

## Do Not Diagonalize

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[Forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Language* —  
Please cite published version.]

### Abstract

Speakers assert in order to communicate information. It is natural, therefore, to hold that the content of an assertion is whatever information it communicates to its audience. In cases involving uncertainty about the semantic values of context-sensitive lexical items, moreover, it is natural to hold that the information an assertion communicates to its audience is whatever information audience members are in a position to recover from it by assuming that the proposition it semantically determines is true. This sort of picture corresponds to an influential and widely endorsed theory of assertoric content: *diagonalism*. I begin by arguing that, despite its intuitive appeal, diagonalism should be rejected because it conflicts with our intuitive judgments about the circumstances in which the contents of speakers' assertions would be true or false. I then show that the failure of diagonalism requires us to either abandon a familiar way of thinking about information and rational assertion or hold that the content of an assertion is not always the information it communicates. I suggest that we choose the latter horn of this dilemma — assertoric content is better characterized in terms of the commitments speakers undertake than in terms of the information they communicate.

### 1 Introduction

A woman is speaking in the next room. Smith turns to Jones and says, “That is either Zsa Zsa Gabor or Elizabeth Anscombe.” The case is a familiar one in the literature on assertion, and so is the theoretical picture it has been taken to motivate.<sup>1</sup> For it seems that what Smith asserts is neither necessarily true nor necessarily false.<sup>2</sup> And yet, if the woman in the next room is Gabor or Anscombe, there is pressure to think that Smith asserts the necessarily true proposition that that woman is either herself or someone else; correspondingly, if the woman in the next room is neither Gabor nor

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<sup>1</sup>For the case (which appears here slightly modified), see Stalnaker (1978, 91). For the theoretical picture, see e.g. Stalnaker (1978, 2009, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>For the purposes of my argument, I assume in what follows that the objects of the speech act of assertion are propositions, referring to the propositional object of an assertion as its *assertoric content*. What is a proposition? I wish to take no stand on this issue. For simplicity of exposition, in what follows I treat propositions as sets of metaphysically possible worlds. Nevertheless, everything I claim is compatible with views of propositions which individuate them more finely. For even on such views, a given proposition will induce a partition on the set of possible worlds: there will be those in which the proposition is true, and those in which it is not. More generally, whatever theory of propositions one is inclined to endorse, one will need to give some account of their informational properties — that is, the way in which they exclude some possibilities but not others. My choice to theorize about propositions as sets of metaphysically possible worlds is a choice to focus on their informational properties. I take this choice to be consistent with a wide range of views about the nature of propositions.

Anscombe, there is pressure to think that Smith asserts the necessarily false proposition that that woman is not herself. The familiar solution is to hold that Smith asserts neither the necessarily true proposition nor the necessarily false proposition, but rather a third contingent proposition, which is true if the woman in the next room is Gabor or Anscombe and false otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

This third proposition has not been chosen arbitrarily. It has a special status: it is the proposition which characterizes the information Jones, ignorant though she is concerning the identity of the woman in the next room, can learn from Smith's utterance by assuming that the proposition it semantically determines is true.<sup>4</sup> For Jones is in a position to reason as follows: either the woman in the next room is Zsa Zsa Gabor or Elizabeth Anscombe, or the woman in the next room is neither Zsa Zsa Gabor nor Elizabeth Anscombe. If the woman in the next room is Zsa Zsa Gabor or Elizabeth Anscombe, then Smith's utterance semantically determines a necessary truth. If, on the other hand, the woman in the next room is neither Zsa Zsa Gabor nor Elizabeth Anscombe, then Smith's utterance semantically determines a necessary falsehood. So, assuming that the proposition Smith's utterance semantically determines is true, the woman in the next room must be either Zsa Zsa Gabor or Elizabeth Anscombe. Holding in this way that Smith asserts the proposition which characterizes the information Jones is in a position to recover from her utterance fits naturally with the intuitive idea that our practice of asserting is intimately connected with our practice of communicating information.

The familiar solution, according to which Smith asserts this third proposition, has an obvious and theoretically appealing generalization: that speakers systematically assert propositions which characterize the information their interlocutors can learn from their utterances by assuming that the propositions they semantically determine are true.<sup>5</sup> According to such a view of assertion, the process of recovering information from an utterance despite ignorance about contextual factors like the individuals referred to by demonstratives is an integral part of the explanation for successful communicative exchanges between fully rational interlocutors. For reasons which will become clear in the next section, let us call this generalization *the diagonal theory of assertoric content*, or, for the sake of brevity, **(Diagonalism)**.

(Diagonalism) is a claim about which propositions speakers assert, not a claim about the semantics of any natural language. The relationship between semantic theories and theories of assertoric content (which belong to the domain of speech act theory) is open to debate, and two theorists who agree about the grammar of English might nonetheless disagree about the truth of (Diagonalism). Moreover, the connection which (Diagonalism) enforces between the assertoric content of an utterance and the information it communicates to members of its audience is by no means inevitable. It could

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<sup>3</sup>Stalnaker's case, though convenient as a starting point for our discussion because of its familiarity, has the disadvantage that it loses much of its intuitive force if we adopt a non-Millian semantics for proper names. It is worth noting, then, that the same idea can just as easily be motivated using examples featuring other expressions.

<sup>4</sup>For a more precise characterization of the notion of the proposition semantically determined by an utterance, see section 2 below.

<sup>5</sup>Importantly, this sort of view makes a distinction between the status of genuine interlocutors and the status of others, like eavesdroppers, who might happen to recover information from an utterance. The propositional content of an assertion is held to be intimately connected only with the information *interlocutors* can recover from an utterance, not with the information others can recover from it.

instead be that the information an utterance communicates is systematically related to, though not identical with, its assertoric content. Indeed, I will ultimately argue that such a picture is preferable to (Diagonalism). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that (Diagonalism) is an appealing theory of assertoric content. On the one hand, in identifying the content of an assertion with the information audience members are in a position to recover from it, (Diagonalism) provides the most direct possible explanation of the platitude that assertion is a means of communicating information. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that speakers do often reason in the way we have imagined Jones reasoning about Smith's utterance.

In a well-known example of the ubiquity of this phenomenon, John Perry (1986) asks us to imagine that he receives a postcard in the mail with no signature and no indication of the location from which it was posted. On the postcard are the words "I am having a good time." In this situation, Perry observes, he is not in a position to recover any proposition of the form '*P* is having a good time at *t*,' though it is plausible that the proposition semantically determined by the sentence on the card, as inscribed by its author, is of this form. He can, however, recover the information that someone inscribed "I am having a good time" on the postcard at some time *t* prior to its arrival in his mailbox, and that (if the author of the inscription was telling the truth), he or she was having a good time at *t*. Even those who ultimately reject (Diagonalism), then, must acknowledge the intuitive appeal of holding, on the basis of the familiarity of this sort of reasoning, that it should play a central role in our theory of assertion.

Notwithstanding its theoretical appeal, recent work on assertion has reached no clear consensus concerning (Diagonalism). Lewis (1980) is sensitive to the distinction between (Diagonalism) and competing theories of assertoric content, but does not take a stand concerning whether (Diagonalism) is correct. Rabern (2012) assumes that (Diagonalism) is false. Stojnić (2017) extends an argument against (Diagonalism) due to Soames (2002). Kirk-Giannini (2020) discusses and ultimately rejects (Diagonalism) on grounds independent of those considered in what follows. Stalnaker (1978, 2014), meanwhile, argues in favor of (Diagonalism). His arguments are criticized by Hawthorne and Magidor (2009, 2010) and defended by Almotahari and Glick (2010).

My first goal in what follows is to show that (Diagonalism) systematically conflicts with our intuitive judgments about the conditions under which the contents of speakers' assertions would be true or false. I believe this result eliminates (Diagonalism) as a tenable theory of assertoric content. Unlike other arguments against (Diagonalism) in the literature, my argument appeals neither to assumptions about the semantics of propositional attitude ascriptions nor to direct intuitions about which propositions are the contents of speakers' assertions or propositional attitudes. My argument also differs from others in that it targets sophisticated versions of (Diagonalism) as well as more naive proposals.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>For a brief catalog of extant arguments, see Stojnić (2017, 175), who attributes many of them to Soames (2002). The naive diagonalist proposal I have in mind is the proposal that speakers always assert the *superdiagonal* propositions of their utterances. Recent defenses of diagonalism (e.g. Stalnaker (2014, 218)) adopt a more nuanced position which substantially mitigates the force of existing arguments. What is distinctive about the argument I offer below is that it focuses on intuitive judgments about the conditions under which the content of an assertion is true *at worlds in the context set of the conversation in which it is produced*. For this reason, it targets even sophisticated versions of (Diagonalism). For further elaboration and definitions of the theoretical terms *superdiagonal* and *context set*, see sections 2 and 3 below.

