

# Assertion Not Possibly Social

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In his paper ‘Why assertion may yet be social’ (Pegan 2009), Philip Pegan directs two main criticisms against my earlier paper ‘Is assertion social?’ (Pagin 2004). I argued that what I called “social theories”, are inadequate, and I suggested a method for generating counterexamples to them: types of utterance which are not assertions by intuitive standards, but which are assertion by the standards of those theories. Pegan’s first criticism is that I haven’t given an acceptable characterization of the class of social theories. His second criticism is that I have overlooked some alternatives, and that there are social theories that are not affected by my argument. In section 1 I discuss the first, and in section 2 the second.

## 1. The class of social theories

In Pagin 2004 I tried to characterize social theories as follows

To characterize this difference in a few words I would like to say: assertion is not a *social* act. In saying that a speech act type is *social* I mean that all acts of this type not only have a social significance, consisting in the social effect intended by the speaker, but also *communicate* this intended effect. In short, a social act communicates its own social significance. Typical social acts, in this sense, are ordering, promising, greeting, congratulating, baptizing, bequeathing, just about all acts that Austin originally called ‘performative’. For instance, the giving of an order has the intended social effect that the audience is placed under an obligation to do what was ordered. Moreover, this is also what is communicated by giving the order (Pagin 2004, 834).

I added

The expression ‘what is communicated’ does not have a precise technical sense, and it is not easy to specify one. What I include under ‘what is communicated’ is what anyone must know in order to understand the utterance. Thus, in order to understand a greeting, you must know not only the general meaning of the act type and that an act of this type has been performed, indicating that someone has greeted someone, but also who has done it to whom. In order to understand an order, you must know not only what has been ordered, but also who has been ordered to do it, and perhaps by whom. And so on (Pagin 2004, 835).

Pegan points to two problems with this. The first stems from a combination of two facts. On the one hand I do not rule out that fulfilling certain social conditions is *necessary* for making an assertion, and hence I do not rule out theories which are partly social (Pegan 2009, 2). And on the other hand, some of the theories I try to refute don’t characterize assertion *wholly* in social terms (Pegan 2009, 2).

There is indeed a problem. In Pagin 2004 I was concerned with theories that could be stated in the format “To assert that *p* is to ...”, and hence with theories that gave both necessary and sufficient conditions. I agreed that meeting certain social condition could be necessary, and hence targeted theories that gave social ingredients in the *sufficient conditions* for making an assertion. Thus far it is clear. That social necessary condition can be accepted is not a problem.

The problem is rather that I did not require of social theories that the social conditions they specified *exhausted* their sufficient conditions, but allowed further ingredients. So one can ask whether just about anything else can be combined with the social part without making the theory non-social. I didn’t have a clear-cut demarcation then, and I don’t have one now. The social condition is supposed to be the main ingredient, and extra conditions (such as that of using a sentence that means that *p*) are intended as “supplementary”. This is ok as far as it goes, but since it is rather imprecise, it doesn’t go far enough. Thus I concede the point.

Pegan adds that “More generally, I assume that if Pagin’s target were all and only those theories that entail that explicit performative utterances are assertions he would have directly said so” (Pegan 2009, 3). I did *argue* that social theories entail that assertions can be made by means of explicit performatives:

For any type of acts that communicate their own social significance, like ordering, promising, greeting, congratulating, bequeathing, naming, warning, advising and proclaiming, it will be possible to perform the act by means of an explicit performative, since performing the act by means of describing it does not change the act content, i.e. does not change what is communicated. When what is communicated by means of the act is the social significance of the act itself, saying that one performs it is simply one way of communicating that same social significance, and therefore—unless because of ceremonial restrictions—one way of doing it (Pagin 2004, 857).

I did indeed not want to characterize social theories by means of this entailment, but I did claim that it is a trait that they share. It may be that adding a second part  $\beta$ , next to the social conditions  $\alpha$ , to the sufficient conditions of a social theory destroys the entailment. However, that effect may in turn be used to rule out the combined the  $\alpha + \beta$  as a social theory. This might seem to make the entailment go through by definition, but doesn't really, since the fact that the social condition  $\alpha$  *by itself* supports the entailment doesn't hold by definition.

