Hedged Assertion

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Assertion is an act in which speakers commit to a proposition that they present in a conversation. As such, it has a distinctively normative dimension. Some assertions seem wrong or inappropriate *qua* assertions and not just for reasons of morality or politeness.[1] But, as a speech act, it also has a distinctively linguistic dimension. A speaker typically performs an assertion by using a declarative sentence. Unlike interrogatives, which are used to ask questions, and imperatives, which are used to issue commands, declaratives state the way the world is,[2] and, as such, their use commits a speaker to the world being as it is stated to be.

The literature on assertion mostly considers examples of unqualified declaratives such as the English sentence (1). But sometimes a speaker uses a *qualified* declarative like (2).

(1) Jane left the party.
(2) Jane left the party, I think.

That linguistic difference produces a normative one. Both (1) and (2) present the proposition that Jane left the party. But the amount of responsibility that the speaker takes for that proposition is diminished with (2). In other words, qualifying the declarative with *I think* weakens the speaker's commitment to the world being as it is stated to be.

A speaker's use of a qualified declarative like (2) is a HEDGED ASSERTION.[3]

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[1]See Turri 2017.

[2]Some call this assertion's "word-to-world direction of fit". See Searle 1979, 11–13.

[3]Sometimes an expression is called a hedge when it makes the propositional content of an assertion fuzzier in some way. See, for example, Lakoff **?**. Our use of *hedge* is limited to

Surprisingly little has been written about hedged assertion.[4] Linguists often focus on semantic or syntactic issues related to expressions that can be used to hedge. Thus they tend to concentrate on semantic or syntactic theorizing about, for example, grammatical evidentials or epistemic modals,[5] but pay far less attention to what hedging does at the level of action. They may describe declaratives like (2) as weakening speaker commitment, but they will not usually fill out what that involves. By contrast, philosophers have extensively focused on normative issues regarding what epistemic position is required for proper assertion,[6] often extending this framework to illuminate related assertive speech or interrogatives.[7] And yet, they have almost exclusively considered unqualified declaratives. What happens when a speaker hedges her assertion is not discussed.

This essay fills the lacuna by considering the linguistic and normative issues side-by-side. We aim to bring some order and clarity to thinking about hedging to illuminate aspects of interest to both linguists and philosophers. After canvassing preliminary issues in §1, our discussion will center on three main questions. In §2, we consider the STRUCTURAL QUESTION: what is commitment weakened from? We take up, in §3, the FUNCTIONAL QUESTION: what is the best way to understand how a hedge weakens? Finally, we end in §4 with the TAXONOMIC QUESTION: are hedged assertions genuine assertions, another speech act, or what?

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expressions that have uses that weaken speaker commitment.

[4]The present authors are, of course, exceptions. See Benton 2011, Benton and Turri 2014, and van Elswyk 2018. Hedging receives little philosophical attention generally. Sorensen 2006 and McCready 2015 are exceptions.

[5]E.g. Aikhenvald 2004; Simons 2007; Aikhenvald & Dixon 2014; McCready 2015; Murray 2017 on evidentials; and von Fintel and Gillies 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011 on modals.

[6]See especially Williamson 2000, Ch. 11; Weiner 2005; Lackey 2007; Stanley 2008; Turri 2010b, 2011, 2016a; Brown & Cappelen 2011; Benton 2011, 2016b; Blaauw 2012; Fricker 2012; Hawthorne 2012; McKinnon 2013, 2015; Goldberg 2015.

[7]E.g. Turri 2013 on guarantees; Benton & Turri 2014 on predictions; and Whitcomb 2017 on questions.

1 Preliminaries

We begin with some clarifications and classifications: first concerning assertion as an act type and then to the range of hedges that are available in English and related languages.

Starting with Frege 1970, assertion is frequently decomposed into a CONTENT and FORCE. Its content is the proposition expressed by the declarative used to perform an assertion. Its force is the way in which the speaker commits to, or takes responsibility for, that proposition. We will hereafter gloss assertoric force primarily in terms of SPEAKER COMMITMENT. But that should not be taken as endorsement for a theory—in the style of Peirce 1934, Alston 2000, Brandom 1994, and MacFarlane 2011—that reduces assertoric force to one of these notions. These concepts are useful for explaining hedging in a somewhat neutral way.[8] In §2 and §3, we will consider a few ways to develop such talk by connecting it up with extant theories of assertion.

