



## Why Content Must Be a Matter of Truth Conditions

Angus Ross

*The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 156. (Jul., 1989), pp. 257-275.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8094%28198907%2939%3A156%3C257%3AWCMBAM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>

*The Philosophical Quarterly* is currently published by The Philosophical Quarterly.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/philquar.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

WHY CONTENT *MUST* BE A MATTER OF  
TRUTH CONDITIONS

BY ANGUS ROSS

I

Both the truth-condition theorist and his verificationist opponent are agreed that, when it comes to giving an account of the notion of meaning, a certain primacy attaches to the assertoric use of language and thus to the idea of the content of an assertion. Yet there is, it would seem, a wholly truistic connection between the idea of the content of an assertion and the idea of truth.<sup>1</sup> By what Dummett has dubbed the equivalence thesis, to assert that P is always to assert that P is true, from which follows that *what* is asserted, the content of the assertion, is always that P is true, that the conditions for P being true obtain. The critic of the truth-condition approach has two main options. He can declare himself suspicious of alleged truisms and demand to be shown why we *have* to conceive of content in these terms.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, he can concede the link between truth and content but insist that as an explanation of the notion of meaning it is worthless, 'a mere slogan' as Crispin Wright has put it.<sup>3</sup> For what, our critic will ask, are we to understand by truth? To appeal once more to the equivalence thesis, to offer, that is, a redundancy or disquotational account of truth, would be to render the identification of content with truth conditions a quite unilluminating tautology.<sup>4</sup> The truth-condition theorist

<sup>1</sup> I take it that this is part of what John McDowell is getting at on p. 229 of his 'Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding' in H. Parrett and J. Bouveresse (eds), *Meaning and Understanding* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Crispin Wright, 'Strawson on Anti-Realism', *Synthese* 40 (1979), pp. 287-8; reprinted in *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Crispin Wright, 'Anti-Realist Semantics: The Role of Criteria' in G. Vesey (ed.), *Idealism Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 246; reprinted in Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth*.

<sup>4</sup> See Dummett's 'Truth' in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978), and also the Preface to that volume, p. xxi.

seeks to explain the idea of the content of an assertion by reference to truth, but the redundancy theory of truth simply refers us back to the idea of assertion.

Our critic cannot, of course, have it both ways. He cannot accuse the truth-condition account of being a vacuous truism and at the same time recommend the adoption of an alternative account. But that does not absolve a defender of the truth-condition account from the need to respond to each of these challenges taken separately. Why *must* we say that the content of an assertion is given by its truth conditions, and what does it mean to say that? These questions deserve an answer whether or not the truth-condition account is thought to be under serious challenge. Thus both Dummett and Wright now seem prepared to concede that it may be a mistake to see anti-realism as requiring the outright rejection of a truth-condition account of content.<sup>5</sup> The issue between realist and anti-realist, they suggest, can be seen as a dispute over what *sort* of notion of truth is admissible as the central concept in a theory of meaning. This is a welcome concession, but we need to ask what it amounts to and why – or whether – the anti-realist has to make it. What is it to be *a* notion of truth? And what light would an answer to that question throw on the idea of the content of an assertion?

## II

We need a way of approaching the idea of the content of an assertion which does not take the idea of assertion itself for granted – as, for example, does the use of reported speech as a means of identifying content. Ideally, we want an account of what it *is* to make an assertion.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, we need to find a way of saying what we mean by truth which does not immediately refer us back to the idea of assertion.

One way of going beyond a simple redundancy account of truth is to take seriously a point that Dummett himself has stressed, that ‘true’ and ‘false’ are terms of criticism and appraisal. To distinguish truth from falsehood is to distinguish between correct and incorrect assertion. Not that we can simply identify the idea of truth with the idea of correct assertion. For one thing, that would return us too quickly to the question of what it is to make

<sup>5</sup> See the Preface to Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p. xxii, and Wright’s *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, pp. 307–8. The following defence of a truth-condition account of content will not, therefore, amount to a defence of realism in the sense that Dummett and Wright define that term. That is not, in any case, a definition I would want to accept, for I do not believe that a realist needs to hold that the relationship between content and the methods of verification available to us is merely contingent (cf. Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, p.307).

<sup>6</sup> Here I side with Dummett against McDowell’s insistence on ‘modesty’ in a theory of meaning (see McDowell, ‘Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding’, p. 233).

an assertion, but it is also clear that there are other ways in which an assertion can be incorrect besides being false. An assertion may be criticized as being impolite, in bad taste, a breach of confidence, or as having been made on inadequate grounds.<sup>7</sup> But the thought that truth marks a dimension of criticism does help us to connect truth with meaning. Both the truth-condition theorist and his verificationist opponent are agreed in seeing the meaning of an assertoric sentence as a function of the conditions under which it may be correctly used. The meaning of the sign is a function of the rules which govern its use. What is in dispute is the character of those rules, or rather the character of the more fundamental of them, those of which meaning is a function.

