax plan proposed by the Trump administration in 2016 – and the related propaganda - is a perfect example of this. See this excerpt from Gale et al., 2017.

“Politicians love to talk about tax cuts, in part because it seems that almost everyone is made better off. Standard presentations of distributional analyses of tax cuts also typically show that all or most people would be better off with a tax cut. Such discussions and presentations are fundamentally misleading, however, because tax cuts must ultimately be financed. Over the long run, tax cuts must be offset by increases in other taxes, reduced spending, or both.”

[…]

Even if a tax cut is not directly linked to offsetting tax increases or spending cuts, some type of corrective future fiscal measure is inescapable. Thus, even if the stated features of a tax cut directly help all or most people, the implied offsetting future tax increases or future spending cuts will hurt at least some people”

[Gale et al., 2017, p.1]

This is part of the introductory remarks on an analysis of the tax plan proposed by the first mandate of the Trump Administration in 2016. The tax cuts proposed by the plan were presented by the administration as “free lunches” for taxpayers which would benefit all house-holds. However, studies showed that

“[...] the aggregate proposals consistent with the Trump Administration outline would reduce taxes for most households, even when including all the limited “pay fors” (revenue raisers) mentioned by the Trump Administration or by the Trump campaign. Most of the gains and the largest percentage increases in after-tax income would go to the households with the highest pre-tax incomes.”

Besides tax-cuts, significant examples of policies where politicians supply-chain regulations (Kolcava et al., 2025) and environmental policies. Environmental policies are of particular interest for the study of framing rhetoric and factual accountability, since it is often the case that environmental policies are framed rhetorically — often in very positive, universal terms — in ways that can minimize attention to costs, marginalize dissent, and build broad support**.** Framing is indeed fundamental in order to present a political issue and discuss the possible way to address it, and a single issue can be framed in different ways (Entman, 1993) . For instance, addressing climate-change can be framed as an existential issue rather than a cost-benefits problem; the former framing, strongly linked to the notion of "common good" is quite effecting in overriding the cost-benefit logic (Stone, 2012). Moreover, the rhetoric of "inevitability" of a politician's proposed policies to tackle climate change is effective in marginalizing alternative pathways (Maarten, 1995). In spite of this universal benefit rhetoric, environmental policies typically impose socially uneven costs (Lamb et al., 2020). A significant example of this kind of policy is given by the *Superbonus* scheme approved in 2020 by the Italian Government, a 110% tax credit for energy-efficient renovations. Studies (Baluer & Fonte, 2024; Di Nardo & Zanelli, 2024) has shown that the scheme blew out of cost. Originally projected around €35 billion over 15 years, but as of 2024 its cost to the state has been estimated much higher. The study show how the scheme has allocated resources in the hands of a fraction of small businesses, mainly contractors who worked on the renovations and real-estate owner who had the opportunity to invest in their properties. Nonetheless, the scheme was originally presented as an environmental policy aimed at the common good, while environmental benefits are yet to be seen and the significant costs will be sustained by the general public.

Now I will make a few considerations. Framing policies in a way which de-emphasizes social costs can be seen as the other side of the coin with respect to undermining factual accountability in political discourse. On one hand, we have framing as a device which allows politician to manipulate the focus of conversation in a way which prevents them from having to answer for the social costs of their policies: we have seen a clear example with the rhetoric often used in environmental policies. On the other hand, the undermining of factual accountability (in which post-truth rhetoric plays a relevant role) erodes the social mechanisms at the basis of political accountability. We will see how these two elements work in concert in the context of political discussion in the US over climate change. As I will explain, this context features both strong elements of post-truth rhetoric (which in turn fuels polarization, where each side dismiss the other one as dishonest) and framing of political stances which . in a political context where antagonism and partisanship is more predominant than a pragmatic approach in evaluating proposed policies.