In English, there are several equivalent of referring to a speaker's assertion that the world is a certain way. For example, one might *state* or *claim* or *declare* or *affirm* that it is a particular way.[9] A standard convention is to use '*p*' schematically to refer in an abstract way to assertoric content. Often a proposition is delineated according to its linguistic roles: it is the meaning of a declarative sentence, what is denoted by a *that*-clause like *that Jane left the party*, and what is available for reference by anaphoric expressions like the *that* in *That's false*. We will also assume that a proposition plays these roles but remain neutral on its metaphysics.

English speakers can qualify their assertive speech in a bewildering number of ways. However, not all qualifications are hedges. An example of a non-hedge qualifier is the adverb *frankly*.

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[8]Some will not be amenable to a normative characterization of hedging. Presumably, those like Pagin 2011 who deny a normative take on assertion will want to resist a normative characterization of hedged assertion too. A question the reader might consider while reading is whether a non-normative account of hedging can be developed, especially in light of the issues we discuss here.

[9]Though colloquially speakers often also use "say" to refer mainly to assertions, we shall reserve this broader term to include utterances made with imperatives and interrogatives as well.

(3) Frankly, Jane left the party.

Frankly marks that the assertion is especially direct and to the point. But it doesn't weaker the speaker's commitment to Jane having left the party like the parenthetical *I think* in (2) does.

We sort hedges into two groups: ATTITUDINAL and EVIDENTIAL.[10] Attitudinal hedges weaken commitment by specifying that the speaker has a weak attitude towards p. A common attitudinal hedge consists of a first-person subject and attitude verb like *think*, *believe*, and *suspect* that has been inserted in either an initial or parenthetical position. Instead of asserting outright that Jane left the party (1), a speaker might add any of the following, which, while retaining the utterance's assertive character, weakens speaker commitment.

    a. I think that Jane left the party.   ATTITUDE VERB
    b. Jane, I believe, left the party.

Similarly, one might append a conditional that expresses uncertainty to similarly weaken commitment:

    c. Jane left the party, if I'm not mistaken.   CONDITIONAL

Evidential hedges weaken commitment by specifying that the speaker's source of evidence for p is one typically regarded as unreliable.[11] They are regularly adverbials like *reportedly* and epistemic modals such as *perhaps, may(be), might, it's possible*, or *there's a chance*.

    d. Apparently Jane left the party.   ADVERBIAL
    e. Jane reportedly left the party.
    f. Jane left the party, evidently.

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[10]By using the term *evidential* we do not mean to suggest that these expressions are grammatical evidentials in the sense of Aikhenvald 2004 and others. We use it more loosely to identify expressions that specify the speaker's evidence source.

[11]Evidential hedges in English parallel grammatical evidentials in many respects. See McCready 2015, Murray 2017, and citations therein for discussion of related issues.

g. Maybe Jane left the party.   MODAL

h. Jane, it's possible, left the party.

i. Jane left the party, perhaps.

Altogether, examples (a) through (i) illustrate that hedges cross-cut a variety of linguistics distinctions.

Explaining how these hedges weaken speaker commitment, however, proves tricky. The first reason was just displayed. These expressions are diverse enough that the explanation given for how one qualifier can weaken commitment might not work for another. Though epistemic modals and adverbs are similar, uncertainty conditionals and parenthetically positioned attitudes are pretty different in both syntax and semantics.

The second reason that hedges present a challenge is that they can be interpreted as contributing to either the content or force of a speech act (van Elswyk, 2018). Consider *Jane probably left for the party* embedded in the following discourse as (5).

(4) Who probably left the party?

(5) Jane probably left the party.

(6) That's false. It is highly improbable that Jane left the party.

For contrast, consider the sentence once again, but embedded within a different discourse as (8).

(7) Who left the party?

(8) Jane probably left the party.

(9) That's false. Only Jack left the party.

