

Questions, content and the varieties of force

Michael Schmitz

Abstract

In addition to the celebrated Frege point, Frege also argued for the force-content distinction from the fact that an affirmative answer to a yes-no question constitutes an assertion. I argue that this fact more readily supports the view that questions operate on assertions and other forceful acts themselves. Force is neither added to propositions as on the traditional view, nor is it cancelled as has recently been proposed. Rather higher-level acts such as questioning, but also e.g. conditionalizing, embed assertoric or directive acts that are forceful and committal, while suspending commitment to them. The Frege point confounds different varieties of force and the question whether something is merely presented for consideration with the question what is so presented. Force is representational: through assertoric and directive force indicators subjects non-conceptually present positions of theoretical or practical knowledge, while interrogative acts indicate positions of wondering which strive for such knowledge.

Word count (excl. bibliography and abstract): 4491

1. Questions and the Frege point

The clauses of e.g. conditionals are not asserted and therefore cannot be assertions. They must rather be forceless entities distinct from assertions, that is, propositions. Force has to be added through a separate act of assertion or judgment. What Peter Geach (1965) called the ‘Frege point’ seemed obvious to him and to many others who accepted it and the wide-ranging force-content dichotomy built on top of it. But recently this dichotomy between force/mode and propositional content has been challenged by a number of philosophers (e.g. Hanks (2015, 2016); Recanati (2016); Kimhi (2018)). Peter Hanks’s (2015) critique is simple, but powerful: anything that bears a truth value must take a position with regard to the reality of what it represents. It cannot leave open whether things really hang together in the way they are represented as being and therefore must be committal and forceful.

But how then to respond to the Frege point? According to Hanks and Francois Recanati force is not added, but rather cancelled in contexts such as those created by connectives or fiction. However, several commentators (e.g. Hom & Schwartz (2013), Reiland (2012), Green (2018)) have asked whether this ‘minus account’ is really as different from the traditional ‘plus account’ as it is made out to be. Does it really make a difference whether we think of occurrences in conditionals etc. as occurrences of propositions which are forceless as such, or as arising through the subtraction of force? In response Hanks (2016) has clarified that terminologically “cancellation” may be misleading: cancellation contexts actually contain more than non-cancellation contexts, not less.

I believe that this points us into the right direction, but that we need to move even further beyond the traditional account. Frege’s assertion sign (judgment stroke) and Hanks’s cancellation sign are ultimately equally redundant. Our account can and should be given entirely in terms of what’s more: e.g. acts of conditionalizing, or fictional acts of pretence. Such higher-level acts allow us to present forceful assertoric or directive acts without being committed to them. The idea that propositions are fundamentally different from assertions is an illusion.

Propositions just are assertions *as put forward for consideration*.

In this paper I approach the familiar issues surrounding the Frege point from the less familiar angle of questions. Why questions? Questions are the most basic way of putting something forward for consideration and frequently appealed to as such by Frege. Moreover, while Frege did not accept the idea that e.g. orders may contain the same proposition (Fregean thought) as assertions (Frege [1918] 1956), he did support his version of the force-content distinction by arguing that an assertion and the corresponding yes-no question contain the same proposition. This argument is different from the Frege point, but hasn't received nearly as much attention. In the next section I will review it and turn it around by arguing that a yes-no question must operate on the corresponding assertion rather than on something supposedly distinct from it. Questions are not on all fours with assertions or directives, but higher-level acts which can operate on either. I go on to suggest that this account of questions can be our model for a general response to the Frege point, and to give a diagnosis of where the latter goes wrong and a positive account of the meaning of force indicators.

2. Questions as higher-level acts

Frege's argument turns on the significance of an affirmative answer to a yes-no question:

The answer "yes" says the same as an indicative sentence, for in it the thought that was already completely contained in the interrogative sentence is laid down as true. So a sentence question can be formed from every indicative sentence. [...] An interrogative sentence and an indicative one contain the same thought; but the indicative contains something else as well, namely, the assertion. The interrogative sentence contains something more too, namely a request. Therefore two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the assertion. (Frege [1918] 1956: 293–94)

Through an affirmative answer to a yes-no or sentence question, a subject performs an assertion: a thought (proposition) is “laid down as true”. Frege takes it as obvious that this is only intelligible if the question and the assertion share the same thought as their content. But question and answer also contain something more. The question contains interrogative force, which Frege claims is that of a request. The answer contains assertoric force. But what is assertoric force and how can it be added to the content of a yes-no question merely by an affirmative answer?