But there is more to be said: (Diagonalism) emerges naturally from an intuitive picture of assertion according to which assertoric content plays a certain privileged role in the theory of communication, and its failure as a theory of assertoric content gives us reason to reassess the relationship between assertion and communication. My second and third goals in what follows, then, are to show how (Diagonalism) emerges from this intuitive picture and to suggest an alternative way of thinking about assertion which does not tempt us to embrace (Diagonalism). The alternative account of assertion I favor takes as its point of departure the platitude that speakers undertake commitments when they assert. On this picture of assertion, the content of an assertoric utterance is the proposition to which a speaker undertakes a distinctive sort of commitment in producing that utterance. Because it relaxes the connection between assertoric content and the theory of communication, my committal account of assertion is not subject to the problems which plague its competitor. In fact, given an independently plausible method for picking out the propositions to which speakers undertake commitments in asserting, it can be shown to make correct predictions about the cases which prove so problematic for (Diagonalism).

Though I stand behind my argument against (Diagonalism), it is worth emphasizing that the interest of the alternative account of assertion I develop in what follows is not wholly dependent on the failure of (Diagonalism). It is widely assumed in the literature on assertion that there is a single proposition — the content of an assertion — which is both that which a speaker communicates to her audience and that to which she undertakes a commitment in asserting. In denying this claim, the account of assertion I propose opens relatively unexplored theoretical terrain. Indeed, I believe the existence of a coherent theoretical picture of assertion which divorces its communicative and committal aspects shifts the burden of proof onto those who hold that assertoric content plays both roles. Though I have presented the dialectic of the paper as though it is the failure of (Diagonalism) which pushes us to adopt a novel account of assertion, then, the story could just as easily be told in reverse: the plausibility of my favored account is a challenge to the friend of (Diagonalism) to explain why her view is preferable.

After characterizing (Diagonalism) more precisely in section 2, I present my argument against it in section 3 and respond to potential objections in section 4. Section 5 shows how (Diagonalism) follows from a number of plausible premises about the relationship between assertion and communication. Sections 6 and 7 motivate and develop my committal account of assertion. Section 8 concludes.

## 2 (Horizontalism) and (Diagonalism)

The semantics of English is Kaplanian in the sense that the context in which a sentence is uttered determines the referents of any demonstratives, deictic pronouns, and similar expressions it contains, thereby partially determining what semantic content it expresses. Since the context sensitivity of subsentential expressions will concern us only in so far as it gives rise to the context sensitivity of full sentences, nothing will be lost if we think of this Kaplanian picture sententially, forgetting for the moment how the contents of sentences systematically depend on the contents of their constituents: a sentence, uttered in a context, expresses a proposition; which proposition a sentence expresses is often determined by the context in which it is uttered. Let us call a way of

pairing sentences in contexts with propositions a *grammar*.<sup>7</sup>

If we have a grammar representing the English language, we can use it to associate any given utterance of a sentence at a world with the proposition obtained by using the context in which that utterance is produced at that world to fill in the semantic values of its context-sensitive vocabulary “in the familiar way.” Let us call this proposition — intuitively, the proposition semantically determined by the utterance at that world — the *horizontal proposition* of the utterance at the world.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Smith’s utterance concerning Gabor and Anscombe, the pressure to think that if Gabor is in the room then the content of Smith’s assertion is necessarily true arises from the fact that if Gabor is in the room then the horizontal proposition of Smith’s utterance is necessarily true (it is the proposition that Gabor is either Gabor or Anscombe). Corresponding to the notion of the horizontal proposition of an assertoric utterance at a world is a theory of assertoric content: the theory which holds that the content of an assertoric utterance at a world is always the horizontal proposition of that utterance at that world. Let us call this theory *the horizontal theory of assertoric content*, or, for the sake of brevity, **(Horizontalism)**.

(Horizontalism) is one systematic way of pairing assertions with propositional contents. As we have seen, however, it is not the only way: there is also (Diagonalism), which promises to dissolve the puzzle of the Gabor/Anscombe case by identifying what is asserted with the information Jones is in a position to recover from Smith’s utterance by assuming that it expresses a truth. I have suggested that this promise is empty: (Diagonalism) is false. Before I can present an argument for this conclusion, however, it is necessary to formulate (Diagonalism) more precisely. In order to do this, we require the formal tools to model how the horizontal proposition of an utterance depends on the world in which it is produced.

Consider an assertoric utterance (call it  $u$ ) of a simple subject–predicate sentence containing a deictic pronoun — “She speaks Farsi,” for example. We can generate a matrix from  $u$  by creating one row and one column corresponding to each possible world which contains  $u$  and, for each ordered pair  $\langle w, w' \rangle$  of such worlds, writing ‘T’ in the location where row  $w$  meets column  $w'$  if the assertoric content of  $u$  as uttered in  $w$  is true at  $w'$  and ‘F’ otherwise.<sup>9</sup> Call such a matrix a *propositional concept*.

A propositional concept represents the way in which the the world in which an utterance takes place affects the proposition with which it is paired by the theory of assertion. The entries along the *row* corresponding to a given world characterize the proposition the utterance expresses at that world. The entries down the *column* corresponding to a given world record whether the propositions the utterance expresses at different worlds are true at that world.

<sup>7</sup>Formally, I take a grammar to be a function from ordered sentence/context/world triples to truth-values.

<sup>8</sup>Formally, I take the horizontal proposition of assertoric utterance  $u$  of sentence  $s$  (of some language with grammar  $G$ ) in world  $w$  to be the set of worlds  $w'$  such that  $G(\langle s, c_w, w' \rangle) = 1$ , where  $c_w$  is the context in which  $u$  is produced at  $w$ .

<sup>9</sup>Following Stalnaker (2004), I exclude from consideration possible worlds which do not contain the utterance. Since the proposition that the utterance occurs is always part of the common ground of the conversation, such worlds are never relevant to the dynamics of the context set. (See below for definitions of *common ground* and *context set*.)

$\mathfrak{A}$	$a$	$b$	$c$	$d$
$a$	T	F	T	F
$b$	T	F	T	F
$c$	F	T	F	T
$d$	F	T	F	T

( $a$ : Speaker demonstrates Smith; Smith speaks Farsi;  $b$ : Speaker demonstrates Smith; Jones speaks Farsi;  $c$ : Speaker demonstrates Jones; Smith speaks Farsi;  $d$ : Speaker demonstrates Jones; Jones speaks Farsi.)

For example,  $\mathfrak{A}$  is the propositional concept predicted by (Horizontalism) to correspond to our assertoric utterance of “She speaks Farsi.” For the sake of simplicity of exposition, we restrict our attention in  $\mathfrak{A}$  to a set of four worlds: we assume that the speaker is demonstrating either Smith or Jones, and that exactly one of the two speaks Farsi (but we make no assumption about which). In worlds  $a$  and  $b$ , the speaker is demonstrating Smith; in worlds  $c$  and  $d$ , she is demonstrating Jones. In worlds  $a$  and  $c$ , Smith but not Jones speaks Farsi; in worlds  $b$  and  $d$ , Jones but not Smith speaks Farsi.

As  $\mathfrak{A}$  shows, the horizontal proposition of “She speaks Farsi” in  $a$  is the proposition that Smith speaks Farsi, whereas in  $c$  it is the proposition that Jones speaks Farsi. This corresponds to the fact that in  $a$  the utterance is produced while the speaker is demonstrating Smith, whereas in  $c$  it is produced while the speaker is demonstrating Jones.

With the idea of a propositional concept in hand, we can now give (Diagonalism) a precise formulation. The information interlocutors are able to recover from an utterance by assuming that the proposition it semantically determines is true can be read off of the propositional concept assigned to it by (Horizontalism) in a straightforward way: it is the proposition uniquely characterized by the entries falling along the propositional concept’s diagonal. Let us call this proposition the *superdiagonal proposition* of the utterance in question.<sup>10</sup> One option for defining (Diagonalism), then, would be to identify it with the thesis that speakers always assert the superdiagonal propositions of their utterances. There are reasons for thinking that this proposal is too restrictive, however, and I will pursue a different approach in what follows.<sup>11</sup>

A more permissive way of understanding (Diagonalism) appeals to the *common ground* of a conversation at a world — that is, the set of propositions which interlocutors take for granted for the purposes of that conversation at that world.<sup>12</sup> The common ground of a

<sup>10</sup>Formally, the superdiagonal proposition of an assertoric utterance  $u$  at world  $w$  is the proposition which is true at a world  $w'$  just in case the horizontal proposition of  $u$  in  $w'$  is true at  $w'$ .