How are we to distinguish meaning-determining rules from other rules governing our use of language? To use Searle's terminology, how are we to distinguish rules that are constitutive of the act of assertion from rules that are merely regulative of such acts?<sup>8</sup> The general thought that meaning is (correct) use is quite unhelpful on this point, and to assume at the outset that the issue is which rules are *epistemologically* most fundamental would risk begging the question in favour of verificationism. What we need is a way of connecting general standards of correct use with the content of what is said on particular occasions of use. We need to be able to see why the fact that our use of certain words is governed by certain rules should give the act of uttering those words the force of an assertion with this or that content. A remark of Dummett's suggests a possible way forward:

Any workable account of assertion must recognise that an assertion is judged by objective standards of correctness, and that, in making an assertion, a speaker lays claim, rightly or wrongly, to have satisfied those standards.<sup>9</sup>

The suggestion, I take it, is that there is a quite general connection between an act having the force of a claim that certain conditions are met and the existence of rules or standards of correctness governing acts of that type. In uttering an assertoric sentence a speaker claims to be observing the appropriate standards of correctness, he claims to be making a correct assertion, and his utterance has that force *because, inter alia*, his use of the sentence is governed by those standards.

Dummett does not develop this thought, but it does, I think, give us a

<sup>7</sup> Once again I am simply echoing Dummett, see 'What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)' in G. Evans and J. McDowell (eds), *Truth and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Ch. 2, section 5. Unfortunately Searle's own discussion is not very helpful on the present point.

<sup>9</sup> Dummett, 'What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', p. 83.

way of approaching the idea of the content of an assertion. In itself it takes us only part of the way. Since there will always be more than one standard of correctness by which a given assertion may be judged, there is always more than one claim the speaker can be seen as having made. For example, if there is a sense in which it is incorrect to assert something one does not have adequate grounds for asserting, then to make an assertion will be to claim, by implication, that one is in possession of the appropriate grounds.<sup>10</sup> But equally, if it is deemed to be incorrect to assert what is false – as is implied in saying that ‘false’ is a term of criticism – then to make an assertion will be to claim that its truth conditions are (or will be) met. The problem of distinguishing between rules that are constitutive of meaning and rules that are merely regulative has become the problem of saying which of the claims a speaker makes in using an assertoric sentence is to be identified with the assertion he makes. Now intuitively at least, to claim to have good grounds for asserting that P is to do something *more* than, or other than, assert that P, even if it is normally something one does *in* asserting that P. By contrast, to claim that the assertion one has made is true is not to do anything more than one does in making that assertion. To claim that P is true just *is* to assert that P, and vice versa. To assert that P just is to claim that P is true. It seems that we can identify the assertion made in using a given assertoric sentence with the claim the speaker makes to have satisfied just *one* of the requirements of its correct use, the requirement of truth. It follows that the content of the assertion is that this requirement is met.

Once again, intuition would seem to support a truth-condition view of content, though once again that can hardly be the end of the matter. The thought that to make an assertion just *is* to claim to have satisfied one of the standards of correctness governing our use of assertoric language is in fact neutral as between a truth-condition and a verification-condition account of content. It is open to the verificationist to insist that an assertion is most centrally a claim to have met a requirement of verification<sup>11</sup> and thus that its content is that that requirement is met. All I want to suggest at this point in the argument is that this general way of thinking about what it is to make an assertion furnishes a framework within which the debate

<sup>10</sup> There are uses of assertoric language, for example, guesses and bets, where a requirement of adequacy of grounds would be out of place and where, in consequence, the speaker cannot be taken as claiming to possess such grounds. For present purposes such uses can be regarded as not really cases of assertion.

<sup>11</sup> By ‘requirement of verification’ I understand the requirement that there be – in some sense – adequate grounds for making the assertion in question. The weaker requirement that the speaker be capable of *identifying* what would count as adequate grounds has some plausibility as a condition of meaningful assertion but none as the content-determining condition of correct assertion.

between rival accounts of content can be pursued with more hope of an argued resolution, for it furnishes the required link between content and standards of correct use.<sup>12</sup> To ask which conditions of correct use determine content is to ask which of the corresponding claims is to be identified with the assertion itself and which is merely a claim we make *in* making an assertion. As we shall see, there are significant constraints on the claims we can plausibly identify with the assertion itself.

### III

To describe assertion as a species of claim is to appeal, by implication, to an analogy between language and certain familiar non-linguistic activities. We speak of claiming rights, titles and property, and such claiming can take both linguistic and, on occasion, non-linguistic forms. For example, I may be able to claim my right to a share of the cake simply by picking up a piece and eating it. It is worth remembering that the term 'assertion', too, has a wider currency. We speak of asserting rights and claims, and once again that can take both linguistic and non-linguistic forms. We need to try to say something about the nature of the genus. What it is to make a claim? What are we saying that these various activities, linguistic and non-linguistic, have in common?