To appreciate the force of the question, consider that “yes” is essentially a device for indicating affirmation or assent to, agreement with, or acceptance or acknowledgment of something, not for adding anything. For example, when I say “yes” in response to an assertion (rather than a question), I do not add anything to that assertion – except a subject, because I make myself a co-asserter in this way. But it seems clear that adding a subject cannot be what the addition of force amounts to. (When Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus* (§ 4.063) that Frege’s judgment stroke only indicated that he, Frege, took certain judgements to be true, this was of course meant as an objection.)

Moreover, since Frege, in contradistinction to many others (e.g. Searle 1969) did not think that, for example, a directive such as the directive to Frank to close the door and an assertion such as the assertion that he closed it, can contain the same thought or proposition, it seems that at least part of what distinguishes assertions from directives must already be contained in the thought. This point is strengthened if we consider practical questions. Practical questions have been almost entirely ignored in recent linguistic and philosophical theorizing about interrogatives. But it is hard to deny that they exist. Any directive can be turned into a practical question simply by repeating it with a question intonation, for example:

(1) Go for a walk?

An affirmative answer to such a practical yes-no question will constitute a practical commitment with directive force, even though, on a Fregean line, we should not say that this question contains directive force, but only interrogative force and what we might call a practical thought. So how can a mere “yes” constitute a theoretical commitment with assertoric force when said in answer to a theoretical question and a practical commitment with directive force when said in answer to a practical question? The conclusion seems inevitable that the questions must contain something that determines that their answers have assertoric or directive force. But what could this something be? And since it must be different from what Frege means by “force”, this makes even more urgent the questions what he means by it and how it can be added to thoughts merely by affirming them.

At this point the Fregean might retreat to the claim that asserting or judging is something “quite peculiar and incomparable” (Frege [1892]), and we might get caught up in an unproductive discussion about whether that is a legitimate move. Instead I will pursue an alternative account and then a diagnosis where Frege went wrong. On the alternative account a yes-no question is a higher-level act or (non-logical) operation performed on either assertions or directives themselves, rather than on something supposedly forceless. It is a device for presenting assertions (or other acts) in order to elicit a yes-or-no response to them.

This account can straightforwardly explain why an affirmative answer to a theoretical or practical yes-no question amounts to a commitment with assertoric or directive force: because it affirms the assertion or directive that has been presented. Accordingly, a question must contain both interrogative and assertoric or directive force indicators. I therefore symbolize the structure of questions as follows, with “DIR” for directive, “ASS” for assertoric and “?” for interrogative force:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) Go for a walk? | ? DIR (we go for a walk) |
| (2) Did we go for a walk? | ? ASS (we go for a walk) |

This representation makes clear that, to paraphrase Hanks, the question is more, not less, than what it operates on. It does not remove the assertoric or directive indicator force, but adds an interrogative force indicator. Conversely, the affirmative answer commits to the act that has been put forward for consideration *by removing interrogative force*. It agrees with the questioned act, not with the question itself – though that is also possible. That’s why we couldn’t make sense of asserting as an act of adding something to a forceless thought: because in this case it rather consisted in subtracting interrogative force. Nor was the thought forceless.

This proposal is supported by common sense at least in so far as we normally find nothing paradoxical in saying that assertions or statements, orders or plans are questioned – rather than forceless entities supposedly distinct from them. Our ordinary understanding of propositions shows the same pattern. Google dictionary defines the first sense of “proposition” as: “a statement or assertion that expresses a judgement or opinion” and the second sense as: “a suggested scheme or plan of action.” So common sense also finds nothing paradoxical in the thought that propositions could be assertions and even plans. The mistake is to think that being an assertion and being a proposition is incompatible. Being a proposition is a role assertions and other acts can have. By calling them “propositions”, we emphasize that they are merely being put forward for consideration. To think that because something is merely put forward for consideration it could not be an assertion or plan is to confuse the question whether something is merely put forward for consideration by a higher-level act with the question *what* is so put forward.

Cross-linguistic studies show that indicative, imperative and interrogative sentences are the three basic sentence types (König and Siemund 2007). This supports the hypothesis that the corresponding speech acts are also fundamental. Can we make sense of this? Hanks (2015) proposes that questions are one of three basic types of acts distinguished through their direction of fit, their kind of satisfaction conditions, and how they are reported. Assertoric acts have mind-to-world direction of fit, truth conditions and are reported using that-clauses. Directive acts have

world-to-mind direction of fit, fulfilment conditions and are reported using to-clauses.