These discourses make a difference to how *probably* is interpreted.[12] The first discourse concerns the probability of an event. That is what the opening

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[12]The careful reader will note that difference between (5) and (8) also corresponds to a difference in what proposition is made at-issue by the sentence. A complete account of the meaning/force interface with respect to hedging will need to take this difference in (not-)at-issue status into consideration. To not get weighed down by some of the linguistic details not immediately relevant to assertion, we forego discussion of (not-)at-issueness.

question inquires about and what forms the basis of disagreement in the response to the answer. As a result, it is difficult to interpret *probably* in (5) as hedging. The proposition presented is about what is probable and the speaker's commitment is not weakened. In contrast, the second discourse is about who left the party. The question and the response to the answer have nothing to do with what is probable. Then *probably* in (8) can be interpreted as a hedge. The proposition presented is about Jane leaving the party and the speaker's commitment is weakened.

In what remains, our focus will be on what hedging does to an assertion at the level of action. To the best of our knowledge, nobody has offered a general explanation of how these expressions hedge. Here and there, explanations have been given for particular expressions.[13] But a general explanation remains to be given. So we will take it for granted that attitudinal and evidential expressions have uses that diminish speaker commitment or responsibility without canvassing how semantics and pragmatics interact to make that possible.

2   Structural

Characterizing hedges as expressions that weaken a speaker's commitment raises a question: what, exactly, is the speaker weakening her commitment from? Put differently, if these expressions serve to hedge, then what, exactly, is the speaker hedging against?

Arguably there is a norm with epistemic content which typically governs unqualified assertions such as (1), where such a norm specifies the required epistemic position one must be in with respect to a proposition in order properly to assert it outright. In most discussions, the norm provides a necessary condition on proper assertion, of the following structure:

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[13]Force-modifier views are an example. Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 767) typify this approach with respect to epistemic modals: "epistemic modality... is a matter of the speaker's assessment of the truth of the proposition expressed in the residue or the nature of the speaker's commitment to its truth." See Swanson 2011 for discussion of why such views fail. With respect to grammatical evidentials, Murray 2017 and Faller **?** offer proposals tailored to evidentials that may be extendible to some English expressions. See McCready 2015 for the most thorough discussion currently available.

One must: assert that p only if one ϕ (with respect to p).

Philosophers have argued at length over the content of ϕ, where ϕ is usually construed either as an epistemic/doxastic property of the asserter, or as a property of the asserted p. Philosophers also argue over whether there is a comparable norm providing a sufficient (epistemic) condition on asserting,[14] and even over whether there is a norm of assertion at all.[15] Debate over the content of ϕ has appealed mainly to which norm offers the best explanation of a range of data from linguistic contructions (including Moorean paradoxical conjunctions), conversational patterns from challenges of, or prompts to, assertions, and judgments of propriety or criticizability. The debate has yielded a strong case, if not consensus, that knowledge is the required status to replace ϕ, a view known as the Knowledge Norm of Assertion:

One must: assert that p only if one knows that p.[16]

Alternative knowledge norms, similar in spirit but different in form, claim that "an assertion should express knowledge" (Turri 2016a and 2016b), or that "to assert p with full epistemic propriety or worth requires knowing that p" (Sosa 2010). We shall loosely refer to all such views as "KNA". Other prominent candidates for ϕ in the norm on (epistemically) proper assertion are, respectively, that one must believe; or that one's evidence make it reasonable *for one* to believe (even if one does not); or that one rationally/reasonably believe; or that one be certain that p; or that p must be true (see Benton 2014 for an overview). Naturally, many philosophers differ on whether the content of the norm itself is context-sensitive,[17] or whether it is a defeasible norm whose conditions of application are context-dependent in some way.

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[14]See Brown 2011; Lackey 2011; Benton 2016a; and Lackey 2016.

[15]See Cappelen 2011.

[16]See the literature cited in fn. 6, as well as earlier work by Unger 1975, Chap. 6, and Slote 1979 (repr. 2010). For an overview, see Benton 2014, §1. See also Simion and Kelp, chapter 3 of this volume, on KNA (or its rivals) as the constitutive norm of the speech act of assertion.

[17]For example, DeRose 2002 argues that the norm is knowledge, but uses this to argue that (semantic) contextualism about knowledge attributions is true; Turri 2010a agrees that knowledge is the norm, but argues for (semantic) invariantism about knowledge coupled with speech act contextualism; and Goldberg 2015 argues that the norm's content may shift depending on context (though he thinks that the default standard is knowledge).