<sup>11</sup>The proposal that the assertoric content of an utterance is always its superdiagonal proposition is subject to a number of difficulties. Stojnić (2017, 175), for example, argues that “...if Jason says ‘I am here now’ and I follow up with ‘That’s necessarily true’, or ‘What Jason said is necessarily true’, intuitively what I said is false.” Assuming that ‘that’ and ‘what Jason said’ in the relevant sentences refer to what Jason asserts, Stojnić argues that the intuitive falsity of her examples is difficult to reconcile with the claim that the assertoric content Jason’s utterance is its superdiagonal proposition, since the superdiagonal proposition of an utterance of ‘I am here now’ is true at every world where the utterance exists.

<sup>12</sup>It is standard to define a more stringent notion of the common ground which is both iterated and collectivized (see, for example, Stalnaker (2014, 4; 2014, 25)). Adopting such a stringent conception would not substantively affect my arguments in what follows, so I have opted for the simpler definition above.

conversation at a world determines a set of worlds — those which are compatible with every proposition in the common ground at that world, or, equivalently, those which are treated as live possibilities for the purposes of that conversation at that world. Let us call this set the *context set* of the conversation at that world. Since interlocutors have already ruled out for the purposes of the conversation all worlds not in the context set, we will not go wrong if we restrict our attention to the context set in characterizing the informal notion of the information they can recover from an utterance by assuming that it expresses a truth.

With this restriction in mind, let us refer to any proposition which agrees in truth-value with the superdiagonal proposition of an utterance over the context set of the conversation in which that utterance occurs as a *diagonal proposition* of that utterance. Each utterance has many diagonal propositions at a given world; these are equivalent over the context set at that world but diverge elsewhere. We can then understand (Diagonalism) as the claim that a speaker always asserts some diagonal proposition of her utterance.<sup>13</sup>  $\mathfrak{B}$  below is the propositional concept predicted by (Diagonalism) to correspond to the assertoric utterance of “She speaks Farsi” introduced above, assuming that the context set consists of just worlds  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ , and  $d$ . Note that the entries along the diagonal of  $\mathfrak{A}$  (T F F T) appear in each horizontal row of  $\mathfrak{B}$ .<sup>14</sup>

$\mathfrak{A}$	$a$	$b$	$c$	$d$
$a$	<b>T</b>	F	T	F
$b$	T	<b>F</b>	T	F
$c$	F	T	<b>F</b>	T
$d$	F	T	F	<b>T</b>

$\mathfrak{B}$	$a$	$b$	$c$	$d$
$a$	T	F	F	<b>T</b>
$b$	T	F	F	<b>T</b>
$c$	T	F	F	<b>T</b>
$d$	T	F	F	<b>T</b>

( $a$ : Speaker demonstrates Smith; Smith speaks Farsi;  $b$ : Speaker demonstrates Smith; Jones speaks Farsi;  $c$ : Speaker demonstrates Jones; Smith speaks Farsi;  $d$ : Speaker demonstrates Jones; Jones speaks Farsi.)

(Diagonalism) is a substantive rather than a definitional thesis about assertion. A theory of assertion is a development of our pre-theoretical beliefs about the social practice of

<sup>13</sup>Formally, I take (Diagonalism) to be the thesis that, for any assertoric utterance  $u$  performed in conversation  $c$  at world  $w$ , if  $cs$  is the context set of  $c$  at  $w$  and  $sd$  is the superdiagonal proposition of  $u$ , then the assertoric content of  $u$  at  $w$  is some  $p$  such that  $p \cap cs = sd \cap cs$ . Stalnaker (2014, 218) adopts a similar proposal; my arguments against (Diagonalism) target his position, as well.

<sup>14</sup>Some readers may worry that my appeal to notions like *propositional concept* and *context set* in my exposition of (Diagonalism) smuggles in certain assumptions about how to model the contents of assertoric utterances and propositional attitudes, and that the smuggling in of these assumptions undermines the interest of (Diagonalism) as a theory of assertoric content. In response to this sort of worry, let me comment briefly on what the framework in which I have chosen to formulate my arguments presupposes. First, propositional concepts are simply tools for visualizing the two ways in which possible worlds are commonly held to be relevant to the truth-values of utterances: on the one hand, in so far as the world at which an utterance is produced determines which proposition it expresses by resolving the semantic values of context-sensitive vocabulary; on the other hand, in so far as propositions differ in truth-value between possible worlds. Second, the idea that every conversation is associated with a set of possible worlds compatible with every presupposed proposition is simply one way of making formally tractable the platitude that there are some scenarios which are not treated as live possibilities during normal conversational exchanges (the possibility that one is radically mistaken about the meanings of words in one’s own language, for example). The arguments in what follows could likely be recast in a framework which made this platitude formally tractable in a different way.

making claims. As such, it is accountable to those pre-theoretical beliefs. It may turn out that there are compelling theoretical reasons to regard our intuitive judgments about assertion as only approximating the truth — but no theory of a social practice can float wholly free of untutored intuition. We must evaluate (Diagonalism) in the light of our everyday judgments about who has asserted what, and about whether what has been asserted is or would be true, and we must reject it if it cannot accommodate those judgments.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 The Case Against (Diagonalism)

In a variety of circumstances, (Diagonalism) conflicts with the intuitive connection between the theory of assertoric content and our judgments about the conditions under which the contents of speakers' assertions would be true or false. I will introduce this conflict by appealing to a modified version of a case from King (2018) involving 'ready,' a relational expression with an implicit argument, but the same point can be made without reference to such expressions.

Relational expressions with implicit arguments belong to a broader class of expressions which King calls *supplementives*: "contextually sensitive expressions whose context independent meanings do not by themselves suffice to secure semantic values for those expressions in contexts" (2018, 631). What exactly does a context supply which, in conjunction with the context-independent meaning of a supplementive, suffices to determine its semantic value in context? Borrowing terminology from King (2014), let us refer to this question as the question of the *metasemantics* of supplementives. In what follows, I will write as if I take for granted a *subjective intentionalist* metasemantics, according to which the semantic values of supplementives — and thus, to return to the sententialist perspective of the previous section, the propositions semantically associated with sentences containing them — are determined by what the speakers who utter them have in mind (i.e. intend to semantically contribute) at the time of utterance.<sup>16</sup> My argument against (Diagonalism), however, does not presuppose any particular metasemantics — all that it requires is that the features of the context which do the work of determining the semantic values of supplementives, whatever these may be, can be known to the speaker but not her audience.<sup>17</sup>

What is interesting for our purposes, then, is what happens when we introduce a known asymmetry in the information about the context available to the speaker and her audience, so that all parties know that the speaker possesses information which

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<sup>15</sup>Note that, though my argument below relies on intuitive judgments about natural language sentences, I am aware that not just any old intuitive judgments will do for serious theory construction. In particular, I do not appeal to judgments about sentences of the form *S said that  $\phi$* , which are widely thought to be too context-sensitive to be a useful diagnostic. For further discussion of these issues, see sections 4.1 and 4.2.

<sup>16</sup>The intentions I have in mind should be distinguished from *communicative* intentions. A speaker can have a particular object in mind when uttering "That is my favorite object" without intending to bring it about that members of her audience recognize which object she has in mind — thus, she can have a recognizably semantic intention without having a corresponding communicative intention. See section 4.4 for related discussion.

<sup>17</sup>Those favoring alternative accounts of the metasemantics of supplementives are invited to replace my talk of *what speakers have in mind at the time of utterance* in what follows with material describing whatever factor they think is responsible for fixing the relevant semantic values.

uniquely determines the proposition semantically associated with her utterance, though her audience lacks this information. Consider the following case (modified from one in King (2018)):

**[READY]:** Susie and Matt are planning to go to lunch with baby Molly. The day is gloomy, but there is a chance that the weather will improve during their meal and they will have an opportunity to take a walk in the park before driving home. They go through their various preparations. Eyeing baby Molly fully dressed in her car seat, Susie proudly says, “Molly is ready.” Matt knows that Susie is either thinking only about lunch (perhaps because she thinks it improbable that the weather will improve) or about both lunch and the walk, though he does not know which. Matt’s evidential situation is common ground between the two.

I take it that [READY] is a case of successful assertion, in the sense that there is some propositional content Susie asserts in uttering “Molly is ready.” The claim that [READY] is a case of successful assertion is thus weaker than the claim that Susie’s utterance is wholly felicitous, on which I do not wish to take a stand. In support of the suggestion that [READY] is a case of successful assertion, consider that the practical import of Matt’s uncertainty about what Susie has in mind is quite minimal: at most it means that he cannot learn from her utterance whether Molly is ready for the walk. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that [READY] is a low-stakes communicative situation in the sense that Matt is significantly more concerned about the answer to the question of whether Molly is ready for lunch than about the answer to the question of whether she is ready for the walk, and that for this reason there is a tacit understanding between him and Susie to the effect that expending the effort required to make what she has in mind fully explicit is not required.