Interrogative acts have mind-to-mind direction of fit, answerhood conditions and are reported through whether-clauses.

Like the rest of the tradition, Hanks neglects practical questions, but in one way at least their reports fit nicely into his scheme because in contradistinction to theoretical questions, which are reported through whether + finite clauses, practical questions are typically reported through whether + to-clauses:

(3) He asked whether the door is closed.

(4) He asked whether to close the door.

Theoretical questions are reported through finite clauses and practical questions through non-finite ones because we assert that something *is the case*, but direct people *to do things*, and we can only direct actions that have not yet been completed.

This pattern of reports further supports the account of questions as higher-level acts that can operate on theoretical or practical acts. The account also harmonizes well with Hanks's illuminating suggestion that questions have mind-to-mind or word-to-word direction of fit and with the ideas familiar from formal semantic accounts of questions that they have answerhood conditions and (sets of) propositions as their denotation rather than truth values. Questions, one might say, are directed at the world via inviting minds to provide answers. They are not directly satisfied by the world, but by the practical or theoretical acts that answer them. This higher-level character also explains their centrality: they perform an important function on the acts performed with the most basic sentence types, indicatives and imperatives, as well as on others, such as optatives or exhortatives.

3. Content and commitment

The argument so far has been that questions must contain assertoric or directive force indicators because it must be specified whether an assertion or a directive is being questioned and only the presence of force indicators can explain how a mere “yes” can commit to an assertion in response to a theoretical question and to a directive in response to a practical question. But how is it possible for a question to contain assertoric or directive force indicators even though it would not be correct to say without further ado that its subject asserted or directed something? If we do not dispel the residual sense of mystery, we are stuck with a mere clash of intuitions.

As a first step, let us distinguish between commitment *in* a speech act (or attitude) and commitment *to* that speech act. Consider again the order to Frank to close the door and the assertion that he closed it: two speech acts directed at the same state of affairs (SOA), one from a theoretical, one from a practical position. Now recall Hanks’s point that nothing could be a truth value bearer that did not take a position regarding what is the case. Likewise, in the practical case nothing could be fulfilled or applied that was not committal in the sense of taking a position regarding what to do. Assertoric acts tell what is the case, directive acts what to do. An assertion contains a theoretical, a directive a practical commitment to the reality of a SOA. But this commitment in the act can be suspended by higher-level acts which suspend commitment to this act and thus to the committing position it contains. So by questioning an assertion or directive, I present these committal acts, while suspending commitment to them. A conjunction will commit me to the conjoined clauses, but a conditional only to one of their affirmation functions: to affirming the consequent should I also affirm the antecedent, and so on.

Talk of commitment should not be taken to imply that there necessarily is a separate act of committing after a prior act of considering or grasping. This of course would take us right back to the Fregean picture. But the child only learns to question, to conditionalize and to pretend after it has learned to understand and to perform assertions and directives. That merely considering or merely grasping an assertion or directive is a higher-level act also means that it is

cognitively more complex and comes later onto- and phylogenetically. So in some cases commitment only means that by asserting or directing a subject has taken a position that affirms the reality of a SOA.

Some will still be dissatisfied and ask: how it is possible for an act to contain a commitment its subject is not committed to? The second major step towards dissolving the puzzle is to respond to this worry by arguing that contrary to received wisdom, force indicators are representational. That commitment is contained in the act means that it contains a representation of a practical or theoretical position that commits its subject to the reality of the represented SOA.

4. The content of force

The Frege point has been used to support a force-content dichotomy according to which force indicators mean in a fundamentally different way than content. Only content is representational, but since it is propositional it must also be truth-conditional. Force is then either construed as entirely non-representational as in traditional speech act theory, or it is in part or entirely reduced to truth-evaluable representation of what is the case as e.g. in the proposals of Donald Davidson (1979) and David Lewis (1970). But by treating (aspects of) force as part of what is the case, these proposals could at best explain non-indicative moods / force indicators, while leaving the indicative mood unexplained and privileged. This privileging of what is truth-evaluable and theoretical is endemic to truth-conditional semantics and also explains the neglect of practical questions and other practical phenomena.

Instead I propose to try out a view which treats force indicators as representational without reducing them to representation of what is the case and without taking for granted and privileging theoretical force. Through basic assertoric or directive force indicators a subject represents its theoretical or practical position towards the reality of a SOA. This representation is neither theoretical representation of what is the case nor practical representation of what to do.