One strand of data that some have thought is best explained by KNA concerns conjunction of hedged utterances with knowledge disavowal or knowledge ascription. Note, first, that when considering each of (1a)–(1i) above, they each permit adding a conjunct—or an added speech act, in the case of (1j)—*disavowing* knowledge of the proposition that Jane left the party. For example, such additions to (1b), (1f), and (1i) yield the acceptable conjunctions (note the aptness of "but" to conjoin):

(b&¬K) Jane, I believe, left the party, but I don't know that she did.

(f&¬K) Jane left the party, evidently, but I don't know whether she did.

(i&¬K) Jane left the party, perhaps, but I don't know.

Yet by comparison, if one were to add a conjunction *claiming* knowledge (even when conjoining with "indeed"), they will come off as oddly problematic; for if one claims to know in the second conjunct, it seems bizarre to have hedged in the first conjunct:

(b&K) ? Jane, I believe, left the party; indeed, I know that she did.

(f&K) ? Jane left the party, evidently; indeed, I know that she did.

(i&K) ? Jane left the party, perhaps; indeed, I know this.

This kind of evidence supports KNA in two ways. On the one hand, the hedges all seem compatible with disavowing knowledge, where both the hedged conjunct and the knowledge disavowal serve to explain why the speaker didn't simply unqualifiedly assert that Jane left the party: each implicitly suggests that knowledge is what would've been needed in order to unqualifiedly assert it. Yet on the other hand, hedging feels out of place when one also claims knowledge, which is to be expected if one's having satisfied the norm requiring knowledge absolves one from the need to hedge.

Note as well the datum that attempting to disavow knowledge, conjoined with an outright declaration like (1), gives us Moore's paradox:

(1&¬K) # Jane left the party but I don't know that she did.

And as many have noted, offering a unified explanation of Moorean paradoxical conjunctions (in either the knowledge version above, or its belief version), is part of the case for any account of the norm of assertion; indeed, KNA explains both versions, including the paradoxical nature of using them across a dialogue.[18]

A related kind of evidence for KNA involves a pattern found by using attitudinal expressions in parenthetical position as in (1a) and (1b). In each case, *I think* or *I believe* can take a fronting main clause position, or parenthetical position, including in utterance-final position:

a. Jane left the party, I think.

b. Jane left the party, I believe.

But "I know," though it can be used in main clause position, sounds odd and overly redundant in parenthetical position:

k. ? Jane, I know, left the party.

k. ? Jane left the party, I know.[19]

Notice then that the sorts of attitudinal expressions which uniformly allow one to hedge against the primary proposition (that Jane left the party) are also those which acceptably take on parenthetical position; whereas the attitude term specifying the KNA's content, *know*, sits redundantly in parenthetical position. Furthermore, *know* also marks the difference between acceptable hedged claims conjoined with self-disavowals of knowledge, and redundantly strange conjunctions of hedged claims with self-attributions of knowledge. In other words, these hedging expressions cluster around the notion of knowledge and are applied rightly when distancing oneself from knowing, but applied wrongly when conveying or claiming knowledge for the speaker. The

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[18]See Benton 2011, §2. Cf. also the relevance of Moorean data from cases of showing and pedagogical norms: Buckwalter and Turri 2014.

[19]For more recent arguments from parentheticals concerning the norm of assertion, see Benton 2011, Blauuw 2012, and McKinnon & Turri 2013.

best explanation of these patterns is plausibly that, as KNA and closely related theories have it, knowledge sets the standard for proper permissible assertion.

3 Functional categorizations

Putting the pieces together from §1 and §2, we say that hedges are qualifiers that weaken the speaker's commitment because they convey that the speaker does not know the proposition asserted. But why does a speaker weaken her commitment by conveying that she does not know?

There are many ways to categorize theories of assertion.[20] But one dimension along which to categorize is whether a theory is REPRESENTATIONAL. A representational theory characterizes assertion as an act in which the speaker expresses or represents her epistemic position towards what is asserted.[21] Such theories differ along two dimensions: (*a*) which position or positions are represented and (*b*) how that position is represented. Non-representational theories deny that by asserting, a speaker thereby expresses or represents anything about her epistemic position. They characterize assertion without any conditions about the speaker's epistemic position.