Two sorts of readers may have reservations about following me in declaring [READY] a case of successful assertion: those who believe that a speaker cannot succeed in securing a semantic value for a suppletive if the value she secures is not suitably apparent to her audience, and those who believe that a speaker cannot succeed in asserting a proposition unless members of her audience are in a position to identify the proposition she has asserted. I address these worries in sections 4.3 and 4.4 below.

Assuming for the time being that [READY] is a case of successful assertion, then, we have a problem for (Diagonalism). Setting aside worlds at which Molly is (i) ready for neither lunch nor the walk or (ii) ready for the walk and not ready for lunch — that is, worlds at which both of the possible horizontal propositions of Susie’s utterance are false — we can represent the remaining portion of the context set of Susie and Matt’s conversation immediately after Susie’s assertion using four worlds: one (*a*) in which Susie has only lunch in mind at the time of her assertion and Molly is ready only for lunch, one (*b*) in which Susie has only lunch in mind at the time of her assertion and Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk, one (*c*) in which Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind at the time of her assertion and Molly is ready only for lunch, and one (*d*) in which Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind at the time of her assertion and Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk. According to (Horizontalism), the propositional content of Susie’s assertion, restricted to this portion of the context set of [READY], is thus  $\mathfrak{C}$ :

$\mathfrak{C}$	$a$	$b$	$c$	$d$
$a$	T	T	T	T
$b$	T	T	T	T
$c$	F	T	F	T
$d$	F	T	F	T

( $a$ : Susie has only lunch in mind; Molly is ready only for lunch;  $b$ : Susie has only lunch in mind; Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk;  $c$ : Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind; Molly is ready only for lunch;  $d$ : Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind; Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk.)

According to (Diagonalism), on the other hand, the content of Susie's utterance in [READY] is uniform across the context set and true at  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $d$  (but not  $c$ ), as shown in  $\mathfrak{D}$ :

$\mathfrak{D}$	$a$	$b$	$c$	$d$
$a$	T	T	F	T
$b$	T	T	F	T
$c$	T	T	F	T
$d$	T	T	F	T

( $a$ : Susie has only lunch in mind; Molly is ready only for lunch;  $b$ : Susie has only lunch in mind; Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk;  $c$ : Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind; Molly is ready only for lunch;  $d$ : Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind; Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk.)

Consider now the following claim about [READY]:

(1) Regardless of what Susie has in mind at the time of her assertion, what she asserts in [READY] is consistent with Molly not being ready for the walk.

(1) is intuitively false: if Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind at the time of her assertion, then what she asserts is false if Molly is not ready for the walk. But any plausible account of the truth-conditions of (1) will predict that it is true if there is a world  $w$  in the context set of Susie and Matt's conversation such that (i)  $w$  is in the content of Susie's assertion regardless of what she has in mind at the time of her assertion and (ii) Molly is not ready for the walk at  $w$ . According to (Diagonalism), regardless of what Susie has in mind at the time of her assertion, she expresses a proposition which is true at world  $a$ , where Molly is not ready for the walk. So (Diagonalism) incorrectly predicts that (1) is true.

Again, suppose that Susie and Molly are in fact in world  $d$ , so that Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind at the time of her assertion and Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk (it follows that Susie's assertion is true in  $d$ ). Let us refer to this further specified version of [READY] as [READY\*]. Consider:

(2) What Susie asserts in [READY\*] could have been true even if Molly had not been ready for the walk.

(2) is intuitively false: in [READY\*], Susie has the walk in mind at the time of her assertion, so what she asserts is false at every world where Susie is not ready for the walk. But if the content of Susie's assertion is its diagonal proposition, then (2) should be true. For the diagonal proposition of Susie's assertion is true at  $a$ , where Molly is not ready for the walk. Since the diagonal proposition of Susie's assertion is true at  $a$ , it follows that it *could* have been true if Molly had not been ready for the walk (since  $a$  is a world where Molly is not ready for the walk) — thus sentence (2) should be true.

So (Diagonalism) yields incorrect predictions about the truth-values of (1) and (2). If, as I have suggested, the theory of assertion must be held accountable to our judgments about whether what has been asserted is or would be true, it follows that (Diagonalism) must be rejected.

This argument against (Diagonalism) is, I confess, something of a homely one. To the august theoretical edifice of (Diagonalism) it opposes no more than our judgments concerning simple natural language sentences about assertion. Some readers will think it a mistake to take our judgments about such sentences to be at all relevant to the theory of assertion. I respond to them in section 4.1. Others will have no in-principle objection to homely arguments of this kind, but will point out that they have gotten a bad reputation in recent years because some have been incautious in drawing conclusions from intuitions about sentences containing the word 'said.' I respond to them in section 4.2. Even if these responses do not ultimately convince, however, my argument against (Diagonalism) and the theoretical position I develop in sections 5 through 8 may still profitably be regarded as an attempt to develop a coherent theory of assertion for those simpleminded theoreticians among us who prefer to vindicate our intuitive judgments about (1) and (2). If it transpires that the resulting theory is no less elegant or appealing than (Diagonalism) — and I think it does — this is perhaps an indication that it is not so bad to be simpleminded after all.

Note that the problem for (Diagonalism) cannot be traced to idiosyncratic features of any particular type of expression. It is possible to construct structurally analogous cases involving other supplementive expressions as well as proper names. When it comes to other supplementive expressions, a general recipe for constructing such cases is to stipulate that the speaker has an intention which is specific enough to determine a unique semantic value for the supplementive, her audience knows this but is uncertain what this intention is, and this informational asymmetry is part of the common ground. I present a case involving a proper name below, leaving it to the reader to construct analogues of (1) and (2) and verify that the intuitive judgments about their truth-values are inconsistent with (Diagonalism).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, a similar point might be made about the "She speaks Farsi" case from section 2, if we imagine that the speaker is engaged in a conversation in which the pre-update context set consists of worlds  $a, b, c$ , and  $d$  (that is, a conversation in which it is not clear to members of the speaker's audience whether she had Smith or Jones in mind when uttering the pronoun). Some readers, however, intuit that successful uses of deictic pronouns must be accompanied by demonstrations clear enough that they would not permit the relevant kind of uncertainty about whether the speaker has Smith or Jones in mind, so [READY] is a less controversial example.

**[JUSTIN]:** Eli is trying to convince Mark that she has too much to do to go to trivia night at the local bar. In the middle of a long list of incomplete to-do items, she says, “I have to draft an email to Justin.” As it happens, there are exactly two people named ‘Justin’ in their social circle: J. Trudeau and J. Theroux. Mark knows that Eli has exactly one Justin in mind but does not know which, and his evidential situation is common ground between the two.

## 4 Objections and Replies

### 4.1 The Dialectical Skeptic

I have used intuitive judgments about sentences describing the truth-values of asserted contents in various circumstances in my argument against (Diagonalism). A certain kind of critic may seek to challenge this choice. According to such a critic, the theory of assertion is the theory of a speech act which *essentially* and *by stipulation* has a certain characteristic kind of effect on the context set — one correctly described by (Diagonalism). From this perspective, it may seem a mistake to think that our intuitive judgments are at all relevant to the theory of assertion and an impossibility that (Diagonalism) should turn out to be false.

Let us refer to the stipulatively defined speech act about which this sort of critic wishes to theorize as *assertion in the broad sense*. Though I do not think that many who have written about assertion have had assertion in the broad sense in mind, I do not wish to deny that the concept has theoretical interest; perhaps, for example, we can use it to give a unified treatment of the way in which possibilities are ruled out in genuine inquiry, hypothetical reasoning, and plan formation. But the possibility of theorizing about assertion in the broad sense by no means precludes theorizing about *assertion*, our social practice of making claims. If my argument so far is correct, we must conclude that (Diagonalism) is false, and therefore, if what is asserted in the broad sense must always be some diagonal proposition of an utterance, that genuine assertion is not a species of assertion in the broad sense. Though it is rarely worth engaging in terminological disputes, this result suggests that some confusion might be avoided if the term *assertion* was no longer used to pick out assertion in the broad sense.

