

Force, content and logic

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Abstract

The Frege point to the effect that e.g. the clauses of conditionals are not asserted and therefore cannot be assertions is often taken to establish a dichotomy between the content of a speech act, which is propositional and belongs to logic and semantics, and its force, which belongs to pragmatics. Recently this dichotomy has been questioned by philosophers such as Peter Hanks and Francois Recanati, who propose act-theoretic accounts of propositions, argue that we can't account for propositional unity independently of the forceful acts of speakers, and respond to the Frege point by appealing to a notion of force cancellation. I argue that the notion of force cancellation is faced with a dilemma and offer an alternative response to the Frege point, which extends the act-theoretic account to logical acts such as conditionalizing or disjoining. Such higher-level acts allow us to present forceful acts while suspending commitment to them. In connecting them, a subject rather commits to an affirmation function of such acts. In contrast, the Frege point confuses a lack of commitment *to* what is put forward with a lack of commitment or force *in* what is put forward.

What is the relation between propositions and acts like judging, asserting or ordering? A very influential tradition takes them to be fundamentally different in kind: propositions are forceless and only provide the content of forceful acts. Some even think that acts like assertions and orders can share the same content, so that, for example, the same proposition might be asserted to be true or ordered to be made true. At the same time propositions are typically seen as the fundamental truth value bearers and as the entities that logical operations are performed on. Accordingly, propositions are taken to belong to the subject matter of logic and semantics, but forceful acts to that of pragmatics.

What Peter Geach (1965: 449) called the "Frege point" has been enormously

influential in establishing this force-content dichotomy: “... a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted; and yet be recognizably the same proposition.” From the fact that e.g. the clauses of a conditional (or a disjunction) are not asserted, the Frege point concludes that they are not assertions either. It’s only the conditional as a whole that is asserted or judged to be true. Therefore, the minor premise and the conclusion of a modus ponens argument such as (1) cannot be assertions either on pain of equivocation.

- (1) If it rains, the street gets wet.

It rains.

The street gets wet.

They must rather be forceless, viz. “propositions”. As influential as the Frege point has been and as obvious it may seem initially, in this paper I will argue that it is fallacious and offer an alternative account. It’s true that a subject who accepts a conditional like (1) thereby neither asserts that it rains, nor that the street gets wet. But it does not follow that these clauses are not assertions. They are, but the subject has performed a higher-level act of connecting them, which commits it to what I will call an “affirmation function” of the clauses rather than to the clauses themselves. In affirming the conditional, it neither commits to the antecedent nor to the consequent, but only to affirming the consequent, should it affirm the antecedent. The Frege point confuses a lack of commitment *to* a clause with a lack of commitment *in* it, that is, with a lack of assertive force.

Let me begin arguing for this proposal and developing it further by comparing it to recent suggestions by Scott Soames, Peter Hanks and Francois Recanati. These philosophers all want to naturalize propositions by reconceptualizing them in act-theoretic terms and propose that acts of predication tie the proposition together. Soames’s (2015) version preserves the dichotomy of force and content. He suggests we can predicate a property of an object without commitment to the truth of a proposition, for example, in imagination or hypothesis. This would be a further step we would take in asserting its truth, or in acknowledging or endorsing it. Hanks (2015) strongly criticizes this proposal, charging that the idea that we could ascribe a property to an object without thereby taking a position with regard to whether it actually has that property is incoherent. Anything that bears a truth value must involve such a position and thus must have force. The traditional separation of propositions as truth value bearers from force is therefore untenable.

This argument is powerful, but it forces Hanks to challenge the Frege point head-on.

How can propositions have force and yet occur unasserted as in conditionals and disjunctions? Hanks proposes that in such cases force gets “cancelled” and introduces a sign for cancellation. A “pure”, free-standing, act of predication counts as an assertion, but if such an act is performed in special contexts such as those created by certain connectives, or by fiction, its assertive force is cancelled. Recanati (2016) instead proposes an account that appeals to R. M. Hare’s (1971) distinction between tropic and neustic force. The tropic indicates the difference between e.g. an assertion and an order. The neustic symbolizes the speaker’s “subscription” to a clause and is accordingly removed from the logical representation of the clauses of conditionals and disjunctions.