The notion of a claim is correlative with that of a challenge. Like any other act, the act of making a claim is open to more than one sort of criticism. In rushing to claim what one takes to be one's rights, one may be acting foolishly or insensitively as well as, or rather than, illegitimately. But there is a form of criticism which is peculiarly appropriate to claims, which in a sense they invite: they may be challenged. To see what distinguishes challenges from other critical responses to human action, it may help to refer once again to Dummett's discussion of assertions as objects of criticism. Dummett wants to distinguish between criticism of 'what is said' and criticism of 'the saying of it'.<sup>13</sup> To refer to an assertion as false is to

<sup>12</sup> It is worth remarking that this way of thinking about what it is to make an assertion captures something the familiar Gricean approach misses (H. P. Grice, 'Meaning', *The Philosophical Review*, 66 (1957)). To seek to get someone to believe that P by getting them to recognize that one intends to get them to believe that P (and so on) is not, or at least not obviously, to claim that P is true. Moreover, if we are right in seeing a connection between an act having the status of a claim and the existence of rules governing its performance, this is an aspect of assertion which a Gricean account is bound to miss, given its insistence on trying to characterize the act of communication without reference to language and its rules.

As a way of stating the connection between assertion and truth, the present way of putting things is also a distinct improvement over talk of truth as the 'aim' of assertion (cf. Dummett's 'Truth', p. 2), given the obvious point that not all who make assertions are aiming to say anything true.

<sup>13</sup> Dummett, 'What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', p. 83.

criticize what is said, whereas to describe it as impolite or in bad taste is to criticize the saying of it. These two sorts of criticism can be distinguished, Dummett suggests, by reference to the fact that the former, but not the latter, can be met by cancellation:

Any linguistic act can be cancelled, at least if the cancellation is sufficiently prompt: a speaker may withdraw an assertion, a command, a request or a question. A criticism that is directed solely at what is said – as that an assertion is untrue, a command unjust or a question unfair – no longer stands if the utterance is cancelled. A criticism which is levelled at the act of saying, on the other hand, may be weakened but is not wholly met by its cancellation: if someone, by his utterance, broke a confidence or wounded his hearer's feelings, his withdrawal of the utterance mitigates, but does not wipe out, the offence.<sup>14</sup>

Dummett does not stop to ask *why* this should be so, but it is not difficult to see a connection here with the thought that to say something is to make a certain claim. To challenge a claim is, of course, to challenge its legitimacy, but the concern with legitimacy expressed in a challenge is distinct from that expressed, for example, in a rebuke or reproach. When a claim is challenged, there is, or need be, no suggestion that the maker of the claim has committed an *offence*. He is not being censured. Rather the challenger is expressing a concern with what will henceforth be seen as legitimate, and seen as legitimate not just by the claimant but by all concerned. If a claim goes unchallenged, its legitimacy has been conceded and a precedent has been set, with all that that implies for the way similar acts will be viewed in future. If a claim is challenged, we have what amounts to a dispute as to where precisely the boundaries of correct action lie, a dispute which may, of course, be terminated by either side backing down. Thus if a claim is challenged and is subsequently withdrawn, further challenge becomes unnecessary and inappropriate, for there is no longer anything in dispute. If criticism is sustained in such circumstances, it does not have, or no longer has, the forward-looking character of a challenge to a claim but rather the backward-looking character of a rebuke or reproach.

Dummett's test for criticism of 'what is said', the fact that such criticism can be met by cancellation or withdrawal, thus serves to pick out a rather wider class of criticism than Dummett has in mind, that of a challenge to a claim. In doing so, it helps to bring out what it is for an action to count as – to be treated as – the assertion of a claim. Dummett's test fails, therefore,

<sup>14</sup> Dummett, 'What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', p. 84.

in its appointed task. It is none the less a point worth making that criticism of what is said, however it be defined, falls within this wider class. Reference to rules and criticism in connection with language use is apt to be misunderstood, suggesting, perhaps, a picture of schoolchildren being rapped over the knuckles for faulty grammar. But criticizing the act need not involve censuring the agent. The most fundamental kind of criticism to which assertion is subject, and the kind which has the closest bearing on questions of meaning, is dissent, the simple expression of disagreement with what is said. In expressing our disagreement with what is said we are not reproaching the speaker for linguistic misbehaviour, and nor are we particularly concerned to help him improve his grasp of the rules. Rather we are expressing a more general and forward-looking concern with what is seen as the right thing to say. To dissent from what is said is to challenge the – or rather a – claim the speaker has made.

Let us turn now to the question of what gives an action the status of a claim. The suggestion is that an action can acquire that status as a result of the existence of a rule specifying the conditions under which it may or may not be performed. Clearly, though, not just *any* action subject to rule can be construed as a claim to the effect that the conditions under which it is permitted obtain. The thief who surreptitiously makes off with my camera when my back is turned can hardly be said to be claiming to own it. However, if I openly pick up a suitcase in an airport luggage bay – a context in which, let us suppose, it is proper for me to do so only if the suitcase belongs to me – I will be seen as claiming, by implication, the *right* to do so, I will be seen as claiming ownership of that suitcase. (And similarly, if the thief, once risk of detection is past, openly treats my camera as his own, he too is implicitly claiming rightful ownership, albeit fraudulently.) Speaking more carefully then, the suggestion is that the *open*, and we had better add *knowing*, performance of an action subject to rule counts as a claim to the effect that the conditions under which one is entitled to perform it obtain.