It is sometimes suggested that Stalnaker, the most persistent advocate of (Diagonalism), uses the word ‘assertion’ to pick out assertion in the broad sense, so that arguments like the one I have offered above do not threaten his position. While it is true that Stalnaker does sometimes use the word in this fashion, he is aware that doing so is somewhat misleading. For example, he writes, “‘Assertion’ is probably too narrow a term for [assertion in the broad sense], since it has a connotation of seriousness not shared by all declarative speech acts with this [effect on the context set]” (Stalnaker 2018, 386). Moreover, he often writes as if he does *not* have assertion in the broad sense in mind: “I should emphasize that I am not claiming that one can *define* assertion in terms of a context-change rule, since that rule will govern speech acts that fall under a more generic concept. A full characterization of what an assertion is would also involve norms and commitments.” (Stalnaker 2014, 89). A natural interpretation, then, is that

Stalnaker recognizes both assertion and assertion in the broad sense, and endorses (Diagonalism) as it pertains to both.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.2 The Methodological Skeptic

Our judgments about the truth-values of constructions of the form *S said that  $\phi$*  are notoriously context-sensitive. If constructions of the form *What S asserts in  $w$  could have been true even if  $\phi$*  (henceforth *truth-conditional pseudo-clefts*) are context sensitive in the same way, this fact might be thought to cast doubt on my conclusions.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, I believe there is little reason to doubt the theoretical utility of truth-conditional pseudo-clefts. For truth-conditional pseudo-clefts have two important features which mitigate the extent to which they are context-sensitive. First, they are pseudo-clefts. Since pseudo-cleft constructions carry an exclusiveness implicature, they do not share the tendency of ‘said-that’ constructions to pick up on proper parts of an utterance, as when a speaker utters a conjunction and I felicitously report her as having said the first conjunct.<sup>21</sup> Second, they are modal and truth conditional; this makes them more sensitive than ‘said-that’ constructions to differences between materially equivalent but distinct contents.

It may help to allay fears about truth-conditional pseudo-clefts to consider a few examples. Cappelen and Lepore (1997) provide a range of cases in which the truth of ‘said-that’ constructions does not appear to require that the indirectly reported proposition match the proposition that was originally expressed. I will consider two here, showing that no analogous problem arises for truth-conditional pseudo-clefts. I believe much the same can be said about other cases.

(3a) A: I bought a pair of Bruno Magli shoes and then I ate lunch.

(3b) B: A said that he bought a pair of Bruno Magli shoes.

# (3c) B: What A asserts in (3a) could have been true even if he had not eaten lunch.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas the ‘said-that’ construction in (3b) is able to embed a sentence expressing only a single conjunct of the conjunction A asserts in (3a), the infelicity of the truth-conditional pseudo-cleft in (3c) suggests that it is tracking the full conjunctive proposition rather than only its first conjunct.

(4a) François: Chartreuse is Maria’s favorite color.

<sup>19</sup>Readers who regard this textual evidence as inconclusive will, I hope, be satisfied upon learning that Stalnaker has confirmed in conversation with me that he recognizes both assertion and assertion in the broad sense.

<sup>20</sup>I assume that the evidential significance of sentence (1) stands or falls with the evidential significance of truth-conditional pseudo-clefts. This assumption is plausible, since (1) differs only slightly from the truth-conditional pseudo-cleft *Regardless of what Susie has in mind at the time of her assertion, what she asserts in [READY] could have been true even if Molly had not been ready for the walk.*

<sup>21</sup>For discussion of the exclusiveness of pseudo-clefts and a suggestion that they be analyzed in terms of conventional implicature, see Collins (1991).

<sup>22</sup>For example, if he had bought a pair of Bruno Magli shoes but not eaten lunch.

(4b) Speaker (demonstrating a chartreuse dress): François said that the color of that dress is Maria's favorite color.

# (4c) Speaker: What François asserts in (4a) could have been true even if chartreuse were not Maria's favorite color.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the 'said-that' construction in (4b) is able to embed a sentence expressing a proposition which is materially equivalent to but distinct from the proposition François asserts in (4a), the infelicity of the truth-conditional pseudo-cleft in (4c) suggests that it is tracking the original proposition rather than the one which is embedded under 'said-that' in (4b).

Lewis (1980) points out that 'said-that' constructions seem able to target either the sentence uttered or the content thereby expressed:

"Consider some further examples. (1) I say 'I am hungry.'. You simultaneously say to me 'You are hungry.'. What is said is the same. (2) I say 'I am hungry.'. You simultaneously say 'I am hungry.'. What is said is not the same...

In every case, the proper naive response is that in some sense what is said is the same for both sentence-context pairs, whereas in another — equally legitimate — sense, what is said is not the same." (97)

Truth-conditional pseudo-clefts do not exhibit any corresponding ambiguity. If I say 'I am hungry' and you say 'I am hungry,' there is no false reading of the sentence 'What I asserted could have been true even if what you asserted was false' and no true reading of the sentence 'What I asserted must have been true if what you asserted was true.'<sup>24</sup>

I conclude that there is no special reason to worry about treating truth-conditional pseudo-clefts as evidence in developing a theory of assertion. Indeed, even if truth-conditional pseudo-clefts were demonstrably context-sensitive, this fact would undermine my argument against (Diagonalism) only if it could be shown that I have mischaracterized their truth conditions *in sentences (1) and (2)* — the onus is on the critic of my argument to show that this is so.<sup>25</sup>

### 4.3 The Gricean

My argument depends on the claim that Susie's assertion in [READY] is successful — that is, that there is some content she asserts. A certain kind of critic, influenced by the Gricean idea that communication is cooperative and involves mutual recognition of intentions between speaker and listener, might seek to deny this claim. Perhaps

<sup>23</sup>For example, if the color of the nearby dress had been avocado and avocado had been Maria's favorite color.

<sup>24</sup>That is, setting aside cases in which we have some background beliefs which entail that I am hungry just in case you are.

<sup>25</sup>Thanks to Ofra Magidor for emphasizing this point.

[READY] is not a case of successful assertion, since successful assertion requires that a speaker's audience be in a position to identify which proposition was asserted.

While it is undoubtedly true that an assertion can in certain cases be infelicitous (and even, we may assume, unsuccessful) because its audience cannot identify what the speaker has in mind — as when, out of the blue, I utter “He should have seen it coming!” — many have thought that there are also *feliculously underspecified* uses of a broad range of supplementive expressions: cases in which such expressions are used felicitously (and thus successfully) even though context does not assign them a unique semantic value. King (2014) offers the following example of a case in which a supplementive appears to be felicitously underspecified (see also the examples in King (2018)):

**[LOST WINDS]:** Suppose I am surfing at Lost Winds beach. South of me are a bunch of other surfers. I keep seeing different surfers from the pack getting incredible waves. I comment to my buddy nodding to the south “Those guys are good.” It seems doubtful that my intentions pick out a unique group of guys and it seems doubtful that my buddy takes them to. I think the reason is that for the purposes of our conversation, all that I am trying to or need to convey is that there are numerous good surfers among the group to the south. So here my intentions, and the fact that they would be recognized by an idealized hearer, determine merely a range of groups, and hence potential semantic values, for the demonstrative. (King 2014, 112-113)

[LOST WINDS] is a case in which it is not clear how to identify a unique proposition corresponding to a speaker's utterance. Nevertheless, it seems to be a case of successful assertion. If this is so, it is difficult to see why a case like [READY], which differs from a case of felicitous underspecification only in that the speaker has an intention which fixes a unique semantic value for her supplementive, should be different.

Of course, the existence of felicitously underspecified uses of supplementives is contested; it is open to the Gricean to deny that [LOST WINDS] and related cases involve successful assertion (though this seems to me to be a serious price to pay for maintaining her position). Fortunately, there is more to be said in response to the Gricean. First, if the Gricean were correct in claiming that [READY] is not a case of successful assertion, we would be left with no explanation for the intuitive falsehood of (1) and (2) and the intuitive truth of:

(5) What Susie asserts in [READY\*] is true if Molly is ready for both lunch and the walk.

For if no content is asserted in [READY\*], our prediction must be that the existence presuppositions generated by the pseudo-clefts in (1), (2), and (5) are not satisfied, leading to a truth-value gap (and thus to infelicity).

Second, even if the Gricean were correct in claiming that Susie's assertion in [READY] is not successful, to construe this response as an objection to my position would be

dialectically inappropriate in the following sense. My argument is an argument against (Diagonalism). In offering it, I presuppose that ruling out (Diagonalism) requires an argument; that is, that neither (Diagonalism) nor its negation is obviously false. But if (Diagonalism) is true, Susie and Matt *can* easily coordinate on the assertoric content of Susie's utterance in [READY], at least as it bears on the context set: it is a diagonal proposition of Susie's utterance, true in worlds *a*, *b*, and *d*, and false in world *c*. This means that, insofar as the Gricean thinks it is intuitively clear that [READY] is not a case of successful assertion, she must also think that it is intuitively clear that (Diagonalism) is false. But then the Gricean can at best charge me with believing what is true — namely, that (Diagonalism) should be rejected — for the wrong reasons.