5.5.3 The case of polarization over the climate change issue: an example of the link between post-truth rhetoric and the decay of factual accountability in political speech

So far I made two important points in this chapter. The first is that post-truth rhetoric is a threat to the normative practice of assertion in political discussion. The second is that a decline of the normative practice of assertion in political discussion can contribute to the decay of factual accountability of politicians; the latter can be exploited by politician in order to avoid accountability for the long-term social costs of their policies. Based on this picture, post-truth rhetoric should be linked to a political climate where opposition to policies in political discussion is not articulated through a pragmatic, fact-based assessment of their costs, but rather through

This is perfectly exemplified by the political discussion over climate change in US politics. As we shall see, the issue of climate change (whether it is caused by humans and what, in case, should be done about it) is a highly polarized one: the stance of politicians, general public and media over the factual issue of whether human activity causes climate change is highly dependent upon political affiliation. Moreover, this polarization is highly imbued with post-truth rhetoric: both sides accuse the other of manipulating truth and being thoroughly dishonest and untrustworthy. These are well documented facts. What I will add to the established picture of political discussion over climate change are some considerations on how post-truth rhetoric and polarization clearly play a role in weakening the factual accountability on both sides. On one hand, we have Republicans, who promote anti-scientific skepticism over the human role in climate change; this has played a role in framing their short-sighted environmental policies as less dangerous, on the long term, than they might actually be. On the other hand we have Democrats, who instead agree with the scientific consensus on climate change and propose to address the problem through radical interventions. However, by adopting the "existential threat" framing of the issue they consistently avoid answering for the actual social costs of the measures they propose. Challenges to their proposed solutions are systematically labeled as going against the common good.

This case indicates how post-truth rhetoric (whether it is enacted by a political faction siding with science or by one siding with pseudo-science) has negative repercussions on political accountability. Even a political group which formally adheres to the scientifically accurate description of a factual issue might frame their policy solution to said issue in a way which dodges factual accountability.

This picture suggests a strong link between post-truth rhetoric (framing political peers as bad epistemic agents, uninterested in truth) and undermining of factual accountability. In conclusion, I advocate for a shift in the paradigm of political speech, from the criticism of political opponents as not interested in truth to the criticism of political opponents as avoiding factual and political accountability. In synthesis, to mitigate polarization we should avoid regarding political opponents as "epistemic aliens" and focus on holding them accountable for the actual practical consequences of the policies they advocate, while at the same time accepting full responsibility for the social costs of the policies that we propose.

5.5.3.1 Climate change and human activity: outlining the scientific consensus

At the present state, the concept of climate change on a global level essentially amounts to that of global warming, to the point where the two expressions can be used interchangeably. Moreover, climate change has been shown to be caused by human activities, with human activities acquiring a prominent role in this sense beginning with the industrial revolution in the 1800s (Forster et al., 2024). The claim is supported by a consensus in peer-reviewed scientific literature higher than 99% (Lynas et al., 2021). This has led to the introduction of the concept of *anthropogenic climate change* (IPCC, 1995). This consensus is in turn reported within the comprehensive assessment regularly made[25] by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Furthermore, global increase in global temperature has been shown to be causally linked with critical alterations of the planet's living environments (IPCC 2019, p. 16), with expected significant social and economic costs for humans across the globe (Cattaneo et al., 2019; IPCC 2022, p. 15).

While significant phenomena like the role of carbon dioxide in global warming[26]were already understood in the 60s, it was only in the 90s that a *consensus* on these issues (particularly the anthropogenic nature of climate change) was reached within the scientific community, thanks to some significant improvements both in terms of model computing and in terms of understanding of observational evidence. The building of consensus amongst experts of the field went in parallel with the attempt to create a public discussion on the issue which would engage policy-makers. One of the most significant historical steps in this process was undoubtedly the US Congressional report made in 1988 by NASA scientist James Hansen, which was an energetic attempt to bring before the legislative power in the United States the issue of the urgency of taking action against climate change as an anthropogenic phenomenon. As of today, the institution by the UN of the aforementioned IPCC is likely the most important result in terms of providing a link between peer-reviewed scientific research and the public discussion about policy-making.

5.5.3.2 Polarization of contemporary US politics over climate change

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[25] The panel operates through an assessment cycle of six to seven years. It does not produce original research, but rather provides a comprehensive assessment of the existing peer-reviewed research on climate change.

[26] Carbon dioxide being emitted in large quantities by human activities, chiefly industrial ones.