Why should this be so? It would be a mistake to appeal to a ‘convention’ to this effect, as though we might conceivably have operated with some different convention. If openly doing X did not, other things being equal, count as a way of asserting the legitimacy of doing X, then nothing could. If language is to be seen as a rule-constituted means of expression, we cannot suppose that the only means of assertion and challenge available to us are linguistic. It must be possible for a rule to be recognized within a community, and for the legitimacy of actions falling under the rule to be asserted or challenged, in the absence of *further* rules or conventions governing what is to count as such assertion or challenge. If the legitimacy of my doing X is potentially open to dispute, and knowing this to be so I



openly do X, then I am, by implication, asserting the legitimacy of my doing X. Thus the existence of a rule determining the circumstances in which an action may be performed – which is to say, the existence of a general practice of, in certain circumstances, challenging such actions – is enough, other things being equal, to render its knowing and open performance a claim to the effect that the requirements of the rule are satisfied.

#### IV

The thought that assertion is a species of claim provides us with a way of linking the idea of the content of an assertion with the idea of standards of correct use. What we need now is some account of what distinguishes truth conditions from verification conditions. As we have seen, if we are to attach a clear sense to the thesis that content is a function of truth conditions, or indeed to the thesis that content is a function of verification conditions, we need a way of saying what distinguishes these two standards of correct assertion which does not assume, as does the redundancy theory of truth, that we already know what it is to make an assertion.

One way of distinguishing truth conditions from other conditions of correct assertion is to appeal to the thought that truth is a peculiarly *impersonal* standard of correctness. Whether an assertion is impolite, a breach of confidence, or in bad taste generally depends on who makes it, in what circumstances and to whom. Similarly, whether an assertion is made on adequate grounds, or more broadly whether the speaker is epistemically justified in making it, depends on who is speaking and in what circumstances. The question is whether that speaker, given the evidence then available to him, his competence as a judge of such matters, and so on, was justified in saying what he said. The truth or falsehood of an assertion, by contrast, is independent of the identity or circumstances of the speaker. If an assertion is true, it is true whoever makes it and whatever their circumstances.<sup>15</sup> As far as *truth* is concerned, we might say, what is correct for one to say is correct for all to say, and conversely, what is incorrect for one is incorrect for all. Viewed as a rule governing what may and may not be said, the requirement of truth has a distinctly impersonal, even egalitarian character.

This feature of the requirement of truth does not, admittedly, distinguish it from all other standards of correct action, or even of correct speech. The rules of grammar are impersonal in the above sense, and so,

<sup>15</sup> As Dummett puts it, truth is an 'objective property of what the speaker says, determined independently of his knowledge or his grounds for or motives in saying it' ('What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', p. 87). See also H. Putnam, 'Reference and Understanding' in A. Margalit (ed.), *Meaning and Use* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979).

on some views, are the requirements of morality. None the less, this feature does serve to distinguish the requirement of truth from the requirement of verification or adequacy of grounds: the fact that I have adequate grounds for making an assertion does not mean that you have adequate grounds for making it.<sup>16</sup> Thus if it could be shown that, whatever else may be true of them, the content-determining rules governing assertoric language must be impersonal in form, that would be a result of some interest. In the section that follows, it is argued that the possibility of different speakers counting as having made the same assertion depends upon at least the most central content-determining rules being impersonal in the present sense. Section VI underlines the importance of this feature of language by considering the limitations of signs governed by less impersonal rules, after which section VII takes up the question of where all this leaves the debate between rival views of content.

## V

Properly speaking, truth conditions attach to statements or assertions, not to the sentences we use to make them. All the same, there must be a sense in which the requirement that we speak truly in using a given language amounts to the requirement that we observe certain rules governing our use of the sentences of that language.<sup>17</sup> Only so conceived can the requirement of truth be seen as potentially content-determining. If the thought that meaning is a function of rules governing use is to do any serious work, the rules in question must be seen as governing our use of expressions identified independently of the significance thus bestowed on them. There are thus two ways in which we can think of truth conditions as conditions of correct speech. We can think of them as identifying the circumstances in which it is correct to make this or that *assertion*, or we can think of them as identifying the circumstances in which it is correct to use this or that *sentence*. Either way, what we have called the requirement of truth will be the requirement that we speak correctly as defined by these conditions. However, while the requirement of truth understood as a requirement on assertion is impersonal in the sense discussed, the requirement of truth understood as a requirement on our use of sentences is not, or, at any rate, not altogether. If I can truly say that I am married, then anyone else who says that I am married, anyone else who makes the

<sup>16</sup> The question of whether the requirement of verification *has* to be understood in this way is taken up in section VII below.

<sup>17</sup> See David Lewis's notion of a 'convention of truth in L', *Convention* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1969) ch. 5, and 'Languages and Language' in K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975).

same assertion, also speaks truly, but it does not follow that anyone else who utters the sentence 'I am married' speaks truly. The rule governing our use of that *sentence* is clearly not impersonal in form. Impersonality, it seems, is a feature of the requirement of truth only when conceived as a requirement on assertions, identified as such.