#### 4.4 The Coordinationist

Certain metasemantic accounts of supplementives, including King's (2014) coordination account, require that a speaker manifest her intention to fix the value of a context-sensitive parameter openly enough that a reasonable and minimally informed member of her audience would be able to follow along.<sup>26</sup> If we accept the coordination account or something similar, our verdict concerning [READY] must be that Susie fails to determine a unique semantic value for the supplementive expression in her utterance.

There is reason, however, to be discontent with this prediction, as it is difficult to see an appealing way to reconcile it with both the intuitive falsehood of (1) and (2) and the intuitive truth of (5). For if (1) and (2) are false but (5) is true, we cannot hold either that all utterances during the production of which a speaker fails to secure a semantic value for a supplementive expression are false, or that they are all true, or that they are neither true nor false.<sup>27</sup>

### 5 Assertion and Communication

The failure of (Diagonalism) is theoretically interesting in its own right. But, as we have seen, it is also interesting because (Diagonalism) is bound up with a common and natural way of thinking about assertion. Any pressure to reject (Diagonalism), then, is pressure to reject this common and natural way of thinking. In this section, I further describe the perspective on assertion in question and clarify its connection with (Diagonalism).

In asserting, speakers communicate information to their interlocutors. When all goes well, speaker and audience leave a communicative exchange with more in common doxastically than when it began. Asserting thus facilitates our efforts to coordinate on a shared conception of the world.

<sup>26</sup>See also Stokke's discussion of the view he calls *Weak Intentionalism* (2010, 388 ff.).

<sup>27</sup>Even if we complicate our picture of assertion so that, for example, Susie is assertion-related in [READY] to two propositions corresponding to the two contextually relevant implicit arguments for 'ready,' it is difficult to see how to generate intuitive predictions: either claims about what Susie asserts must be satisfied by one or more propositions to which she is assertion-related, in which case (2) is true, or they must be satisfied by all, in which case we mistakenly predict that, if Susie has only lunch in mind at the time of her assertion, then what she asserts is false if Molly is ready for lunch but not the walk.

The propositional contents of assertoric utterances distinguish between possibilities in just the way required for coordination on a shared conception of the world. It is therefore natural to hold that the propositional content of an assertion is the content which a speaker communicates to her audience. If we understand communication of a content in terms of excluding possibilities in which it is false, the theory which results from this identification of assertoric content and communicative upshot is as follows:

**(Communication):** When a speaker asserts a proposition, her interlocutors rule out for the purposes of the conversation all possibilities in which that proposition is false.<sup>28</sup>

Let us refer to a systematic way of pairing assertoric utterances with propositions as a *species of utterance content*, and let us say that a species of utterance content *plays the communicative role* just in case it pairs any given assertoric utterance with the proposition which characterizes its communicative upshot. Then (Communication) is the claim that assertoric content plays the communicative role.<sup>29</sup>

Note that (Communication) is not a claim about what is distinctive or individuating of the speech act of assertion. It requires only that, however assertion is individuated, asserting a content involves communicating it to one's audience. For this reason, (Communication) is consistent with all major accounts of the nature of assertion.

If communication can be understood in terms of the ruling out of possibilities, (Communication) offers the most direct possible explanation of the platitude that we assert in order to communicate information to one another: we are able to do so because what is asserted *is* what is communicated. But there is also a further motivation for adopting (Communication). For (Communication) seems able to play an important role in explaining the dynamics of conversation. If an assertion of some content  $p$  in the context of an ongoing conversation is not rejected, it generally becomes infelicitous for interlocutors to perform various speech acts: to assert a content inconsistent with  $p$ , to ask whether  $p$ , to hypothesize that  $\neg p$ , and so forth. It is attractive to explain this observation in terms of (Communication) and the principle that the set of speech acts which are felicitous continuations of a conversation at a time is constrained by which possibilities are live for the purposes of that conversation at that time. For our purposes, we can limit our attention to one such constraint:

**(Connection):** *Ceteris paribus*, it is acceptable to perform an assertoric utterance in the course of joint inquiry just in case the assertoric content of that utterance, if accepted, would eliminate some but not all of the worlds in the context set.

To endorse (Communication) while rejecting (Connection) would be to decide to use the context set to model how assertion allows interlocutors to coordinate on a shared

<sup>28</sup>Provided, of course, that the speaker's assertion is not ignored or rejected by her interlocutors. Note that (Communication) is consistent with the claim that interlocutors sometimes also rule out additional possibilities, as when they come to accept an implicated content in addition to an asserted one.

<sup>29</sup>See Stalnaker (1978, 86) and Dummett (1991, 47) for endorsements of (Communication).

conception of the world while at the same time denying that the shared conception on which they coordinate shapes the future course of their project of inquiry — a logically possible but unappealing theoretical picture. I will therefore assume in what follows that friends of (Communication) should also endorse (Connection). For clarity, let us refer to the conjunction of (Communication) and (Connection) as *The Possibility-Carving Picture*.

The Possibility-Carving Picture is appealingly simple, intuitive, and explanatorily powerful.<sup>30</sup> It can be shown, however, that the conjunction of (Communication) and (Connection) all but secures the truth of (Diagonalism). It follows, given the argument of the preceding sections, that we have reason to abandon The Possibility-Carving Picture. This connection between (Diagonalism) and The Possibility-Carving Picture has not generally been appreciated: more is at stake in the controversy over (Diagonalism) than is typically recognized.

Suppose we pair assertoric utterances with propositional contents by associating any utterance  $u$  with the set of worlds  $w$  such that the assertoric content of  $u$  is true at  $w$ . Call the proposition thus associated with an utterance its *proto-diagonal*. The construction of an utterance's proto-diagonal proposition is thus very similar to the construction of its superdiagonal proposition, which was introduced in section 2. The two differ, however, in that the superdiagonal proposition of an utterance is defined in terms of its horizontal proposition at various worlds (which is in turn grammatically determined), whereas its proto-diagonal proposition is defined in terms of its assertoric content at various worlds, which could in principle fail to be grammatically determined.

(Communication) and (Connection), together with a few plausible ancillary premises, suffice to establish the following principle:<sup>31</sup>

**(Proto-Diagonalism):** For any conversation  $c$ , assertoric utterance  $u$ , and world  $w$ , the assertoric content of  $u$  at  $w$  agrees with its proto-diagonal proposition in truth-value at every world in the context set of  $c$  at  $w$ .<sup>32</sup>

Informally presented, the argument for this conclusion is as follows. If (Proto-Diagonalism) could be violated, then, given (Communication), accepting an assertoric utterance of a sentence at a world could involve either ruling out some worlds in the context set at

<sup>30</sup>It is not, however, universally accepted. Some who prefer to think about belief in terms of guised propositions may hold that when a speaker asserts, her interlocutors come to accept the content of her assertion for the purposes of the conversation, but deny that this involves ruling out for the purposes of the conversation all possibilities in which the content of her assertion is false (thus rejecting (Communication)). In general, they may think, coming to accept a content under some guise does not enable hearers to rule out all possibilities in which it is false; some such possibilities could only be ruled out if they came to accept the same content under a different guise.

<sup>31</sup>For informal suggestions in this vicinity, see Hawthorne and Magidor (2009, 395-6) and Almotahari and Glick (2010, 1085). For a formal presentation of the argument, see Kirk-Giannini (2018, 677-81). These discussions primarily concern a principle endorsed by Stalnaker, which has come to be known as (*Uniformity*). (*Uniformity*) requires that, in cases of rational communication, the assertoric content of a speaker's utterance is the same at every world in the context set of the conversation in which she is participating. It is perhaps because of this focus on (*Uniformity*) that the broader significance of these arguments for the theory of assertion has not been fully appreciated.

<sup>32</sup>In the 2018 paper, I call this principle '(Diagonal)'; I have renamed it here to avoid confusion with (Diagonalism).

which that utterance expresses a truth or failing to rule out some worlds in the context set at which an utterance of the negation of that sentence expresses a truth. But, given (Connection), this would mean that it could be felicitous to assert a sentence in a conversation where it is presupposed that that sentence expresses a truth, and that it could be felicitous to assert a sentence in a conversation where it is presupposed that an assertion of its negation would express a truth. But neither of these sorts of utterances are in fact felicitous. So (Communication) and (Connection) together secure (Proto-Diagonalism).

(Proto-Diagonalism) is not (Diagonalism), since (Proto-Diagonalism) but not (Diagonalism) could be true in a world where the assertoric contents of speakers' utterances bore no relation to the grammar of their language. Nevertheless, (Diagonalism) is by far the most plausible theory of assertoric content according to which (Proto-Diagonalism) is true — among theories of assertoric content which have been proposed in the literature, it alone both satisfies (Proto-Diagonalism) and shows how the assertoric content of an utterance depends in a straightforward way on the grammar of the community in which it is produced. There is thus a compelling abductive case from (Proto-Diagonalism) to (Diagonalism): an argument for (Proto-Diagonalism) is *ipso facto* an argument for (Diagonalism). Our argument against (Diagonalism), then, suggests that at least one of (Communication) and (Connection), and thus also The Possibility-Carving Picture, should be rejected. We must devise a new way to think about the role of assertion in inquiry.