Political elites and general public in the US are starkly divided over the issue of climate change, with Republicans and Democrats pushing for different views on the issue. As we mentioned earlier, polls indicate that acceptance of the human role in climate change (or lack of thereof) is correlated with political affiliation.

Moreover, Republicans and Democrats are sharply divided on the issue of whether environmental policies aimed at mitigating climate change ought to be a top priority; namely, as reported by the Pew Research Center, "Nearly nine-in-ten Democrats (87%) say efforts to reduce the effects of climate change need to be prioritized today to ensure a sustainable planet. By contrast, 61% of Republicans say that efforts to reduce the effects of climate change need to be a lower priority, with so many other important problems facing Americans today. (Democrats and Republicans include those who lean to each party.)"[27]

In the following sub-sections, I will outline the policy-stance of both Republicans and Democrats in recent years. In doing so, I will highlight two important aspects. First, the sort of declarations regarding made by their representative regarding the nature of climate change. Second, the way these declarations fit into the framing of the respective policies. As I will show, in both cases, although in different ways, the policies are framed in a way which underscore their long-term costs. In addition to the framing, I will show how avoidance of accountability for the social costs is pursued by means of labeling political opponents as dishonest and morally bankrupt.

5.5.3.2.1 The Republican stance

In the US, political polarization over climate change affects both ordinary voters and politicians. Polls indicated that opinions on its existence amongst the general populace reflect a strong

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[27] PEW Report 2024.

political polarization, with Democrats typically expressing agreement with the IPCC claims and Republicans denying them or being skeptical (Mullin & Egan, 2017).

Also, the Republican and Democratic party members are sharply divided over the issue. Recent decades have been marked by episodes of significant political opposition towards international policies aimed at regulating economic activities with the goal of countering climate change. We can cite two significant examples. In 2001, the George W. Bush administration refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty signed in 1992 which committed state parties to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Republican criticism of scientific consensus on climate change has radicalized ever since the rise Donald Trump. In 2017, during Trump's first term as president, his administration announced the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement, an even more comprehensive policy agreement than the Kyoto Protocol, developed in 2016, which is meant to implement the long-term goal of keeping the rise of global temperature well below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. The withdrawal was enforced in 2020; only for the US to rejoin the agreement in 2021, once the Biden administration succeeded Trump's[28]. Both episodes involved an effective political opposition, from the GOP-led US government, towards prominent international treaties aimed at contrasting climate change.

In addition to policy decisions in this direction, Donald Trump has repeatedly gone on the record challenging the scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic causes of climate change.

Already during his first term as a president (2016-2020) he made several remarks expressing skepticism towards the conclusions reached by the IPCC[29]. Consider this quote reported in De Pryck & Gemenne, 2017:

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[28] The US exited the accords again at the beginning of Trump's second term in 2025.

[29] The main sources of Trump's stance in this sense are his New York Times 2016 interview and his Twitter posts http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/.

I think right now … well, I think there is some connectivity [between climate change and human activities]. […] It depends on how much. It also depends on how much it's going to cost our companies. You have to understand, our companies are noncompetitive right now. (New York Times 2016, emphasis added).

[quoted in De Pryck & Gemenne, 2017, p. 124]

Here Trump limited himself to a suspension of judgment regarding whether or not climate change is caused by human activity, recommending caution against the proposals by Democrats of regulations over fossil-fuel companies aimed at limiting carbon emissions.

However, his stance appears to have radicalized over time. In September 2025, during his second mandate, he claimed at the UN General Assembly that climate change was "the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world"; he regarded claims about human role in climate change as motivated by stupidity and disinterest towards national interest[30]. Another significant step during the second mandate was the removal of 2009 EPA's "endangerment finding", a declaration from the US government agency of the health hazards linked with carbon emissions.[31]

It is easy to see how manipulation of facts enables Trump to downplay the long-term costs of his policies. By dismissing the risks associated with carbon emissions, he can present his policies favoring fossil fuel industries as lacking the long term negative effects ascribed to them by scientific findings. A key element of this strategy is to label scientific claims on climate change as motivated by the intent to undermine national interest rather than willingness in ascertaining the truth; this is a significant example of post-truth rhetoric, where third-party fact-checking is treated as if it was dishonest source of information.