On the face of it this is not good news, for it follows that the present way of distinguishing the requirement of truth from the requirement of adequacy of grounds is available to us only if we already know what it is to make an assertion – or at least what counts as making the *same* assertion. However, if our discussion so far has been on the right lines, we are already in a position to say a certain amount about what it is to make an assertion, enough, at least, to enable us to attach a sense to the idea of making the same assertion. To make an assertion, we have said, is to make a certain claim, so making the same assertion will be a matter of making the same claim. The same claim, note, not just a similar claim. Intuitively, the distinction is tolerably clear. Two individuals who each claim to be married, for example by each wearing a wedding ring, make similar claims, even in a sense identical claims, but they do not make the same claim. By contrast, two individuals who each claim that Dummett is married – and it may be significant that they seem to need to use language to do so – make the same claim. Recall the close connection between claims and challenges. In saying that the two individuals who each claim to be married make different claims, we are saying that a third party who challenges the claim one makes does not automatically count as challenging the claim the other makes, and equally that a third party who concedes the claim one makes does not automatically count as having conceded the claim the other makes. By contrast, where two individuals each claim that Dummett is married, a third party who challenges the claim one makes does, by implication, challenge the claim the other makes, and a third party who concedes the claim one makes concedes the claim the other makes. For two individuals to make the same claim is for a challenge to the one to count automatically as a challenge to the other.

The thought that making the same assertion is a matter of making the same claim puts us in a position to see the impersonality of the requirement of truth in a new light. Conceived as a requirement on assertion, the impersonality of the requirement of truth is no more than a special case of the tautology that, if the claim one individual makes is legitimate, then *anyone else who makes the same claim* also makes a legitimate claim. Notoriously, tautologies tell us little, but the fact that this tautology has application, the fact that different speakers *can* make the same claim, tells us something important about language and its rules. Note that two individuals who perform the same action governed by the same rules do not

always make the same claim. In wearing a wedding ring or picking up a suitcase in an airport luggage bay, you and I make different claims. I claim that I am married, or that the suitcase is mine; you claim that you are married or that the suitcase is yours. Yet it is clearly vital to the notion of assertion that different speakers can make the same assertion. Or to put it another way, it is of the essence of assertoric language that it enables different individuals to make the same claim. We need to ask what it is about language that makes this possible.

There is no single answer to this question, but let us consider the simplest case, that in which two speakers make the same assertion by using the same words. Given the existence of indexical expressions, two speakers who utter the same words do not *always* make the same assertion, and equally speakers do not *have* to utter the same words in order to make the same assertion. But for present purposes we can afford to ignore these complications: the simplest case is also the most central. If different speakers are to be systematically enabled to make the same assertion, it is important that *normally*, indexicality aside, they are able to do so merely by uttering the same words. It is not difficult to see what needs to be true of language for this to be possible. Our guiding thought here is that the claim one makes in performing an action, whether it be uttering a sentence, wearing a wedding ring or picking up a suitcase, is a function of the rules governing acts of that type, for *what* one claims is that the conditions under which the act may be correctly performed obtain. Our question, then, is a question about the character of these rules. What form must the rules governing our use of a sentence take for it to be the case that in uttering that sentence different speakers make the same claim – or rather that *one* of the claims they make be the same claim?

The answer, as will by now be clear, is that at least one of the rules governing our use of each sentence must be impersonal in the sense discussed, for, in claiming to meet a requirement of correct use that is *not* impersonal in this sense, each speaker claims only that *he* satisfies the requirement in question and so makes a different claim from every other speaker. Now the rule which makes it possible for two speakers uttering the same sentence to make the same claim is, of course, the rule which determines the content of the claim in question, the rule which determines the content of the claim they both make. It follows that if different speakers are to be systematically enabled to make the same assertion – to make assertions with the same content – then the rules determining content must, in the central non-indexical case, be impersonal in the sense discussed.

## VI

It will be evident that being governed by impersonal rules is a fairly central feature of language as we know it, but to appreciate just how central we need to consider the limitations of signs governed by more 'personal' rules. The comparison serves to highlight virtues of language *qua* medium of communication which we might otherwise be inclined to take for granted. (Readers in a hurry to see where the main argument is leading may proceed immediately to section VII.)