## 6 Interlude: The Communicative Role

Rejecting The Possibility-Carving Picture raises two questions: first, the question of how to explain how speakers coordinate doxastically via assertion without accepting (Communication) and (Connection); second, the question of what theoretical interest remains in the theory of assertion if we give up (Communication) or (Connection). I will consider the former question in this section and the latter in the next.

Having given up (Diagonalism), we must decide what to make of (Communication) and (Connection). Some may be tempted at this juncture to abandon The Possibility-Carving Picture's underlying model of communication entirely — perhaps communicating is more like getting the right sentence into one's interlocutors' heads than causing them to rule out the right possibilities. But I would like to suggest a less dramatic departure from The Possibility-Carving Picture. In [READY], it seems that the communicative effect of Susie's utterance is to update the common ground with one of its diagonal propositions: to rule out world *c*, at which Susie has both lunch and the walk in mind and Molly is ready only for lunch. This suggests an appealingly minimal revision of The Possibility-Carving Picture: in cases like [READY], though no diagonal proposition of an utterance is its assertoric content, some diagonal proposition is the content which is intersected with the context set. Though (Communication) is false, then, it is *almost* true — assertions *do* characteristically cause interlocutors to rule out possibilities for the purposes of the conversation, though (Communication) incorrectly characterizes the set of possibilities ruled out in this way. Similarly, though (Connection) mistakenly identifies the proposition acceptance of which must rule out some but not all worlds in the context set as the assertoric content of an utterance, a modified version of the

principle which replaces talk of an utterance's assertoric content with talk of its diagonal propositions remains plausible.

The lesson I propose to draw from the failure of (Diagonalism), then, is that it is not the assertoric content of an utterance but rather some diagonal proposition of that utterance which plays the communicative role. The slogan of this paper — *Do Not Diagonalize* — thus applies only to assertoric content, not the theory of communication.

Since all diagonal propositions of an utterance are equivalent over the context set of a conversation, it does not matter which one we choose. For the sake of simplicity, however, no harm will be done if we hold that it is the superdiagonal proposition of an utterance which plays the communicative role. This gives us the following principles:

**(Super-Communication):** When a speaker performs an assertoric utterance, her interlocutors rule out for the purposes of the conversation all possibilities in which the superdiagonal proposition of her utterance is false.

**(Super-Connection):** *Ceteris paribus*, it is acceptable to perform an assertoric utterance in the course of joint inquiry just in case the superdiagonal proposition of that utterance, if accepted, would eliminate some but not all of the worlds in the context set.<sup>33</sup>

## 7 Assertion and Commitment

It may seem natural at this point to conclude that the failure of The Possibility-Carving Picture suggests that assertoric content is not particularly interesting: if (Communication) and (Connection) are false, then what role does it play apart from explaining our judgments about certain sentences describing cases like [READY]?<sup>34</sup> This is the second of our two questions from the previous section. In what follows, I suggest that this dismissive attitude toward assertoric content is wrongheaded: though The Possibility-Carving Picture is false, the theory of assertoric content retains its interest because it is intimately related to the theory of assertoric *commitment*.

It is a platitude that we undertake commitments when we assert, becoming liable to criticism for speaking falsely, misleadingly, or otherwise inappropriately. Accountability is the price of communication. Indeed, intuition delivers more than the platitude: intuitively, there is a distinctive sort of commitment which a speaker undertakes in asserting, this commitment is associated with a unique propositional content, and any other commitments incurred by a speaker in asserting are derivative of her commitment

<sup>33</sup>I have so far said nothing about the status of (Horizontalism). In [READY], it seems that the horizontal proposition is asserted rather than any diagonal proposition. Having distinguished between assertoric content and other species of utterance content, then, it is tempting to embrace the horizontal theory of the former. This is, however, a matter on which I wish to take no stand. Perhaps there are other cases (the Gabor/Anscombe case, for example) in which some diagonal proposition of an utterance is asserted; perhaps not. All that is required for my purposes here is that there are some cases in which no diagonal proposition is asserted.

<sup>34</sup>For a defense of this kind of pessimistic view, see e.g. Cappelen (2011).

to this content.<sup>35</sup>

Let us refer to the unique propositional content to which a speaker undertakes this distinctive sort of commitment in asserting as the *principal commitment* associated with her utterance. Then we can say that a species of utterance content *plays the committal role* just in case it pairs any given assertoric utterance with the principal commitment its speaker undertakes in producing it. Just as the thesis that assertoric content plays the communicative role is the most straightforward possible explanation of the platitude that speakers assert in order to communicate, the thesis that assertoric content plays the committal role is the most straightforward possible explanation of the platitude that speakers take on commitments when they assert. Thus the following principle will be familiar, similar as it is to principles endorsed by a wide range of theorists, including Searle (1976, 10), Brandom (1984, 640), and Williamson (2000, 268-269):

**(Commitment):** When a speaker asserts a proposition, the principal commitment she incurs is to that proposition.

Though it is both familiar and plausible, (Commitment) is by no means trivial. I have insisted that the theory of assertion be held accountable to our intuitive judgments about the truth and falsity of what speakers have asserted. (Commitment) is the substantive thesis that the propositional objects which explain these judgments are also the objects to which speakers undertake principal commitments in asserting. In the remainder of this section, I will motivate this thesis by proposing a heuristic for identifying the principal commitments speakers undertake in asserting and showing that this heuristic suggests that, even in cases where assertoric content does not play the communicative role, it nevertheless continues to play the committal role. If I am correct, the notion of assertoric content finds theoretical purchase in thinking about the normative dimensions of conversation.<sup>36</sup>

How can we single out the principal commitment associated with an assertion? An initial impulse is to appeal to liability to blame: a proposition  $p$  is the principal commitment a speaker incurs in asserting just in case she is liable to blame in the conversational state resulting from her assertion if  $p$  is false (and she lacks a compelling excuse for committing to  $p$ ).<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, a blame-only account of principal commitment does not distinguish between the assertoric content of an utterance and certain obvious entailments of that content. If a speaker is liable to blame if the proposition that Mark is in the kitchen is false, then she is liable to blame if the proposition that Mark is in the house is false.

<sup>35</sup>I thus assume, along with most others who have written on assertion, that an utterance is associated with at most one assertoric content. For an alternative picture, according to which assertion must be modeled as a relation between utterances and contents rather than as a function from utterances to contents, see Soames (2005).

<sup>36</sup>In fact, even establishing the weaker claim that the content of an assertion is *usually* (or *often*) the principal commitment a speaker undertakes in asserting would vindicate the theoretical interest of assertoric content. So even if my argument for (Commitment) below is found to be less than dispositive, it does not follow that the notion of assertoric content is not theoretically interesting.

<sup>37</sup>Note that I do not wish to commit myself to any particular account of the connections between liability, blame, and excuse. I invite the reader to reformulate my arguments in this section using her favored account of this topic — the conclusions should be unaffected.

Likewise, if a speaker is liable to blame if it is false that John knows that Mark is in the kitchen, then she is liable to blame if it is false that Mark is in the kitchen. But, as we have seen, the notion of the principal commitment associated with an assertion is intuitively not indiscriminate in this way: a speaker who asserts that Mark is in the kitchen is liable to blame if the proposition that Mark is in the house is false *because* she is liable to blame if the proposition that Mark is in the kitchen is false, not vice versa.

A natural move to make at this point would be to introduce a notion of *non-derivative* liability to blame and characterize the principal commitment associated with an assertoric utterance  $u$  as the unique proposition  $p$  such that, in performing  $u$ , a speaker becomes non-derivatively liable to blame if  $p$  is false. If liability to blame for the falsity of a proposition because it is entailed by another proposition for the falsity of which one is liable is a species of derivative liability, this move would allow us to circumvent the overgeneration problem just introduced.