Many theories are representational. KNA can be understood as a representational theory that identifies knowledge as the position represented and which accounts for representation as a side effect of there being a norm that a speaker tacitly follows. Importantly, though, representational theories need not posit a norm. Davidson (1984), for example, appears to treat position representation as a primitive feature of assertion.

Examples of non-representational theories include commitment-based theories of assertion. For such theories, assertion is characterized by a speaker undertaking a commitment to what she asserts. That commitment may be

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[20]See Cappelen 2011 and MacFarlane 2011, for example.

[21]As Black puts it: "In order to use the English language correctly, one has to learn that to pronounce the sentence 'Oysters are edible' in a certain tone of voice is to *represent oneself* as knowing, or believing, or at least not disbelieving what is being said. (To write a check is to represent oneself as having money in the bank to honor the check)" (Black 1952, 31). Cf. Unger's view that "if S asserts, states, or declares that *p*, then S represents it as being the case that he *knows* that *p*" (1975, 252–256).

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epistemic in nature. For example, asserting might involve undertaking the commitment to defend what was asserted by sharing one's supporting evidence. But undertaking commitment does not essentially involve representation of an epistemic position. For MacFarlane 2011 and others, being non-representational is a good-making feature of a commitment-based theory. Like representational theories, non-representational theories needn't be normative either. Pagin 2011, for example, details a non-representational theory that is non-normative.

Representational theories can explain the function of hedging if they adopt what we call the *responsibility-position link*, or RPL. RPL maintains that the amount of responsibility a speaker has for a proposition necessarily covaries with the strength of the epistemic position represented. As a result of such covariance, RPL predicts that if a speaker's utterance represents her as having a weaker position than what is normally represented by an unqualified assertion, she is to that extent less responsible for the proposition's truth.[22] Since RPL is neutral on why responsibility and represented positions covary, representational theories can extend to hedging differently according to how they explain the link.

To illustrate, let's consider two representational theories. Start with KNA. A defender of KNA can adopt RPL and explain why responsibility and position representation covary in terms of the norm on unqualified assertion.[23] Williamson's defense of KNA is articulated in terms of assertion's constitutive rule or norm, rather than in terms of the general notion of representation; this is because he thinks the KNA subsumes the principle that assertions represent their speakers as having a particular epistemic position under more general principles:

> In doing anything for which authority is required (for example,

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[22]A fuller account of RPL can build in a scale of how the scale of commitment, as one ascends through stronger forms of declarative speech acts, covaries with the credit one earns by successfully (and responsibly) using them. See Turri (2010a, 84–86), and Benton and Turri (2014, 1863).

[23]Ancestors of the KNA view used the descriptive terminology of assertions *representing* their speakers' epistemic positions, rather than the prescriptive talk of a *norm* on assertion. For ways of understanding how these relate to each other, and which may be conceptually prior, see Benton (2012, Chap. 2).

issuing orders), one represents oneself as having the authority to do it. To have the (epistemic) authority to assert p is to know p. The [representational] thesis follows. (Williamson 2000, 252, *fn.* 6)

So since unqualifiedly asserting that p requires one to have the epistemic authority to do so, and having that authority consists in knowing that p, then unqualifiedly asserting that p thereby represents the asserter as knowing that p. Because by so asserting one represents oneself as having this authority, one takes on the responsibility of not misrepresenting one's authority to others. In particular, one takes on the responsibility of not engaging in speech which represents one to have *more* authority than one in fact has. Thus, as Williamson puts it, "to make an assertion is to confer a responsibility (on oneself) for the truth of its content; to satisfy the rule of assertion, by having the requisite knowledge, is to discharge that responsibility, by epistemically ensuring the truth of the content" (2000, 268–269).