Given the convention that only married persons are entitled to wear a plain gold ring on the third finger of the left hand, to wear such a ring is in effect to claim, and to entitle others to assume, that one is married. As with the rules governing our use of the sentences of a language, we have a rule which can be exploited for the purposes of communication,<sup>18</sup> though here the rule in question is distinctly personal in character. In wearing such a ring, I claim only that *I* am married; I cannot use it to claim that anyone else is married. Equally significant as far as the contrast with language is concerned is the fact that you cannot use such a ring to pass on to others what I communicate to you in wearing one, or to express your agreement with me, your acceptance of, or support for, the claim I make in wearing one. In furnishing us with signs governed by impersonal rules, signs which serve to make the same claim regardless of the identity of the user, language makes it possible for us to do all these things. Admittedly, it is sometimes possible to do these things without the aid of signs governed by impersonal rules. For example, we can indicate our agreement with what has just been said by nodding or by saying 'That is true'. But such context-bound means of expressing agreement are of limited utility. They cannot be used in the absence of the individual to whom one is responding, or at a later point in time, and nor are they capable of distinguishing between different things that have been communicated. It would be difficult to overstate the importance to our way of life of being able to pass on to others what has been communicated to us, and of being able to express agreement in cases of dispute. Only a system of signs governed by impersonal rules can make this possible in any systematic way.

Signs governed by personal (i.e., not strictly impersonal) rules are also of limited utility when it comes to using one sign to challenge the claim made in using another. In contradicting your assertion, I make a claim which conflicts with yours in the sense that if mine is correct yours cannot be. More generally, if I am to be able to use one sign to challenge the claim you make in using another, the rules governing this pair of signs must be

<sup>18</sup> On the possibility of exploiting rules for the purposes of communication, see my 'Why Do We Believe What We Are Told?', *Ratio XXVIII* (1986), section V.

such that at least one of us *must* be breaking those rules. (Let us call such a pair of signs ‘incompatible’.) Now it is not impossible to imagine the claim made in using a wedding ring being challenged by a conflicting claim made using some other personal sign. In wearing an item of clothing or bodily decoration that is permitted only to the unmarried, I might be seen as contradicting the claim I had made earlier in wearing a wedding ring, but I could not use such a sign of bachelorhood to challenge *your* claim to be married. A more promising suggestion might be a form of greeting that could be used only in addressing the unmarried. In greeting you in this way I could be taken to have challenged the claim you make in wearing a ring. Another possibility would be a sign or gesture, a condition of whose correct use is that the individual addressed has made an illegitimate claim. Such a sign could be used to challenge whatever claim has just been made, much as we use ‘That is false’. But the usefulness of either of these last two signs as a means of challenging claims to be married would still be extremely limited. The latter, though the more versatile of the two, would have the drawback that it failed to identify *which* claim is being challenged where more than one has been made, and neither sign could be used to challenge a claim in the absence of the person making it. Neither could be used by me in your absence to indicate to a third party that I reject your claim to be married.

Once again, the position with signs governed by strictly impersonal rules is different. Where two such signs are incompatible in the above sense, any individual’s use of one sign will be incompatible with anyone else’s use of the other. Thus my use of one member of such a pair of incompatible signs will constitute a challenge to the claim you make in using the other, even in your absence and regardless of whom I happen to be addressing. The possibility of different speakers, however situated in relation to each other, making conflicting claims and thus disputing what the other has said is every bit as central to the role language plays in our way of life as is the possibility of different speakers making the same claim. The fact of being governed by impersonal rules renders language not merely a more flexible means of transmitting information but a medium of debate – a debate to which all speakers of the language are potential contributors.

Admittedly, if the fact of being governed by impersonal rules were the only difference between the sentences of a language and signs like wedding rings, these advantages would have been bought at a considerable price. A sign that conveys the same information regardless of who is using it (for example, that Dummett is married) can *only* be used to convey that item of information. Wedding rings at least have the advantage that they can be used to communicate different messages depending on who is wearing them. But language too allows for the same signs to be used to convey

different messages, though in a different way: sentences are composed of words which may be recombined to form different sentences. A system of signs governed by impersonal rules which lacked this further feature would still be of fairly limited utility. None the less, it is clear that a system of signs that was *not* governed, in the main, by impersonal rules would lack a central feature of language as we know it. The form of communication such a system of signs made possible would be so limited as not to deserve the name 'assertion'.

## VII

As we saw in section V, the fundamental, content-determining rules governing our use of assertoric language must, indexicality aside, be impersonal in form. If we put this thought together with two further thoughts, first, that the requirement of verification is not impersonal in form, and second, that the requirement of truth conceived as a requirement on our use of sentences is, indexicality aside, impersonal in form, then we have at least a *prima facie* case for the conclusion that content-determining rules specify truth conditions. Admittedly these considerations fall short of a demonstration of this conclusion, for not *all* impersonal rules express truth conditions, but they do make things difficult for the only serious alternative account of content.

It would be a mistake to object that any conclusion we draw should be restricted to the non-indexical case. We cannot plausibly take one view of content where indexicality is involved and a different view where it is not. After all, an assertion made using indexical expressions can usually be made without their assistance. Just as we want to be able to see two utterers of 'Dummett is married' as having made the same assertion, so we want to be able to see an utterer of 'Dummett is married' and an utterer, in appropriate circumstances, of 'He is married' as having made the same assertion. That there is a sense in which these sentences differ in meaning is no ground for denying that they can, on occasion, be used to make the same assertion. (That is, it is no ground for denying that the sentences can on occasion be used to make the same claim, that it will sometimes be the case that, in challenging the claim made using one, we will be challenging the claim made using the other.) Once it is conceded that content-determining rules express truth conditions in the non-indexical case, their lack of impersonality where indexicality *is* involved cannot be taken as a sign that they then specify some other sort of condition. The point is rather that where indexicality is involved, the requirement of truth itself, conceived as a requirement on our use of sentences, fails to be impersonal.