Secondly, Pegan thinks that I accuse social theories of views that they are not committed to. He writes “Thus, it would appear that as Pagin understands ‘what is communicated’, what is communicated in an assertion is what is asserted in that assertion” (Pegan 2009, 2), and adds

Combining the idea that what is communicated in an assertion is what is asserted in that assertion, with the idea that an assertion does not “communicate its own social significance”, we get the idea that the social significance of an assertion is not asserted in that assertion. Yet, none of the theories Pagin is explicitly concerned to refute is committed to denying this. None of those theories is committed to saying that the social significance of an assertion that P, is that P (Pegan 2009, 2).

But this is just a misrepresentation of what I say: *My* view is that what is communicated in an assertion is just what is asserted. I ascribe to *social theories* the view that what is communicated contains *more* than what is asserted, i.e. the social significance of the act. I don't ascribe the view to *them* that the social significance is part of what is asserted.

## 2. Blocking the counterexamples

In Pagan 2004 I devised a method of generating counterexamples to “social” theories of assertion, i.e. to theories which characterize assertion in terms of their social significance. The idea was simply to use the formulation of the theory to generate a performative formula. For instance, given a theory that says that a speaker asserts that  $p$  iff she commits herself to the truth of the proposition that  $p$ , we generate the performative schema

- (1) I hereby commit myself to the truth of the proposition that  $p$ .

Then, if an instance of the schema is sincerely uttered, the speaker has committed herself to the truth of  $p$ , but, intuitively, she has not asserted that  $p$ . So meeting the sufficient condition of the theory may fall short of asserting, and hence the theory is false. I claimed that any social theory can be refuted this way, although the format may in some cases have to be more complex. In case it is required that the assertion that  $p$  be made by means of a sentence that means that  $p$  (in context), I suggested meeting this condition by means of a paratactic construction:

- (2) I hereby commit myself to the truth of what is expressed by the following:  
 $p$

Pagan aptly characterizes the idea of this method, but claims that there is a class of social theories for which such counterexamples are blocked. In the 2004 paper I did discussed ways of blocking the counterexamples, and dismissed them, but I wasn't imaginative enough, as Pagan demonstrates.

Pagan focuses on the idea of intending to do A *in* doing B:

U intends to do A in doing B only if he does not intend to do A only partly in doing B. For example, if C and B do not at all overlap, then U intends to do A in doing B only if he does not intend to do A partly in doing C. U's doing A in doing B does not preclude him from doing, and intending to do, something other than, but of the same general sort as, A, in doing something of which his doing B is a proper part (Pagan 2009, 4).

This idea is used for devising theories for which the suggested type of counterexamples are blocked:

Pagin's method is ill-suited for generating counterexamples to theories of the current sort. Consider, for example, a theory on which U asserts that P if and only if U produces a sentence that means that P and intends to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition that P in producing that sentence. Now imagine U uttering 'I hereby commit myself to [what is expressed by] the following: The Red Sox won' in such a way that he does not assert that the Red Sox won. To the extent that I imagine U failing to assert that the Red Sox won, I do not imagine him intending to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition that the Red Sox won in uttering 'The Red Sox won'. Instead, I imagine him merely intending to indicate a particular proposition in uttering that sentence. Namely, the proposition to whose truth he intends to undertake a commitment in making his entire utterance. A proposition to whose truth he intends to undertake a commitment partly in making that part of his utterance that does not at all overlap his utterance of 'The Red Sox won'. In sum, when I imagine U failing to assert that the Red Sox won, I imagine him failing to satisfy the current theory's conditions for asserting that the Red Sox won (Pegan 2009, 4).<sup>1</sup>

Pegan also adequately provides the following discourse as a proposed anti-social counterexample.

- (3) In making the following utterance I intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence I utter: The Red Sox won.

As far as I can see, on the assumption of sincerity, there are two readings of this discourse. They differ with respect to the status of the second sentence; on one it is assertoric, on the other not.