[30] https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop/trump-tells-un-that-climate-change-is-con-job-2025-09-23/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[31] https://apnews.com/article/trump-climate-epa-endangerment-zeldin-5cba0871c880e23d044ef40a398c57b2

Here it is important that we stress on a difference. One thing is to raise a legitimate question about the social costs of environmental policies aimed at limiting carbon emissions. Another is to assume the dishonesty of scientific findings which show the dangers associated with carbon emissions. At first glance it might seem that Trump's criticism of environmental regulation is an attempt of re-introduce factual accountability in political discourse, pressing Democrats to answer for the economic costs of their proposed environmental policies. However, this is a far cry from re-shaping political discourse towards factual accountability. Factual accountability needs to work both ways: an agent which holds an interlocutor accountable for what she says must be prepared to answer for his own assertions. In the case of Donald Trump, he pretends to adopt a pragmatic approach when discussing the environmental regulations proposed by the Democrats; however, his consistent undermining of scientific authority indicates that he himself is not willing to answer for the long-term environmental hazards of his inaction regarding climate change.

Specifically, I will argue that this instance of avoiding responsibilities related to inaction falls under the concept of "negative" action. Howlett, 2014 employs this concept to characterize an approach to a policy problem (in this case, the necessity to act against climate change) "geared towards denial of a problem or its rejection" in order to minimize costs related the risk of losing face.

"Decision-makers' desire to avoid blame for failures, it is argued, leads them first to attempt to avoid any action at all and then only when forced to do so by the threat of blame for inaction to undertake as little action as possible. The climate change case in particular reveals the extent to which this behaviour can extend, when even the little action that is undertaken is less 'positive substantive' action designed to ameliorate a social condition or problem, but rather 'negative' and primarily procedural activity, attacking opponents and even denying a problem exists in order to continue to justify support for the status quo."

Howlett, 2014, p. 2.

This hypothesis is supported by what documented in Dunlap & McCright, 2010. By analyzing policy recommendations redacted by advisors for the Republican party, the authors notice that from the early 2000s, Republicans had to face the issue of avoiding to lose face regarding the climate change issue. While Democrats had already established their stance in favor of environmental regulations, Republicans lack a precise stance on the issue. The safest political strategy for Republicans was deemed to downplay the gravity of the issue itself, in order to avoid confrontation with the issue. This can be seen as instance of the communicative strategy known as "evasion" (Bull, 2003). Evasion is the strategy of subtly avoiding commitment to an answer to a question or issue and is often exploited by politicians in order to avoid losing face when confronted with difficult questions. One subtle way of evading an answer to an issue is to reframe the context of conversation by undermining the very presuppositions of the issue. In this case, the issue of what to do about the emergency of climate change is rendered moot by the Republicans arguing that climate change is not emergency at all and/or there is no human role in climate change which could be mitigated.

Combining the conceptual tools of "evasion" and "negative action" we can characterize Republican political rhetoric as aimed at avoiding accountability for inaction regarding a complex and delicate issue like climate change.

5.5.3.2.2 The Democratic Stance

The case of the Democrats is quite different. In the last years, the Democratic platform has strongly advocated for federal programs aimed at reducing carbon emissions and transition US economy towards reliance over renewable energy sources[32]. This policy proposals are based on acceptance of the findings reported by the IPCC. As a result, Democrats have been vocal against the rejection by Republicans of scientific findings regarding climate change, making the accusations towards the GOP of dismissing scientific truth as much an important part of Democratic political communication as the advocacy for environmental policies. Republicans have been accused by Democratic members of congress of putting the interests of fossil-fuel industry before scientific truth[33]In the words of Democratic congressman Chuck Schumer:

"Maybe denying or misleading about climate change is considered acceptable in the modern Republican party… Some argue… there's a lot of oil money cascading into the Republican Party… it leads to terrible, terrible inaction"[34]

Moreover, think-thank aligned with the Democrats have conducted inquiries where Republicans members of congress are deemed as untrustworthy and linked with the spread of misinformation.[35]

Democratic policy proposals regarding climate change have typically being framed in terms of being justified by the necessity to avoid the expected long-term costs of climate change, which

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[32] The references are the following policy documents and reports: Democratic National Committee Environment & Climate Policy Agenda (DNC); Climate Recommendations for a New Democratic President and a New Congress (a compilation of policy recommendations conceived in preparation to the 2020 presidential election); Senate Democrats Climate Actions Plans (Presidential Climate Action Project.)

