

ASSERTION, TESTIMONY, AND THE EPISTEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SPEECH

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ABSTRACT: Whether or not all assertion counts as testimony (a matter not addressed here), it is argued that not all testimony involves assertion. Since many views in the epistemology of testimony assume that testimony requires assertion, such views are (at best) insufficiently general. This result also points to what we might call the epistemic significance of assertion as such.

KEYWORDS: norm of assertion, testimony, knowledge

What is it to perform a speech act that amounts to testimony that *p*? An initial hypothesis that has occurred to many – call it the *necessity thesis* – is that a speech act constitutes testimony only if it has the force of an assertion. Some authors appear to identify testimony with assertion, and thus appear to hold the biconditional.¹ But whatever the standing of the sufficiency thesis in the biconditional,² the necessity thesis has seemed plausible to a good many people – so plausible, in fact, that entire theories in the epistemology of testimony have been erected on this basis.

Examples are easy to come by. The “assurance view” of testimony³ holds that it is only when a speech act is an assertion that it has the core feature of

¹ See Elizabeth Fricker, “The Epistemology of Testimony,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplemental Vol. 61 (1987): 57-83, and Ernest Sosa, “Testimony and Coherence,” in *Knowing from Words*, eds. Bimal Krishna Matilal and Arindam Chakrabarti (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 59-67. I say ‘appear to’, since their comments are made in passing, and so the attribution is not certain.

² It is doubted by many; see for example C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). But see Peter Graham, “What is Testimony?,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (1997): 187, 227-232 for a response to Coady.

³ Edward Hinchman, “Telling as Inviting to Trust,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70, 3 (2005): 562-87; Richard Moran, “Getting Told and Being Believed,” in *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 288-289.

testimony – that of amounting to (in the words of Moran) a speaker’s “guarantee” of the truth of what she said. Moran goes on to say that

The epistemic value of [a speaker’s] words is something publicly conferred on them by the speaker, by presenting his utterance as an assertion. ... Determining his utterance as an assertion is what gets the speaker’s words into the realm of epistemic assessment... of the sort that is relevant to testimony...⁴

Similarly Owens, who is an explicit critic of the assurance view, nevertheless endorses the necessity thesis. Although his endorsement is not as explicit as is Moran’s, it is strongly suggested in the way Owens orients his project. He writes:

I am concerned with a distinctive way in which language users transmit information: they assert things. To accept testimony is to take someone else’s word for it. Thus any epistemology of testimony presupposes some account of assertion and of the role that it plays in testimony.⁵

Two things are noteworthy about this quote. First, Owens uses ‘assert’ to designate the subject-matter of his inquiry – the sort of speech act that constitutes “a distinctive way in which language users transmit information” (his topic of inquiry). Second, Owens moves without comment from his claim about assertion, to a characterization of what it is to accept testimony, and from there to a claim about the need to provide some account of assertion and its role in testimony cases. This suggests that he thinks accepting testimony involves accepting assertion – something that would appear to make sense if, but only if, he accepts the necessity thesis.⁶

Nor is an endorsement of the necessity thesis restricted to those who endorse or aim to rebut the assurance view. On the contrary, it can be found in views, such one I presented in Goldberg,⁷ where testimony is characterized as a matter of the speaker’s representing herself as standing in an epistemically authoritative position vis-à-vis the truth of what she said. Noting that it is part of the very point of the speech act of assertion to so represent oneself, I concluded by “suggesting that testimony is governed by an epistemic norm because assertion is.”⁸

⁴ Moran, “Getting Told,” 288, 289.

⁵ David Owens, “Testimony and Assertion,” *Philosophical Studies* 130 (2006): 105.

⁶ Owens’ brief against the assurance view of assertion paves the way for his alternative model, on which assertion is a speech act expressive of belief; he argues that this more expressivist view of assertion does more justice to the epistemology of testimony.

⁷ Sanford Goldberg, *Anti-Individualism: Mind and Language, Knowledge and Justification*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸ Goldberg, *Anti-Individualism*, 18.