Traditional Fregean accounts, including Soames’s act-theoretic version, can be called “plus”-accounts. They assume that propositions are as such forceless, but that force is *added* in certain contexts by acts of assertion or judgment, indicated by Frege’s judgement stroke. In contrast, Hanks and Recanati propose “minus”-accounts. Their basic entities are forceful, but force or components of it are *subtracted* in certain contexts. But, I will argue now, regardless of this difference, they are subject to the same dilemma. Either the judgment stroke, or the signs for force cancellation or neustic force, make a contribution to meaning and to the validity of inferences, or they do not. If they do, they make the wrong kind of contribution. This is the first horn of the dilemma.

To see this, add symbols for force cancellation or neustic force to (1). These symbols will indicate that the (neustic) force of the antecedent and the consequent is removed, but that of the minor premise and the conclusion is not. But this means that if these symbols make a contribution to meaning and validity, they will invalidate modus ponens because both statements will once appear with their (neustic) force removed in the conditional and once with their (neustic) force intact in the minor premise and the conclusion. The same is true for Frege’s judgement stroke, which will be added to the minor premise and the conclusion, but only to the conditional as a whole, not to its clauses. So let us opt for saying that these signs make no difference to meaning and validity (as does Hanks 2016) – that they are logically meaningless, as Wittgenstein said about the judgment stroke (TLP, 4.442).

On this horn of the dilemma, the symbols turn out to be redundant. At best they indicate something that has already been indicated by other symbols, viz. the connectives. This should be obvious from the fact that where the signs are put is entirely determined through the connectives: e.g. the force of the clauses of conditionals and disjunctions gets cancelled, but that of the conjuncts of a conjunction does not. It is entirely a matter of whether the clauses are entailed by the whole complex or not.

It is really the connectives which are doing the work here and this is why I propose to extend the act-theoretical framework to logical acts of connecting, e.g. of disjoining or conditionalizing. Through such acts, the subject commits to certain affirmation functions of the connected clauses such as the conditional, but not necessarily to these clauses themselves. This is sufficient to explain why a subject that accepts our conditional in (1) does not assert that it rains. There is a temptation to think that there must be further difference between the ‘asserted’ and ‘unasserted’ occurrences beyond the presence of the connective, but, as we have seen, all attempts of both the plus and the minus variety to specify this difference only lead and can only lead to something logically idle and redundant. Therefore, there is no “neustic” force. What Hare called “tropic” force, what distinguishes e.g. assertions from orders, is all the force there is. And force in this sense does make a difference to the validity of arguments. For example, “Make it rain!” can’t detach the antecedent in our argument (1). To complete our response to the Frege point, we need to understand force, and that means we have to understand assertive force in contradistinction to the force of orders and other directive speech acts. I will just be concerned with generic assertive and directive force, not with the differences between, say, guesses and statements, or commands and requests and will use “assertion” and “order” with such generic meanings.

I propose to understand force in terms of a representation of the theoretical or practical position a subject takes up with regard to a state of affairs. In stating or asserting that it rains, the subject takes a stand or position with regard to the reality of this state of affairs (SOA). The subject takes theoretical, epistemic responsibility for this reality, it affirms it from a theoretical position. I submit that it is also aware of this position and indicates it. Through grammatical mood, intonation and other force indicators, it presents itself as having some form of epistemic, cognitive access to this SOA, perhaps even as knowing it, and thus undertakes a theoretical commitment to its reality. In ordering something, a subject takes a practical position towards the reality of a SOA. It takes practical responsibility for its realization. It affirms it from a practical position and undertakes a practical commitment to it. And again, it is aware of doing so and indicates its position through force indicators.

Now suppose a practical and a theoretical position are taken towards the same SOA. For example, you may have ordered me to close the door and now state that I have done so. You first represent this SOA as a goal and then as a fact. The order and the statement share content representing this same action, but can this content be the supposedly forceless and at the same time truth-evaluative proposition of the traditional conception? No. What is shared is mere representation of a SOA, but such a representation “is not yet a *move* in the language

game”, as Wittgenstein put it (PI, §22; his italics) in commenting on Frege’s notion of thought. To become such a move of the truth-evaluable kind it needs to be connected to a theoretical position, as truth is representational success from a theoretical position. The shared content is essentially incomplete and can only become the bearer of a truth or other satisfaction value by adding a theoretical or practical position.