It cannot be because what makes representation theoretical or practical is that it is representation from a theoretical or practical position. The SOA of Frank closing the door is represented as a goal from a position of directing him to close it and as a fact from a position of asserting that he closed it. It is not that there is another position – behind the first one as it were – from which we introspectively observe the first one as something that is the case. We rather *take* theoretical or practical positions with regard to the reality of a SOA in a self-aware way. Force indicators complete representations of SOAs to yield acts that can bear truth or other satisfaction values. In contrast, a mere representation of a SOA is not yet “a *move* in the language game”, as Wittgenstein put it (PI, §22; his italics).

But isn't this still a version of the force-content dichotomy? It is neither like Frege's view – whose thoughts cannot be shared between different forces – nor is it like Searle's. For Searle what's shared is a truth value bearer, while on the present view only something that has an assertoric force indicator can be a truth value bearer, as truth is representational success from a theoretical position towards the world. And the proposal overcomes the dualistic opposition between how force and content mean by ascribing representational content to force. It still recognizes a *distinction* between force as what e.g. distinguishes assertives and directives, and *what* is asserted or directed. This sensible distinction should not be thrown out with the dichotomy built on top of it.

The basic idea that force represents positions is compatible with different accounts of the indicated positions. I'll work with the idea that through assertion proper – as opposed to the broader class of assertoric speech acts – a subject indicates a position of theoretical knowledge. This suggestion harmonizes well with accounts according to which knowledge is the norm of assertion (Williamson 2000). How is this norm connected to assertion, one might ask? The straightforward answer is: because an asserting subject represents itself as knowing (Unger 1975). For the practical case I will use the parallel idea that in the most committal cases of practical speech acts – of telling somebody what to do, as opposed to making a suggestion – the subject

makes a claim to practical knowledge, where practical knowledge is not mere bodily skill, but discursive knowledge of what to do (author). An observation in support of this is that a practical question can be put in the form “Do you know whether to / what to do / where to go?” etc., just like a theoretical question can be put in the form “Do you know whether this happened / what is the case / where it happened?” etc.

Accordingly, a question indicates a position of ignorance or doubt and thus the absence of theoretical or practical knowledge, but it also indicates something more. Shying away from the dark unknown, one does not always want to be relieved of one’s ignorance or doubt, but by asking a question one indicates that one wants to. Frege tried to capture this additional element of questions as that of a request, but if one formulates questions as requests it becomes apparent why this account fails:

(5) Tell me whether the door is closed!

(6) Tell me whether to close the door!

The presence of “whether” shows that the interrogative element has not been eliminated. That questions can be reformulated as requests *to answer questions* hardly shows they are nothing but requests.

A better explanation is that there is something in a question that inherently strives for an answer. I propose that by questioning a subject indicates a position of wondering. Wondering is a position of being aware of one’s ignorance or doubt, of an absence of knowledge, and simultaneously striving for this knowledge. An observation in support of this is that both theoretical and practical questions can be put in the form of “I wonder whether / what / where” etc.

That the subject indicates and presents its position does not mean that it represents it conceptually. We are here primarily trying to understand force as indicated through very basic

features of language such as intonation and obligatory grammatical markers like mood. While I have appealed to paraphrases using lexical items such as “know” or “wonder” to help us conceptualize the subject’s position, I propose that basic force indicators present it in a non-conceptual way not equivalent to “I know...”, “I wonder...”, “I assert...” etc. They express the subject’s *sense* of its position rather than a concept of it. One crucial difference between having a sense and having a concept is that only the latter entails reflective abilities. A subject may be able to perform assertoric, directive and interrogative speech acts because it has a sense of the corresponding positions, without yet being able to reflect on whether it really knows what to do or what is the case.

5. The varieties of force

The representation of the subject’s committal position is what remains in the assertoric or directive act even when it is embedded in a higher-level act suspending commitment to it and thus to the represented position. The argument for this was that it must be determined e.g. whether a practical or a theoretical question is asked and thus whether a “yes” affirms an assertion or a directive. This is only intelligible if the question presents an assertion or directive. Commitment to it is expressed by affirming the presented act rather than the question and thus by removing interrogative force rather than by adding assertoric or directive force.

This is why the question is more, not less than what it questions. This is not to deny that there must also be something more present for an affirmative answer to the question to be warranted: e.g. a perceptual experience on which the assertion is based. But purely in terms of linguistic acts, the act of indicating assertoric or directive force is present in both contexts, while the interrogative act of course is only performed in the question.