A more promising way of challenging the above *prima facie* case would be

to question whether the requirement of verification is, as we have assumed, a 'personal' requirement in the relevant sense. We have assumed that a verification condition is the condition under which the speaker himself can be said to have verified, or have adequate grounds for making, the assertion in question. What one speaker is in this sense warranted in asserting, another speaker may not be warranted in asserting, so, in claiming such a condition is met, a speaker claims only that *he* meets it. The idea of a verification condition, can, however, be understood more impersonally. To say that a proposition is verified is not to say that any particular individual has verified it. It is to say only that there *exists* a proof or good evidence of its truth. There is at least something to be said for the view that this is all that is required for a speaker to be warranted in asserting the proposition. Knowledge can be a collective possession. For example, that Jupiter is larger than the Earth has been established by experts to the satisfaction of other experts, and the rest of us are entitled to accept it on their authority. It is this public fact rather than any personal feat of verification which warrants each of us in asserting that Jupiter is larger than the Earth. In claiming that this more impersonal condition of warranted assertibility is met, two speakers who assert that Jupiter is larger than the Earth may well be making the same claim.

However, it is not clear that this will always be a plausible way of understanding the conditions of warranted assertibility, and in any case the move it makes in the direction of impersonality is strictly limited. It is only plausible to think of the existence of proof or evidence as warranting a speaker in making an assertion if that proof or evidence is *available*, if not to the speaker himself then at least to the cognitive community of which he claims membership. That it exists in some more abstract sense, awaiting discovery, is not to the point. Thus to claim that such a condition of warranted assertibility is satisfied is to claim that we, individually or collectively, are *now* in possession of the proof or evidence in question. To see this as the content of what is asserted is to make it impossible for individuals speaking at different times to count as making the same assertion, which is absurd. (If we cannot make one and the same assertion both before and after its truth is established, the whole idea of enquiry becomes incoherent.) There are some constraints of course. Speakers divided by centuries may fail to share the necessary concepts, and a verificationist will be particularly ready to detect conceptual change. But the mere fact of temporal distance cannot make it impossible for two speakers to say the same thing. Thus even on this relatively more impersonal way of construing the idea of a verification condition, a verificationist view of content still involves placing unacceptable constraints on who may be counted as making the same assertion.



It might be objected here that the verificationist need not see the speaker as claiming that proof or evidence is actually in anyone's possession. Dummett refers to the content of an assertion as being 'that the statement asserted has been *or is capable of being* verified'.<sup>19</sup> However, it is clear that a statement is capable of being verified for Dummett only if its proof is in some sense accessible to *us*. If we are to avoid the result that speakers speaking at different times are unable to make the same assertion, the content-determining criterion of correct use must be wholly impersonal. We must eliminate all implicit reference to the speaker or his community.<sup>20</sup> Now it is certainly possible to construct a wholly impersonal criterion of correct assertion out of ostensibly verificationist materials. Thus we might see it as correct to assert that P if, and only if, P could be or could have been verified by someone at some time. Alternatively, we might see it as correct to assert that P if, and only if, P either has been or will at some time be verified. In claiming that either of these requirements are satisfied, different speakers making the same assertion will make the same claim regardless of their situation. However, in transforming verification conditions into wholly impersonal criteria of correct assertion – in turning them, that is, into adequate surrogates for truth conditions – we find ourselves facing two further questions, one about their motivation and the other about their identity.

To take the question of motivation first, it is not clear what advantage such wholly impersonal verification conditions are supposed to possess over truth conditions. There is much the same gap between their being satisfied and our having grounds for believing them to be satisfied as there is between an assertion being true and our having grounds for believing it to be true. They are certainly no more decidable than truth conditions, and the mere fact that they are satisfied, as distinct from the fact of the speaker knowing them to be satisfied, provides the speaker with no epistemic warrant for making the assertion in question. They are, to use Dummett's distinction, conditions of an assertion's objective correctness rather than of the speaker's personal entitlement to make it,<sup>21</sup> and hence are not conditions of warranted assertibility in the usual sense. It is simply unclear why we should see them, rather than truth conditions, as the central, content-determining conditions of correct use. Indeed, it is unclear why we

<sup>19</sup> Dummett, 'What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', p. 117 (my italics).

<sup>20</sup> Crispin Wright's notion of 'superassertibility' makes a move in the direction of impersonality relative to the more usual notion of assertibility, but his view seems to be that an anti-realist cannot consistently embrace wholly impersonal content-determining conditions of correct use. See Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, ch. 9, pp. 298–302.

<sup>21</sup> Dummett's 'What Is a Theory of Meaning?' (II), p. 119. Dummett accepts that in the general case (i.e., in all but the 'most primitive' case, on which see section VIII below) an assertion's content is determined by the condition of its objective correctness rather than by the condition of the speaker's personal entitlement to make it.

should see them as identifying any sort of criterion of correct use.