[33] https://democrats.org/news/maga-republicans-ignore-climate-change-while-americans-choke-on-wildfire-smoke/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[34] https://www.democrats.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/schumer-floor-remarks-on-republicans-refusal-to-seriously-confront-climate-change-three-voting-rights-priorities-in-the-wake-of-continued-efforts-to-curb-voter-access-and-the-need-for-president-trump-to-take-a-hard-line-on-us-china-trade-negotiations?

[35] https://www.americanprogress.org/article/climate-deniers-of-the-118th-congress/?

in their view outweigh the transitional costs which will clearly need to be sustained in order to relocate jobs from fossil-fuel industry to renewable energy industries, implement the necessary infrastructures and allocating the necessary incentives.

Regarding transitional costs and the way they are dealt with in Democratic policy proposals , it is important to highlight two important aspects. First, the general necessity to sustain transitional costs is mentioned in official policy documents, it is rather under-emphasized in political communication, with comparatively more stress put on the expected long-term benefits. Rhetorical emphasis is always on long term savings and benefits. Second, even if transitional costs are mentioned, there is an absence of explicit short-term allocation – i.e., the policy outline does not specify which specific group of taxpayers will sustain the costs required to finance the new energetic program. Hence, commentators have argued that the Democratic platform is still unable to answer satisfactorily regarding the transitional aspect of environmental policies.[36]

This leads us to conclude that the Democratic platform lacks factual accountability regarding certain significant social costs of their policies. While Democrats do embrace the results of scientific findings regarding climate change, they also seem reticent in acknowledging the full scale of the costs of the policies they propose in order to tackle climate change. Lack of factual accountability in this sense is particularly in cases like that of of Democratic Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who in 2019 was one of the main proponent of the so-called "Green New Deal" a comprehensive policy program aimed at reducing the role of human activities on climate change by means of regulation of economic activities (see Green, 2024, for an overview). In a 2019 interview on *60 minutes*, Democratic Rep. Ocasio-Cortez was called out on having made false claims on Twitter about GOP administration military spending. Her assertions regarding Trump's military budget were made within the context of a discussion where she was

[36] https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/5471140-democrats-climate-action-strategy/

questioned regarding how her proposed environmental federal program would have been financed. Ocasio-Cortez claimed that given the size of the current allocation of funds for the military (widely disproportionate, according to her, with respect to actual national needs), the Green New Deal could be financed by cutting military funds. However, it turned out her estimation of the entity of military funding was incorrect, hence casting doubt over the capacity of the Democratic platform to answer for who and how will support the transitional costs needed in order to implement their environmental policies. In response to the criticism, Ocasio-Cortez stated that being "morally right" is more important than being "factually right" (see Ingermarson, 2019, for an overview of the contents).

This is an outstanding example of avoidance of factual accountability when discussing policy making. It is interesting to point out at the sort of framing employed to avoid factual accountability. The moral high-ground referenced here is clearly meant to be the one separating Democrats from Republicans: caring for the long-term consequences of climate change is what makes Democrats morally superior to Republicans. This notion is exploited in order to avoid confrontation regarding factual considerations: to assess the costs of environmental policies is not a top priority, in this framing, since we are dealing with countering potentially catastrophic outcomes of climate change in the long term.

Another example of the emergency rhetoric is reflected in an interview with Ocasio-Cortez at the MLK Now event, the same year, where Ocasio-Cortez claimed that without counter-policies, global warming would end the world in 12 years. The statement is incorrect and presumably comes from an alteration of a statement contained in the IPCC 2018 report according to which if global warming is not halted within 12 years from the report's date, it would become almost impossible to reverse the process of environmental alteration which might be critical for humans. This episode has been described (Lybrand & Miller, 2019)[37] as

[37] https://www.wral.com/story/fact-checking-trump-aoc-climate-claims/18144777/.

mirroring Trump's approach to the subject. Ocasio-Cortez's misreporting of the IPCC suggests a willingness to manipulate and exaggerate facts in order to push for a political agenda (in this case, exacerbating alarmism regarding climate change in order to justify government intervention in the economy).