KNA supplemented by RPL can now explain why one takes on less responsibility when one opts to hedge one's assertion rather than assert unqualifiedly. Since according to KNA, one should not unqualifiedly assert unless one knows, one should therefore refrain from unqualified assertion when one takes oneself not to know. Hedged assertion represents the speaker as being careful enough to refrain from unqualified assertion, while nevertheless using declarative speech to communicate either one's attitude or one's (moderately) strong evidential position toward p. Since the authority required for thus hedging one's assertion falls short of knowledge, one does not represent oneself as knowing the proposition one has hedged against. Rather, by hedging one's assertion, one merely represents oneself as having the attitude indicated, and/or the relatively weak evidence which typically makes p merely somewhat probable. Given RPL, representing oneself as having this moderate epistemic authority confers a much lesser amount of responsibility on the speaker: crucially, the speaker who hedgedly asserts that p will not be held responsible for the truth of p, for they have not taken on an unqualified commitment to the truth of p. (They have, at most, committed to believing, or thinking, or it being apparent, or probable, etc., that p.)

Next, consider how a representational theory which does not posit a norm

of assertion might adopt RPL in order to explain the function of hedging. One approach which treats what the speaker represents about their epistemic position as a primitive feature of (unqualified) assertion, claims that "to assert is, among other things, to represent oneself as believing what one asserts" (Davidson 1984, 7–8; cf. Black 1952, 31).[24] Insofar as representing oneself, or a state of affairs, is the kind of thing which one can do inaccurately, one can mislead others with respect to what one represents as being the case; but then not only can one be poorly positioned with respect to what one indeed represents as being the case, one can also use it to intentionally mislead others. As such, representing oneself (or the facts) is something for which one can be responsible, and be held responsible by others. Since unqualifiedly asserting represents oneself as believing what one asserts, one thereby represents oneself as having strong enough grounds for believing it; given RPL, one takes on a similarly strong responsibility for the truth of what one unqualifiedly asserts. But a speaker who opts for hedging their assertion that p instead represents something weaker: they at least represent themselves as less confident in p, given that they could have, but did not, unqualifiedly assert that p. Typically, being less confident signals that they have less than optimal epistemic grounds for the proposition about which they are less confident. Given RPL, then, such a hedged assertion confers on the speaker less responsibility for its truth, which is all the more appropriate when speakers regard themselves as having less than optimal epistemic grounds for belief.

What about non-representational theories? Some non-representationalists try to account for position representation as a side effect of unqualified assertion. MacFarlane notes that if assertion consists in undertaking a commitment to defend p, then "One would not normally undertake a commitment

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[24]Note that non-norm representational theories of assertion can still introduce normative elements. If assertion may be understood partly, if imperfectly, on analogy with the rules of a game (e.g. Williamson 2000, ch. 11), then even Davidson, who criticizes the analogy as given by Dummett 1959, acknowledges how this might work: in games, "people who play usually want to win. Whether they want to win or not, it is a condition of playing that they *represent* themselves as wanting to win... But perhaps representing oneself as wanting to win does entail that one can be reproached if it is found that he does not, or isn't trying to, win" (Davidson 1984, 5). For concerns about the analogy with games, see Maitra 2011; for arguments that a non-norm representational theory can capture all that a norm theory can, see Pagin 2011.

to vindicate entitlement to a proposition one does not believe is true" (2011, 94). Rescorla (2009) similarly concludes that assertion involves pretense that a speaker believes what is asserted because assertion presents a proposition as a reason and one normally does not present a proposition as a reason unless there is some minimal pretense of believing it. Perhaps, then, non-representationalists can help themselves to RPL too.

But is difficult to see how non-representationalists could explain why responsibility and position representation rise and fall together. For the views mentioned, position representation is but a side effect of assertions performed in normal contexts. In contrast, the amount of speaker commitment is essential to assertion such that an assertion in any context carries that amount of speaker commitment. So the two features will detach in non-normal contexts by having different modal profiles.

The non-representationalist might therefore try to account for hedging in another way. But insofar as position representation is inessential, hedges, which alter what position is represented, cannot alter what is essential to assertion. Within the confines of non-representational theories, hedged assertions should be assertions in which the amount of speaker commitment is unchanged, but the position represented is weaker. But that is not what we saw §1 and §2. By disclosing what their epistemic position is, speakers can weaken commitment. We are therefore skeptical that non-representational theories have the resources like representational theories to explain how hedging functions.