The real difficulty is not, however, that impersonally construed verification conditions are poorly motivated. The real difficulty is that once it is conceded, for whatever reason, that language is a system of signs governed at the most fundamental level by strictly impersonal rules, it is simply unclear why we should regard the conditions these rules specify as verification conditions rather than truth conditions. Any attempt to distinguish between verification and truth must begin with the thought that, unlike truth, verification involves a relationship to a knowing subject. Impersonal talk of the 'existence' of evidence or proof presupposes a conception of the conditions under which an individual can be said to come to know something by obtaining and grasping the significance of such evidence or proof. In the absence of this relationship with a more fundamental, less impersonal level of talk about the conditions of warranted assertibility, we have no reason to regard what is spoken of in impersonal terms as having any connection with verification. But that is precisely the situation we find ourselves in with the content-determining rules of language. In the central, non-indexical case, these rules specify impersonal conditions of correct use which are fundamental in the sense that their capacity to endow our use of language with the significance they do presupposes no relation to other, less impersonal conditions of correct use. The verificationist faces the following dilemma: either the conditions of correct use he invokes are conditions under which a speaker can be said to have adequate grounds for saying what he says, in which case they are disqualified as determinants of content for the reasons we have given; or it is conceded that as determinants of content they must be impersonal in form, in which case it is unclear why we should think of them as verification conditions.

## VIII

The requirement that content-determining rules be impersonal in form rules out the only well canvassed alternative to a truth-condition account of content. However, an opponent of the truth-condition account might concede the difficulty of classifying the most fundamental conditions of correct use as verification conditions and still resist classifying them as truth conditions. Thus Dummett has suggested that at the level of 'the most primitive employment of assertoric sentences', the distinction between an assertion being false and its being made on inadequate grounds simply has no place.<sup>22</sup> This distinction gets a grip, Dummett believes, only with

<sup>22</sup> Dummett, 'What Is a Theory of Meaning?' (II), p. 85. See also the postscript to 'Truth' in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, pp. 22-3.

the introduction of the future tense and the use of assertoric sentences as constituents in more complex sentences such as conditionals. At the more primitive level, our use of assertoric language reflects a root notion of correct assertion indeterminate between truth and adequacy of grounds. At that level, content must be seen as a function of conditions of correct assertion which are strictly neither truth conditions nor verification conditions. It is not entirely clear whether Dummett is referring here to a subset of our current uses of assertoric language or to a primitive form of language which has now been superseded. Either way, the claim falls short of a wholesale rejection of a truth-condition account of content, but it is none the less worth asking whether it could be correct as an account of any use of assertoric language.

Dummett leaves it unclear exactly how we are to conceive of this root notion of correct assertion, but there are only two possibilities that need concern us: either it shares the impersonality of truth or it does not. If it does not, we shall be unable to recognize different speakers as making the same assertion and any associated practice of communication will, as argued in section V, be seriously impoverished by comparison with what an impersonal standard of correctness makes possible. In short, the use of assertoric sentences Dummett is inviting us to imagine will involve nothing worthy of the title 'assertion'. Alternatively, if this allegedly more primitive standard of correctness *does* share the impersonal character of truth, we have no grounds for refusing to call it by that name. We merely have a situation in which there is criticism in respect of truth but not, for some reason, in respect of adequacy of grounds.<sup>23</sup> More than one philosopher with verificationist leanings has been tempted to see the notion of truth as some sort of late arrival on the scene, emerging only *after* assertoric language has been established as a going concern, whether it be via the idealization of the notion of adequate grounds, as in the Peircian 'verifiable under ideal conditions' account,<sup>24</sup> or as Dummett envisages, via the differentiation of a root notion of correct assertion indeterminate between the two. What we have seen is that the same considerations that require us to tie content firmly to truth conditions also rule out the idea that truth is any sort of late arrival on the assertoric scene. Where truth is absent so too is assertion.

<sup>23</sup> There is no reason to suppose that criticism in respect of adequacy of grounds will in fact be absent from 'the most primitive employment of assertoric sentences'. Any practice worthy of the name 'assertion' will involve the possibility of different speakers making the same assertion, thus providing the occasion for a distinction between objections that amount to an objection to anyone, however placed, saying something, and objections that are concerned solely with the speaker's warrant for saying it.

<sup>24</sup> See Putnam, 'Reference and Understanding'. By contrast, Dummett's proposal at least has the merit of not requiring us to imagine a situation in which we have a notion of verification but no notion of truth. What, we must ask, would make it a notion of *verification*?

Neither of these claims will occasion much surprise. The interest of the argument we have offered for the claim that content is a function of truth conditions lies in the way it enables us to attach a more determinate sense to a familiar thesis, thus allaying the (not wholly unreasonable) suspicion that it is no more than a vacuous slogan. One does not have to be a verificationist to grant that sometimes the chief service a proof performs is that of furnishing conclusions to which we are antecedently attached with a more determinate sense.

*University of East Anglia*