But even if it is granted that there is always a unique non-derivative commitment associated with any given assertion, intuition is not always clear concerning which of a speaker's commitments is non-derivative. In cases where assertoric content does not play the communicative role, which commitment of the speaker is non-derivative?<sup>38</sup> Consequently, I wish to explore the possibility that the principal commitment associated with an assertion can be singled out as involving a distinctive combination of liability to blame and *vulnerability to criticism*, where this latter notion is understood in terms of targetability by certain expressions—most notably 'that'—which can be used to refer to propositions.<sup>39</sup>

It is worth briefly pointing out that, like blameability, targetability with 'that' alone cannot be used to pick out the principal commitment associated with a speaker's assertion. For the contents of other speech acts are targetable in the same way. If I conjecturally utter, "Perhaps the train is late because of track work," you can felicitously respond, "That's unlikely — there's no announcement on the website," with your use of 'that' targeting the proposition that the train is late because of track work, to which I have not committed.<sup>40</sup>

I therefore propose that the principal commitment associated with an assertoric utterance can be picked out terms of two factors: non-derivative liability to blame and targetability by propositional anaphors. Undertaking a principal commitment to  $p$ , on this picture, involves both introducing  $p$  as a candidate for subsequent reference and exposing oneself to blame if  $p$  is false:

<sup>38</sup>Camp (2006) develops a method for isolating a certain privileged subset of the commitments undertaken by speakers when they produce utterances. However, her account does not extend to utterances of sentences containing context-sensitive vocabulary, and for this reason it is not possible to apply it in the sorts of cases which are of interest here.

<sup>39</sup>That 'that' can be used to refer to propositions is suggested by the semantic non-defectiveness of the sentences "That is true" and "That is false" in certain contexts.

<sup>40</sup>Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) present a number of cases suggesting that 'that' can also target certain contents related to the semantic content of a speaker's utterance by lambda abstraction. For example, if a speaker says "My parents won't listen to me," her interlocutor can reply "That is my problem, too" (91). This sort of behavior is not a problem for the heuristic I propose below, since (i) it seems that 'that' is picking out a property (*being such that one's parents don't listen to one*) rather than a proposition, and (ii) even if it did pick out a proposition, the speaker's liability to blame if that proposition were false would plausibly be derivative of her liability to blame if the horizontal proposition of her assertion were false.

**(Commitment Heuristic):** Proposition  $p$  is the principal commitment a speaker undertakes in performing assertoric utterance  $u$  in conversation  $c$  just in case (i) in virtue of performing  $u$ , she is non-derivatively liable to blame if  $p$  is false, and (ii) in the state of  $c$  immediately resulting from her performance of  $u$ , interlocutors can felicitously continue  $c$  by producing utterances which target  $p$  using ‘that.’

Note that (Commitment Heuristic) is not a theory of the nature of assertoric commitment. No theory of the nature of assertoric commitment could appeal to targetability by ‘that,’ since there can be assertions in languages other than English — perhaps even languages lacking propositional anaphors entirely. (Commitment Heuristic) is intended merely to state conditions which single out the principal commitment associated with a speaker’s assertion in a useful range of cases. This more modest achievement is all that is required for the purpose of distinguishing between an utterance’s superdiagonal proposition and its assertoric content when it comes to assertoric commitment.

One might worry at this point that, in appealing to availability for anaphoric reference using ‘that,’ (Commitment Heuristic) stacks the deck in favor of my preferred view that the species of content which plays the committal role is the same as the species of content which explains our intuitions about cases like [READY]. This concern is misplaced, however, for two reasons. First, it is nontrivial to claim that ‘what is asserted’ or ‘that’ must pick out a proposition for which the speaker becomes *non-derivatively* liable to blame when she asserts. Second, it is independently plausible that the species of utterance content which plays the committal role should be targetable with ‘that’ in the conversational state resulting from an assertion. The alternative would be for a speaker’s principal commitment to play a role in discourse similar to the role played by presupposed or conventionally implicated content — to be targetable only by interrupting the conversation with “Hey, wait a minute!” or similar devices. This would be a strange situation: the commitments speakers explicitly take up in asserting are not peripheral like these other forms of content.

Granting (Commitment Heuristic), our question becomes whether, when the assertoric content of an utterance does not play the communicative role, it nevertheless plays the committal role. I claim that this is the case. My argument for this claim has the following structure: Consider an arbitrary case in which the assertoric content of a speaker’s utterance  $u$  does not play the communicative role and a sentence  $\phi$  which expresses a proposition that entails the superdiagonal proposition of  $u$  but not its assertoric content. Suppose a member of the speaker’s audience learns the proposition expressed by  $\phi$ , as well as relevant features of the context set in which  $u$  will be produced, prior to the conversation. If, after the speaker asserts  $u$ , this audience member cannot felicitously assert the sentence “I already knew that,” ‘that’ must be unable to target any diagonal proposition of  $u$ . For the audience member’s knowledge of the proposition expressed by  $\phi$ , together with her knowledge of the context set, secure her knowledge of every diagonal proposition of the speaker’s utterance even before that utterance is produced. Given that an utterance’s assertoric content and diagonal propositions are the only contents for which its speaker plausibly assumes non-derivative liability to blame in producing it, and given that ‘that’ does seem able to target an utterance’s assertoric content, establishing that ‘that’ cannot in general target an utterance’s diagonal propositions suffices to establish that assertoric content plays

the committal role even when it does not play the communicative role.

An example will clarify both the structure and the intuitive force of the test. You have volunteered to participate in a psychological experiment designed to investigate whether subjects can reliably guess your preferences. Franz is running the experiment; he has chosen you because he has great faith in your honesty. The experiment will work as follows: at noon tomorrow, you and one of Franz's subjects will be presented with an array of objects. Both you and the subject will have a clear view of the objects; the subject's view of your upper body, however, will be obscured. Your task will be to point to an object and say to the subject "That is my favorite object." The subject will then be asked to make a prediction about which of the objects is your favorite, and Franz will note whether he is correct or incorrect. This process will be repeated until Franz has a satisfactory idea of the subject's ability to guess your preferences regarding objects.

Supposing that Franz's faith in your honesty is not misplaced, and that he has successfully communicated it to the subject, he and the subject can know today that at noon tomorrow you will point to an object and, speaking truthfully, say "That is my favorite object." Now imagine that, at noon tomorrow, just after you point at an object and say "That is my favorite object," the subject says "I already knew that." If 'that' can target a diagonal proposition of your utterance, then the subject's utterance should be felicitous. But it is not felicitous — indeed, what the subject says is intuitively false. The natural explanation is that, in assertorically uttering "I already knew that," the subject can only mean that he already knew the horizontal proposition associated with your utterance, which is its assertoric content — knew, that is, that the particular object you demonstrated was your favorite. But, of course, the subject cannot know this proposition because he does not know which demonstration accompanied your utterance. So (Commitment Heuristic) suggests that, when the assertoric content of an utterance diverges from its superdiagonal proposition, the principal commitment a speaker incurs in producing that utterance is the former rather than the latter.<sup>41</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

Combining (Commitment) with the thesis that superdiagonal content rather than assertoric content plays the communicative role yields a substantive theory of conversation which is able to capture the insights of The Possibility-Carving Picture while

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<sup>41</sup>This case has the following artificial feature: because the design of the experiment is common ground between you and the subject, the communicative upshot of your utterance does not eliminate any possible worlds from the context set of your conversation. Your utterance thus seems to violate (Super-Connection) — except that *ceteris* are not *paribus*, as your utterance serves the purpose of conveying information to Franz. This feature of the case does not affect the substance of the argument, since it remains clear that (i) the content of your assertion is its horizontal proposition, (ii) the informational import of your utterance is one of its diagonal propositions (which is why updating on it does not change the context set), and (iii) the subject cannot target any diagonal proposition of your utterance using 'that.' Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that we could complicate the case to remove this feature. For example, we can imagine that one of the objects is on a pedestal, so that if you demonstrate it, the subject will see where you are pointing. If, unbeknownst to you, the subject has learned from an omniscient oracle that you will demonstrate a non-pedestal object, your utterance of "That is my favorite object" *does* narrow the context set of your conversation (since it eliminates worlds where the object on the pedestal is your favorite, which are in the context set because the subject's foreknowledge is occult). Nevertheless, it remains infelicitous for the subject to reply with "I already knew that."

also accommodating our intuitive judgments about [READY] and related cases. The Possibility-Carving Picture is superseded by one which recognizes greater complexity in the structure of conversation: where The Possibility-Carving Picture posits a single species of utterance content which is both asserted and communicated, the view I have advocated has room enough for two distinct species, one—assertoric content—which plays the committal role, and one—superdiagonal content—which is communicated. The existence of a coherent theoretical picture which vindicates intuition when it comes to (1) and (2) by divorcing the communicative and committal aspects of assertion constitutes a challenge to the friend of (Diagonalism) to explain why we should prefer her view to the alternative.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>I would like to thank Liz Camp, Andy Egan, Thony Gillies, Jeremy Goodman, John Hawthorne, Ethan Jerzak, Jeff King, Harvey Lederman, Ernie Lepore, Ofra Magidor, Eliot Michaelson, Paul Pietroski, Jonathan Schaffer, and Susanna Schellenberg for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as audiences at Rutgers, the New York Philosophy of Language Workshop, and the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association for helpful discussion.

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