5.6 Concluding remarks on the chapter

The case study of political polarization in the US regarding climate change is a paradigmatic example of how post-truth rhetoric and avoidance of factual accountability can be strictly correlated.

The theoretical framework we sketched in the previous chapters shows how, conceptually, there is indeed a strong link between post-truth rhetoric and undermining of factual accountability: post-truth rhetoric undermines the model of interaction between where agents regard each other as interested in truth. As a result, it undermines the strategic and cooperative basis of the normative practice of assertion (what Brandom and Sellars call "the game of giving and asking for reasons"), which is in turn at the basis of factual accountability.

By looking at the empirical case of polarization over climate change we can see how this works in practice. We saw how post-truth rhetoric features prominently within framing strategy adopted by politicians on both sides in order to underplay the costs of their policies. In the case of Republicans, it involves labeling proponents of anthropogenic theories of climate change as untrustworthy manipulators. The consequent narrative is aimed at justifying the policy of inaction chose by the Republican platform regarding climate change. Democrats, on the other hand, exploit Republican environmental skepticism in order to frame the opposing side as lacking concern for scientific truth and the future of humanity. This rhetoric has been used to discard the concerns of those who question the Democratic platform about the transitional costs of environmental policies.

Both sides of the political spectrum avoid accountability regarding significant aspects of their policies, which causes a shift in the general normative structure of political discourse. The normative structure of a discourse involving factual accountability involves the fact that utterances which present a proposition as true work as conventional means to instantiate commitments and entitlements affecting the participants of the conversation. This normative import reflects in turn the strategic profile of interactions of agents which regard each other as interested in cooperating for the pursuit of truth. Through rhetorical framing and post-truth rhetoric, these equilibria are more and more undermined, and so is factual accountability.

It is important to see how misinformation about climate change (of the sort propagated by Republicans) can be exploited by both sides. Republicans exploit it in order to justify their policy stance. Democrats exploit the fact that Republicans spread misinformation in order to dismiss them as unworthy interlocutor; this makes them easier for Democrats to avoid factual accountability regarding their own policies. This is important, because when post-truth rhetoric becomes the standard approach of discussion between political factions, both sides end up assuming negative attitudes, including the ones (like the Democrats) who are comparatively more respectful of scientific findings.

Lack of factual accountability in political discourse has significant consequences for policy-making. It makes politicians less accountable for the outcome of their policies, thus enabling them to inflict social damages without significant costs on their part in terms of reputation and consensus. As a result it creates incentives for reckless policies grounded on questionable cost-benefits analyses. In a world where democracy has to face increasingly complex challenges due to fast technological process, lack of factual accountability can lead to the sort of policy making which fails to articulate effective answers to current issues.

When it comes to addressing the contemporary challenges of democracy, this chapter has the aim of highlighting the deep ties between factual accountability (and its consequences related to policy making) and contexts involving radical political polarization and rhetoric of mistrust and moral condemnation between opposing political sides. To stop treating our political opponents as genuine peers, on par with us in terms of normative entitlements and commitments, is not only problematic in terms of the sort of normative conception of democracy which this implies, but also in terms of how it erodes accountability for both sides involved in the political debate.

This also comes with an important caveat regarding how we fight misinformation. While denouncing spread of fake-news, manipulation of facts and pseudo-science by political opponents is a legitimate practice in political discussion, this sort of denounce should not be exploited in order to make ourselves less accountable in the eyes of political opponents. Fighting misinformation ought to always come with readiness to answer for our own incorrect statements and for the expected costs of our political proposals.

5.7 General conclusions of the thesis

In this thesis I have started from a strictly theoretical problem in philosophy of language and speech-act theory (how should we define the concept of assertion?) and then moved towards applied speech-act theory – specifically, speech-act theory applied to analyze contexts which are interesting from the ethical or political perspective. The result is a work which can be said to be divided in two specular parts. In the first part (chapters 1-3) I ultimately argue that the normative act of assertion is made possible by the existence of equilibria of coordination which reflect a cooperative effort to pursue truth. In the second part (chapters 4-5), I have shown how erosion of this cooperative model affects one's capacity to perform the normative act of assertion.