Despite the widespread agreement on the necessity thesis, there is good reason to think that there can be cases of testimony that are not cases involving assertoric speech. The following case illustrates. Speaker S has super-high epistemic standards. These standards affect all of her speech act dispositions. For example, she will not assert anything that does not meet these super-high standards. Even her standards for speculating are very high. T knows all of this about S. In addition, T has assembled track-record data about S's speculations: T knows that these are highly reliable – more reliable, in fact, than are most competent assertions by other speakers. So when S speculates that p, T comes to accept that p on the grounds that S so speculated. (T had excellent reasons – in the form of the track-record data – to believe that S wouldn't have speculated that p, unless it were true that p.)

The hypothesis at issue (“The Claim”) is that S's speculation that p is legitimately regarded as a case of testimony that p. Here I assume that The Claim is established if it can be shown that S's speculation is legitimately regarded as a case of testimony in connection with T, given his background knowledge of S's speech behavior and reliability. This latter hypothesis can be backed by noting several of the features of the case. To begin, T's belief in p is formed through his acceptance of a content S presents-as-true in her speech act, where T's acceptance was made on the basis of (his recognition of) S's having performed that speech act. In so doing, T is relying on S to have gotten things right. Stronger, T is relying on S's speech act to manifest S's reliability on the matter at hand. This is seen in the counterfactual T himself would cite in defense of his belief: S wouldn't have speculated that p, unless it were true that p. In effect, T's appeal to this subjunctive conditional makes clear that he is relying on S's epistemic authority on the matter. It is true that S hasn't explicitly or implicitly represented herself as having any such authority. But the point of the illustration is to support the claim that representing oneself as epistemically authoritative on the matter at hand is an inessential feature of testimony: although most cases of testimony may involve this feature, it is not required that all do.

Against The Claim, it might be objected that S's speech counts as testimony only to a properly situated hearer such as T, and hence is not, in and of itself, a case of testimony. But to this two things can be said. First, granting that S's speech act is testimony only to those situated like T, and so that this speech act is not *in and of itself* a case of testimony, this case falsifies the necessity thesis so long as it counts as a case of testimony; for then we would have an instance of testimony (albeit in connection with T) that is not an instance of assertion. One could resist this conclusion by insisting that no speech act should count as testimony unless it counts as testimony *independent of the background information of its potential audience*. But—and this is my second point—this reaction would appear to beg an

important question in the epistemology of testimony. A standard (if perhaps minority) view in the epistemology of testimony is that a hearer is justified in accepting testimony if and only if she has (undefeated) positive reasons, not ultimately reducible to further testimony, for regarding the testimony as credible. This ‘reductionist’ view is motivated by an idea regarding the epistemic significance of another’s speech. The motivating idea is that the epistemic significance of another’s speech is a function of the background information in terms of which the hearer assesses the credibility of the observed speech act. What the case of *S*’s speculation brings out is that this very rubric can be fruitfully applied even in cases not involving assertion. To rule out this would-be case of testimony, on the grounds that its status as testimony depends on the background information of *T*, thus would appear to beg the question against reductionism’s motivating idea.⁹ It would be a disappointment if our characterization of testimony ruled out reductionist positions from the start.

Perhaps it will be said that, while *S*’s speculation that *p* (together with *H*’s background information) provides a reason in support of *H*’s belief that *p*, not all cases of giving someone a reason to believe *p* are cases of testifying that *p*. As a general point this is surely correct: when I take my umbrella with me as I walk past you out the front door, I have given you a reason to think that it is raining (or perhaps merely to think that I think that it is raining), but I certainly have not testified either to the weather conditions or to my state of mind. The key question is whether this correct general point applies in the case at hand. It would seem not: the speculation case is not a case of *S*’s behavior merely giving *H* a reason to believe that *p*. For unlike the case of the umbrella, in the speculation case *H* is guided in belief precisely by how *S* has linguistically represented things as being: *H* acquires the belief that he does – the belief that *p* – on the strength of the fact that *S* so speculated. As I noted above, this involves *H*’s relying on something like *S*’s own