I have claimed that this position is added by representing it. Different, e.g. functionalist, normativist or expressivist accounts of force are possible and have of course been given, but I believe that on reflection, the representationalist proposal is intuitively plausible. Compare representing the same SOA as a goal or as a fact. There is certainly a difference in being aware of something as a fact or as a goal, and a difference between the subject’s positions, so it is natural to think that the former consists in an awareness of the latter. (For additional arguments, see Schmitz (2018)).

For present purposes, it is crucial how this proposal can dissolve the problem raised by Frege and make sense of the inference patterns we find. In the basic case of a free-standing assertion or order, a subject represents the position she at the same time takes or reaffirms. But e.g. in conditionals a subject considers a SOA before being in the position of asserting its occurrence, typically in order to decide what else would be the case then, or what to do in this eventuality. If in response to uttering our conditional (1), somebody claimed I had asserted that it rains, I would be right to respond “I only said ‘if’!”. But the SOA of it raining *is still considered from a theoretical position*, as a (possible) fact. That is why affirming its reality by the order to make it rain cannot detach the antecedent, even though if the order were executed, the antecedent would be true. But this needs to be determined, and it can only be determined from a theoretical position. That is why the theoretical position is represented in the antecedent, and why only taking such a position by an assertion can detach it. In the conditional, however, this position is not yet taken, but only represented, because by conditionalizing the subject commits to an affirmation function of the clauses rather than to the clauses themselves. That’s why it is right to respond “I only said ‘if’!”. It commits to affirming the consequent should it also affirm the antecedent, that is, *take* the position represented in the antecedent.

To take stock, force must be part of clauses because a) anything that has a truth or other satisfaction value must involve a commitment to the reality of the represented SOA, and b) force makes a difference to the validity of inferences. But this is consistent with the fact that e.g. the antecedent of a conditional is not asserted because the subject is not committed to this antecedent, but only to one of its affirmation functions. We only need to

distinguish between the commitment *in* the clause – the theoretical or practical commitment to the reality of a SOA – from the commitment *to* the clause indicated by the connectives. The representation of a theoretical or practical position in the clause which embodies commitment to the reality of a SOA is always there, it is just that the subject may not be committed to this position, because it is not committed to the clause in which it is represented. In contrast, the Frege point fails to distinguish these different kinds of commitment and in effect attempts to infer the absence of commitment and thus of force in the clause from the absence of commitment to the clause.

Hanks and Recanati are therefore right that the basic entities are forceful. But what the notion of force cancellation tries to capture can be entirely accounted for in terms of additional acts of conditionalizing or disjoining. Analogous accounts can be given of other contexts often appealed to in this connection such as fictional or interrogative contexts. These contexts can be understood in terms of additional higher-level acts such as questioning an assertion or order, or of pretending to question, assert or order. Just like acts of logical connection, these acts allow us to present forceful acts while suspending commitment to them (cf. Schmitz, manuscript).

Let me conclude with a couple of clarifications concerning the notion of connecting acts through affirmation functions. A frequent misunderstanding is to think that such connections would be commitments to perform acts, such that by affirming our conditional in (1) one would commit to perform the act of asserting that the street gets wet if it rains. But the relevant act has already been performed. By affirming the conditional, the subject has connected the positions so that, if it affirms the antecedent, it is committed to the consequent *position* rather than to the act of taking this position – though of course it may be asked to reaffirm its commitment. The position a subject takes or the connection between positions that it makes can be seen as the *product* of the *processes* or acts of taking and connecting positions. In the sense of this familiar distinction, we can say that logic is concerned with the positions that are taken rather than with the acts of taking them, because when, where, why and by whom positions are taken is inessential to logic.

I speak of affirmation functions rather than of truth functions to gesture towards a conceptualization of logic which can deal with practical positions just as well as with theoretical, truth-valueable ones. The basic idea is very simple, namely that logic is essentially about the yes-no polarity of affirmation and negation and that this polarity is more fundamental than the polarity of truth and falsity, which is just a special case of this polarity, the case where the affirmed or negated item is a truth-value bearer. That is, to affirm a

statement or assertion is to affirm its truth, while to affirm an order, promise or intention is to affirm its realization. On this way of thinking, logic is about affirmation-functional connections between positions regardless of whether these bear truth or other satisfaction values. But developing this idea further must be left to another occasion.

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