In chapter 4 I articulated the notion of dialectical obstructionism. I have shown how undermining the topical presuppositions of an assertion prevent said assertions from having the expected normative import within the conversation. This shows that when a question is treated by the majority of participants as not worth discussion (by undermining the presuppositions of the question), agents who are willing to address the question have a hard time performing assertions addressing the question which acquire the normative status of contribution to the conversation. This provides evidence to the fact that the capacity of an agent to perform an assertion in a discussion is tied to the fact that she and the interlocutor are working towards the same goal.

In chapter 5 I have shown the link between post-truth rhetoric and weakening of factual accountability in political discussion. In this case, we have opposing political factions which regard each other as unworthy interlocutors in terms of how the relate themselves to truth. This contributes to the decline of normative accountability for what one say in political discussion.

In order to highlight the importance of the connection between the two parts, I cannot think of a better starting point than the recent controversy surrounding the so-called "idealistic" approach to philosophy of language, which has prompted scholars to reflect upon the applicability between a cooperative model of language (a la Grice) to the salient phenomenon of political speech, including those related to fake-news, hate-speech and other sorts of harmful rhetoric.

I am referring to the discussion started by Beaver & Stanley, 2019 (see also Beaver & Stanley, 2023), who have strongly argued that philosophy of language should "free" itself from the underlying assumption that the main goal of language is to represent reality and to exchange information. The authors regard as "idealistic" a philosophy of language which relies on models which assumes most agents to be cooperative and interested in exchanging truthful information. Such models cannot, according to them, be used to describe many real life cases where language is used by a specific group to pursue an ideological agenda at the expense of others. In such cases, language is not used to describe reality, but rather to enable the reproduction of certain social and cultural systems (see also Stanley, 2015). The appeal has generated both praise (see for instance Keiser, 2023) and controversy (see Cappelen & Dever, 2021, who argued against the usefulness of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theories).

What does my work show about the relationship between the cooperative view of language and the application of speech-act theory to analyze political speech phenomena? this thesis the explanatory role of cooperative models (or lack of thereof) is crucial in analyzing the emergence and decay of the normative act of assertion. I have relied on a cooperative model of language in order to explain the emergence of the normative act of assertion. At the same time, I have shown how non-cooperative contexts entail the erosion the mutual normative relations between agents which make assertion possible as a social act and which determine factual accountability within a discussion. The ultimate conclusion is that the study of cooperative models is the starting point for a comprehensive theory of assertion as a speech-act, even though cooperation can be compromised in certain contexts – such as in political discussion. Therefore, the contraposition outlined by Beaver & Stanley between idealistic and non-idealistic philosophy of language is, as some other critics have already pointed out (again, Cappelen & Beaver), overstated.

Hopefully, the work I have done here will help gap the bridge, somewhat still persistent in philosophy of language, between a descriptive, game-theoretical approach to language, on one hand, and speech-act theory - in the tradition of Austin - on the other. Speech-act theory has the conceptual advantage of allowing us to connect language to the social, normative and, ultimately, political dimension of human life. Game-theory allows us to explain the emerge of speech phenomena by postulating certain features of agents involved which in turn we can observe in ordinary reality. The approach I advocate for speech-act theory (which is exemplified in my work on assertion here) is that we take intuitions about the relationship between speech and normativity very seriously and do not fall into the temptation of reducing the normative aspects of speech to non-normative elements. At the same time, we should be able to explain the emergence of normative structures through descriptive, empirical models which refer to individual beliefs and preferences. Failing to abide by any of these two aspects would give us an incomplete picture of speech. If we adopt a reductionist approach towards our intuitions about normativity (as suggested by Pagin) we fail to make sense of the distinctive nature of human speech compared to forms of communication of non-human animals. If we do without the naturalistic component of our account of speech-acts, we are not able to explain how the normative structures sustaining illocutionary acts come into being, evolve, and decay.

6. References

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