⁹ In saying this I do not mean to be taken as suggesting that those opposed to reductionism – so-called anti-reductionists – cannot regard background information as relevant to the mature hearer’s consumption of testimony. On the contrary, they can and do. See Coady, *Testimony*, 47, and Sanford Goldberg and David Henderson, “Monitoring and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72, 3 (2006): 576-93. Note, though, that this fact only helps my case. For if all sides in the debate between reductionists and anti-reductionists agree that background information can be used to assess the credibility of testimony, then the hypothesis that the speculation case above is a case of testimony is not hurt by the fact that the hearer’s reception of the speculation involves reliance on her own background information. This should be a point that is endorsed by everyone, independent of their position on the reductionism/anti-reductionism debate.

epistemic authority, as this authority is manifested in how *S* herself linguistically represented things as being.

But perhaps it will be said that this talk of *S*'s 'linguistically representing things' as being a certain way – the way things would have to be iff *p* – is either false, or else entails that *S*'s speculation amounts to an assertion that *p* after all. Such talk is false (it will be argued) if it turns out that *S*'s speculation does not really present *p* as true in the first place. Here, the suggestion might be that *S*'s speculation does not present *p* as true, but merely (e.g.) *suggests* that *p* is to some nonnegligible degree supported by *S*'s evidence. On the other hand (the objection continues), if it is granted that *S*'s speculation *does* present *p* as true, then it would seem that *S*'s speculation has all the trappings of an assertion that *p* after all.

The dilemma is a false one. To see this, we can begin with what is involved in talk of a speech act's "presenting a content as true." Such talk has to do with one dimension of evaluability of the speech act. In particular, when a theorist describes a speech act as "presenting-as-true" some proposition, the theorist is committed to regarding the speech act as a candidate for truth-evaluability, and in particular to evaluating the speech act as true iff the proposition in question is true.¹⁰ With this in hand it is easy to see that one who speculates that *p* does in fact present-as-true the proposition that *p*. This claim captures both the truth-evaluability of the speculation, as well as the precise conditions under which such a speech act would be correctly evaluated as true (namely, iff *p*). This claim also offers a warning to those who would try to argue that, while the speculation that *p* does present some proposition as true, the proposition in question is one that is 'epistemically weaker' than that of *p* itself. For example, suppose a theorist were to claim that what is presented-as-true by *S*'s speculation that *p* is, not the proposition *that p* itself, but something like the proposition *that p is somewhat probable on my [S's] evidence*. Such a proposal is clearly wrongheaded, since it makes the wrong prediction in a case in which *S* speculates that *p*, where it turns out that, though *p* was highly probably on *S*'s evidence (and highly probable in some more objective sense as well), it is false that *p*. In such a case *S*'s speculation would be false, not true. This supports the contention that what her speculation presents-as-true is *that p*, and not some other, weakened proposition.

Indeed, the forgoing should really come as no surprise. This is because the difference between speculating that *p*, and asserting that *p*, is one of speech act

¹⁰ Thus my use of 'presentation-as-true' differs from that found in Tyler Burge, "Content Preservation," *Philosophical Review* 102, 4 (1993): 457-488, where what a speech act "presents as true" includes obvious implicatures. I would use a term like "convey" to capture this broader notion.

force, not content. In particular, the difference lies not in whether p is presented as true – in both cases it is – but rather with the way in which the speaker represents her epistemic position vis-à-vis p . One who speculates that p does not represent herself as satisfying any substantial epistemic norm regarding the truth of p , whereas one who asserts that p does.¹¹ This is seen in our natural reactions to cases. As many other writers have noted, someone who asserts that p , under conditions in which she lacks good (epistemic) grounds for regarding p as true, is susceptible to criticism *qua* asserter. This is not so in the case of one who speculates that p : the standards for warranted (or epistemically appropriate) speculation are not as rigorous as those for warranted (or epistemically appropriate) assertion. Reactions to these cases are part of our ordinary linguistic lives: for each of the various kinds of speech act, both speakers and hearers have a general (if not readily articulable) sense of what is required, epistemically-speaking, if a speech act of that kind is to be warranted.