4   Taxonomic categorizations

Since the start, we have described hedged statements as hedged assertions. But perhaps this is misleading. Are hedged assertions true assertions? If not, how should they be understood?

The traditional conception of assertion situates it within a broader family of speech acts with word-to-world fit that are tokened by using a declarative sentence. These acts are usually called CONSTATIVES.[25] Verbs for constatives

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[25]This is the name used by Austin 1962, Bach and Harnish 1979, Recanati 1987, and Kissine 2013. Searle and Vanderveken 1985 use ASSERTIVES to name this family. Kelp 2013

include *insist, conjecture, assure, state, swear, guess, claim, testify, argue, admit, conclude, remind, predict, confess, report,* and *hypothesize.* A theory of constatives explains what these acts have in common and in what respect(s) they differ from each other. As a result, whether hedged assertions are assertions depends on what feature distinguishes assertion from other constatives and if hedging alters this feature.

In line with representational theories of assertion, one way to account for the constative family is to maintain that constatives are alike in representing a speaker as occupying a particular epistemic position, but they differ in which position is represented. Assertion may, for example, represent the speaker as knowing whereas weaker constatives like conjecturing or guessing represent the speaker as occupying an epistemic position that falls short of knowledge for one reason or another.

Within this taxonomy, hedged assertion is naturally treated as a constative act other than assertion. By changing what position is represented, the speech act performed is changed by the hedge as well. Some corroboration for this perspective is that many of the speech act verbs listed above can be used parenthetically to hedge.

(10) Jane, I guess, left the party.

In (10), the speaker weakens her commitment by conveying that she is guessing. That is what we should expect if guessing is an act that represents a position weaker than knowledge.

An account of constatives like the one glossed is necessary for the explanatory success of a wide range of theories. KNA is no exception. For suppose that acts like (10) are not instances of another constative, but assertions that a theory must explain. If so, KNA misexplains them. When a speaker states that her assertion is backed only with the force of a guess, it is false to identify her act as one where she must know it. A speaker commits no wrong by being related, as in (10), to a proposition in the way she says she is. Other theories of assertion that associate assertion with a specific position would be in similar trouble. If engineered only to explain unqualified asser-

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refers to them as INFORMATIVE ACTS.

tions, then if hedged assertions are tokens of assertion, these views will fail to explain hedged assertions wherein a speaker permissibly occupies a different position. So a traditional conception of constatives is required to clearly demarcate hedged assertions as falling outside the explanatory purview of a theory like KNA.

Not everybody follows tradition. Some deny that assertion is individuated by a particular epistemic position.[26] Depending on the context, what position is represented with an act of assertion can change. Let's call them VARIANTISTS about the epistemic position associated, and contrast them with INVARIANTISTS. Variantists face a choice with respect to the constative taxonomy. Either constative acts are no longer distinguished from one another according to what position is represented. On this approach, assertions can vary in the positions they represent because a particular position is not essential to assertion or any other constative. Or, on the other approach, constatives are distinguished by position, but assertion is not an act type that is a member of the constative family; rather, assertion is regarded as a sub-family of different types covering a range of positions.

Goldberg 2015 appears to be a variantist of the first kind. He distinguishes assertions and guesses as distinct acts, and yet he maintains that assertion varies in the position represented. So what distinguishes assertions and guesses cannot be the positions they represent. By contrast, McKinnon 2015 is an instance of the latter approach. She writes that she doesn't think "there's particularly good reason to break [constatives] up into different speech acts" because "The differences between telling and guaranteeing... aren't like the differences between asserting and commanding." Each constative is a type of assertion that differs in the degree of commitment.

The variantist's choice in how to approach constatives predictably impacts how hedged assertions are to be categorized. For a variantist like McKinnon 2015, hedged assertions count as assertions. Though she does not consider them outright, they do not differ enough from unqualified assertion to be disqualified. Interestingly, the norm proposed by McKinnon 2015 can explain hedged assertions as assertions, unlike a norm like KNA. Her proposed norm

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[26]See Levin 2008, Turri 2010a, McKinnon 2015, and Goldberg 2015, and van Elswyk 2018, for example.

is the following:

> (SRNA) One may assert that p only if: (i) One has supportive reasons for p, (ii) The relevant conventional and pragmatic elements of the context are present, and (iii) One asserts that p at least in part because the assertion that p satisfies (i) and (ii).[27]

This norm extends to hedged assertions because of the wide variety of epistemic positions that count, on McKinnon's view, as ones in which a speaker has a supportive reason for p.

