



Assertion and Rejection

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the interplay between the speech acts of *assertion* and *rejection*. First, it defends that it is even sensible to distinguish these two speech acts, against an old consensus—going back to Frege—that rejection is merely negative assertion. To this end, I introduce the speech act of *weak rejection* and defend it against its critics. Based on this notion, I develop a logic of asserted and rejected content—*weak bilateral logic*—and demonstrate its usefulness in the analysis of natural language inferences.

To make this result accessible to a general theory of linguistic interaction, I give an alternative characterisation of weak rejection in a theory of *public commitment*. I develop a broad theory of commitment from independent, basic principles that hold even in non-cooperative dialogue contexts. These principles predict compelling dynamic-interactive properties of the speech acts of assertion and rejection, and moreover validate weak bilateral logic as *the logic that preserves cooperative commitment*. This theory is further rounded out by a theory of *Why*-questions that explains what it means to be able to *vindicate* one's commitments.

Then, I develop these investigations further by pairing weak rejection with its dual speech act: *weak assertion*. This generalises weak bilateral logic to *epistemic multilateral logic*. This logic has two major upshots: it defends classical logic as *the logic of asserted content* against arguments from harmony, while simultaneously explaining epistemic modals. This is grounds to re-evaluate a growing collection of data that alleges the incompatibility of classical logic and a satisfactory semantics for epistemic modals.

Another challenge to classical semantic theory is the *faultless disagreement* argument. Famously, judgements about taste (and similar properties) have linguistic and interactional properties that appear to distinguish them from other judgements. Some have argued that this calls for wide revisions of semantic theory. I show that this is not necessarily the case. Using a public commitment framework, I develop a theory of *reframable predicates* and specify the dialogue dynamics of such predicates. Then, if one accepts that taste predicates are reframable—as

suggested by the available data—one can explain the relevant phenomena without revising semantic theory.

Finally, I address a methodological issue. Sometimes, written records of certain utterances can be ambiguous between agreement and disagreement: *how* they were said makes the difference. Intonation is rarely annotated and, if so, it is frequently only the placement of the focal stress that is recorded, but not the *utterance tune* that sets the focus. I demonstrate that foregoing tune can lead to confusion: the interpretation of an utterance with the same focal stress can vary depending on the tune. Thus, one needs a unified theory of focus and tune. I develop a first attempt towards a formal discourse theory of focus and tune that already explains a number of interesting tunes, including one that signals verbal irony. This theory in particular explains relevant data on agreement and disagreement.