U is sincere; she announces what intention she will have in making the second utterance (of 'the Red Sox won'), and she also has exactly that intention. If committing oneself is a mental act or attitude, then there is no reason to deny that U, being

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<sup>1</sup>A similar objection has been made to me by Stephen Barker (pc), where (as far as I remember) Barker required the utterance to be *unembedded*.

sincere, in fact commits herself as she says she intends. Still, her utterance of the second sentence need not be assertoric. She indicates which sentence it is whose truth she commits herself to, but does not do more than this. This understanding comes out on one reading of the extended discourse:

(3') In making the following utterance I intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence I utter: The Red Sox won. But in fact they didn't.

On the non-assertoric reading, this is pragmatically anomalous, but not a contradiction. It is pragmatically anomalous in the same way as sayings like

(4) I recommend you to buy this car. But in fact it sucks.

The second utterance undercuts the perlocutionary force of the first utterance, but does not cancel or contradict the illocutionary act. We can bring it out more perspicuously by reversing the emphasis:

(4') This car sucks. But I (nevertheless) recommend you to buy it.

Such an utterance is bewildering but not inconsistent. Similarly, it is bewildering but not inconsistent to say

(3'') The Red Sox didn't win. But In making the following utterance I (nevertheless) intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence I utter: The Red Sox won

If that is right, the utterance of 'the Red Sox won' in (3') or (3'') cannot plausibly be an assertion, for if it were, there would be a contradiction with the last utterance of (3') and the first of (3'').

As far as I can see, there is also a reading on which U *does* assert that the Red Sox won. She sincerely says that she intends to commit herself to the truth of the sentence, and does so in uttering that sentence assertorically. On that reading, there *is* a contradiction with the last sentence of (3').

Let's consider a variation with back-reference, of a kind that is common in news reports, as in

- (5) The economy will start to pick up within a year. This was claimed today by Mr Harry Vestar, a spokesman of the WHPCG.

At first there is an appearance of assertoric force to the utterance of the first sentence, but this is canceled by the utterance of the second. In this format we have

- (6) The Red Sox won. In making that utterance I intended to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence I uttered.

Again I think we have two readings. On one reading, the appearance of assertoric force of the first utterance is canceled, on the other reading not. On the first reading you can add a denial without contradiction, and on the second not. In the non-assertoric readings of (3) and (6) we still have counterexamples to the sufficient conditions of the theory proposed by Pegan.

Pegan's intuitions differ. He says about (3):

Depending on how we imagine things, we can imagine U either asserting, or failing to assert, that the Red Sox won. Insofar as I imagine U failing to assert that the Red Sox won, I do not imagine him intending to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition that the Red Sox won in uttering 'The Red Sox won'. Instead, I imagine him merely intending to indicate a particular proposition in uttering that sentence. Namely, the proposition to whose truth he intends to undertake a commitment in making his entire utterance. A proposition to whose truth he intends to undertake a commitment partly in making that part of his utterance that does not at all overlap his utterance of 'The Red Sox won'. Thus, the current utterances are not counterexamples to a theory on which U asserts that P if and only if U produces a sentence that means that P and intends to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition that P in producing that sentence (Pegan 2009, 5).

I fail to see the force of this intuition. Why would it be impossible for U to succeed in her intention to commit herself by means of uttering 'The Red Sox won' and by

means of that utterance alone, if that is exactly what she intends, i.e. if she does not also want to assert that the Red Sox won?

It is anyway clear that we can form a more restrictive theory that definitely blocks counterexamples like (3), e.g. by ruling out that the utterance of the sentence that means that  $p$  be prefixed by a sentence containing a reference to it. But this does not mean that it is possible to devise social theories that escape counterexamples. If the current intuitions about discourses like (3) and (6) are right, this is in fact impossible.

For suppose that we have a new more restrictive theory T such that an utterance of (3) would *not* count as containing an assertion that the Red Sox won. In this case the non-assertoric reading of (3) does not give us a counterexample to the sufficient conditions of T. This is surely possible. But in this case, the *assertoric* reading of (3) gives us a counterexample to the claim that the *necessary* conditions of T are necessary conditions for making an assertion. For on the assertoric reading, the speaker *does* assert that the Red Sox won, and this is ruled out by the more restrictive theory T. Hence, if both readings are available, social theories cannot escape counterexamples.

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## References

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