It is worth pointing out, however, that views like SRNA make it much harder to well-explain the systematic conversational patterns like those discussed in §2: the flexibility gained by a broadening the class of assertions to include hedged assertions as falling under its norm necessarily results in fewer explanatory resources to predict patterns of hedging as weakening a speaker's commitment. In particular, such views will sometimes countenance Moorean conjunctions as non-paradoxical, and will sometimes count one as asserting that Jane left by making utterances like (1a)-(1i) from §1; if so, such utterances commit their speaker to having fulfilled the norm, even though they've hedged. But if that is right, it is quite unclear why the speaker would've opted to so hedge, or what standard it is that they are aiming to hedge against.

For a variantist like Goldberg 2015, matters are different. Hedged statements like (10) will not count because guesses are not assertions. But what about statements qualified with parentheticals like *I think* or epistemic vocabulary like *probably*? Goldberg does not detail how assertion differs from other constatives and he cannot rely on a traditional taxonomy that distinguishes acts through what position is represented. So it is not clear on which side of the assertion/non-assertion boundary hedged statements fall. Unlike SRNA and like KNA, however, the success of Goldberg's norm does hang on which acts count as assertions. He proposes that the the default position required for proper assertion is knowledge, but that it can shift up or down,

> depend[ing] in part on what would be reasonable for all parties to believe is mutually believed among them (regarding such things

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[27]Compare also Lackey's (2007) Reasonable-to-Believe Norm of assertion.

as the participants' interests and informational needs, and the prospects for high-quality information in the domain in question). (Goldberg 2015, 273–274)

It is not then hard to imagine cases similar to the ones that make trouble for KNA. In such cases, the hedged assertion will publicize that the speaker does not occupy the position that is required for proper assertion, and thus the declarative should be improper. And yet, to reiterate an earlier point, a speaker commits no wrong by being related to a proposition in the way she says she is.

Though limited in the theories considered, the preceding discussion highlights why a theory of assertion must be accompanied by a principled account of what divides assertions from non-assertions. This methodological question van Elswyk 2018 calls the DEMARCATION QUESTION. Without an answer, we have not settled which acts need to be explained by a theory of assertion in the first place. For theories like SRNA, answering the demarcation question does not appear to impact its explanatory success. Hedged and unhedged assertions can be accounted for as assertions. But for theories like KNA or Goldberg's, explanatory success is affected. If hedged assertions should be counted as assertions, they will be mishandled because they involve a speaker properly occupying an epistemic position different from what the norm requires.

5   Conclusion

After clarifying what hedging involves, we have discussed what a hedge weakens an assertion from (§2), how a hedge weakens commitment (§3), and where to place hedged assertions within a broader taxonomy of speech acts (§4). Along the way, a thicket of issues was encountered that a theory of assertion needs to navigate.

One way through is to adopt KNA and a traditional taxonomy of constative acts where they are distinguished according to what epistemic position they are associated with. This approach explains why knowledge is associated with unhedged assertion and why hedging requires the speaker to specify that she occupies a position weaker than knowledge. That hedged assertions are

not assertions at all but instances of other constative acts ensures that KNA cannot misexplain them because it does not need to explain them. But this way through the thicket might incur costs by proliferating a family of constatives as dense as the number of epistemic positions that a speaker can occupy. And what of qualified assertions, such as parentheticals, which nevertheless yield data concerning at-issue content which is better explained by counting them as assertions?

There may be other ways through this thicket as well. We have given reasons think that commitment-based theories cannot find their way, but broadly representational theories can. Which way is, on balance, most preferable will depend on what a theory of assertion is in the business of explaining. Yet the very issue of what a theory of assertion should explain depends in part on our prior grasp of which speech intuitively counts as assertions. Most who have worked on such matters have prioritized one portion of the linguistic data over others; and very few have taken up the difficult work of giving attention to the linguistic phenomena of hedging. Though we have not aimed to settle such matters here, we hope to have at least trimmed the thicket enough to see the path forward.

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