We can now see that the would-be dilemma presented above is a false one. While a case of speculating that p does present-as-true the proposition that p , it is not for this reason a case of asserting that p . There remains a difference in speech act force. Or, if it is preferred, there remains a difference in the epistemic standards which one represents oneself as satisfying in performing speech acts of these kinds.¹²

Before concluding, I want to consider one last point in connection with my hypothesis that not all cases of testimony are cases of assertion. We might wonder why so many philosophers who have written on testimony have assumed the necessity thesis (that testimony requires assertion). Stronger, we might wonder why they have used this assumption as a cornerstone of much of their theorizing about testimony. These questions are all the more pressing if, as I have been arguing, the assumption is false. I think that there is a natural explanation: there is a (proper) subset of cases of testimony regarding whose instances it is arguable that the necessity thesis is true. Thus we might distinguish cases of *testimony* from cases of *testifying*, with the latter constituting that proper subclass of cases of the former in which the speaker herself aims to be offering testimony.¹³ It is arguable, both that testifying

¹¹ Contemporary discussion of the norm of assertion has focused on precisely what the norm of assertion is – whether it is knowledge or (some variant on) rational or justified belief – but most everyone agrees that whatever it is it involves some substantial epistemic standing. (See, for a dissenting opinion, Matthew Weiner, “Must We Know What We Say?” *Philosophical Review* 114 (2005): 227-51).

¹² It is an interesting question, though one I cannot examine here, how to understand the nature of speech act force in general, and assertoric force in particular.

¹³ We might further distinguish another subclass of cases of testimony that are not yet cases of testifying: those cases where the speaker has no communicative aim in connection with a

constitutes the paradigmatic way of giving testimony, and that a speaker does not testify that p unless she asserts that p . In these terms it is intelligible why the authors cited at the outset assumed the necessity thesis: they appear to have had cases of testifying in mind when they spoke of testimony. On this picture, the most charitable interpretation is that they endorse the necessity thesis in connection with their view of what is involved in the act of *testifying*; and the thrust of the present paper is then to question whether one should generalize about testimony from what is true of cases of testimony-through-testifying.

I draw two main lessons from the proposed illustration of the falsity of the necessity thesis with respect to the broad category of testimony. First, those theories of the epistemology of testimony that are organized around the necessity thesis – the various accounts I mentioned at the outset – are insufficiently general: even if it is granted that there is a good deal of testimony (= cases of testifying) that answers to their characterization, they do not succeed in characterizing testimony as such.¹⁴ For this reason it is to be doubted whether their account of the epistemology of testimony is fully general. (This is a matter to be pursued elsewhere.) But second, the case I have used to illustrate the falsity of the necessity thesis suggests that, to the extent that the force of a particular (truth-aimed) speech act falls short of assertion, to that extent the epistemic burden on the hearer, if she aims to acquire knowledge through her acceptance of the speech act, will be greater. (This assumes both that assertion's norm is more demanding, epistemically, than is the norm of speculation, and that the ease of confirming the credibility of a speech act of kind K increases with the demandingness of the epistemic norm that warrants K -instances.) As a corollary I submit that, to the extent that a hearer is *uncertain whether* a particular truth-aimed speech act has the force of assertion, to that extent the burden on her, if she aims to acquire knowledge through her acceptance of the speech act, will be correspondingly greater. This may suggest that how much of an epistemic burden the hearer must shoulder, if she is to acquire knowledge through testimony, is not something that can be determined independent of other features of the testimonial exchange – including features pertaining to the (hearer's perception of the) force of the testimony-constituting speech act.¹⁵

hearer, but nevertheless aims to be reliable in her presentations-as-true – perhaps writing in one's diary count here.

¹⁴ This point is very much in the spirit of Jennifer Lackey, *Knowing from Words*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). If I am correct, it gives added support to the importance of her category of "hearer testimony."

¹⁵ For helpful discussions I thank Peter Graham, Tim Kenyon, Jennifer Lackey, Baron Reed, and Rob Stainton.