Terminologically, I suggest to call the act of using a force indicator to represent one’s position vis-à-vis the reality of a SOA an assertoric, directive or interrogative act even if the subject suspends commitment to it by performing a higher-level act, but to follow common

sense in calling it an act of asserting, directing or questioning only if the subject is committed to it. I will also continue to follow common sense in calling the act that is merely put forward an assertion, statement, order, or plan etc. This means that an assertion can be put forward by a mere assertoric act. But again, an assertoric act is also an act of asserting unless a higher-level act suspends commitment to it.

Similar arguments can be given for logical and fictional acts. For example, consider the theoretical and the (also much neglected) practical conditional:

(7) If the door is closed, the wind won't come inside.

(8) To close the door, pull it towards you!

In (8) the order to close the door is needed to detach the antecedent and in (7) the corresponding assertion. The converse inferences are invalid. This is only intelligible if the antecedents contain force indicators. The same SOA is being considered, but once from a theoretical, once from a practical position. Only a matching act can detach, and commitment to it is expressed not by a Fregean assertion sign, but by repeating it while removing the conditional marker.

Our account of cancellation contexts can therefore entirely be given in terms of higher-level acts such as questioning, conditionalizing and pretending and the corresponding markers. Frege's assertion sign could only have the function of indicating the *absence* of an additional act of e.g. disjoining, joking or playacting. But if no further act is performed, the sign is redundant. At the same time, it cannot prevent the performance of such an act. As Davidson pointed out, "...every joker, storyteller, and actor will immediately take advantage" (1979, reprinted in 1984: 113) of such a sign. So, it is useless either way. But this does not mean that, as Davidson thought, a genuine force indicator is impossible. We just have to clearly separate what distinguishes assertives and directives – what Richard Hare (1971) called the "tropic" – from

what e.g. distinguishes serious from non-serious utterances and antecedents and consequents from free-standing acts.

The Frege point goes astray when it concludes from e.g. the fact that an utterance is not serious, or merely a clause of a conditional, that it was not an assertion. This confounds different layers or dimensions of meaning. As I have argued, we need to know e.g. whether the question or antecedent is theoretical or practical. That is why we must keep these dimensions apart in our analyses and our notations, regardless of whether we think of them as different varieties of force, or of force vs. other dimensions of meaning. I propose to think of what distinguishes assertives and directives as the basic kind of force, of interrogative force as a higher-level force, but of seriousness vs. non-seriousness and logical acts as belonging to different higher-level dimensions of meaning.

The cancellation account is an important advance over the Fregean account because it recognizes that committal contexts are basic and cancellation contexts more complex. However, talk of cancellation is at best a way of talking about what higher-level acts do and terminologically misleading because it suggests they remove things, for example, common implications of positions like the requirement to provide justification for an assertion (Hanks 2015). A better way to think about this is that such implications are transferred (Recanati 2016) into the dimensions indicated by the higher-level act. For example, questioning transfers the requirement from the asker to the (possible) answerer; playacting from the actor to the character played; the conditional from the context of utterance to that of detaching the antecedent. And if we think of cancellation as a separate act marked by its own sign, the cancellation account becomes a mirror image of the Fregean account and the cancellation sign just as idle as Frege's assertion sign. These signs at best only repeat what is already determined by the markers of higher-level acts. At worst, if we try to give them logical significance, they will invalidate modus ponens and other inferences (author).

There is no separate act of either adding force – Fregean assertion – or removing it

– cancellation. All the work is done by “what’s more” – by higher-level acts and their markers – and by our ordinary force indicators.

References

- Davidson, Donald. 1979. “Moods and Performances.” In *Meaning and Use*, edited by A. Margalit, 9–20. Reidel.
- . 1984. *Inquiries Into Truth And Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1956. “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry.” Translated by A. M. Quinton and M. Quinton., *Mind* 65 (259): 289–311.
- Geach, Peter T. 1965. “Assertion.” *The Philosophical Review* 74 (4): 449–465.
- Green, Mitchell. 2018. “A Refinement and Defense of the Force/Content Distinction.” In *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hanks, Peter. 2015. *Propositional Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2016. “On Cancellation.” *Synthese*, 1–18.
- Hare, R. M. 1971. *Practical Inferences*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hom, Christopher, and Jeremy Schwartz. 2013. “Unity and the Frege–Geach Problem.” *Philosophical Studies* 163 (1): 15–24.
- Kimhi, Irad. 2018. *Thinking and Being*. Harvard University Press.
- König, Ekkehard, and Peter Siemund. 2007. “Speech Act Distinctions in Grammar.” *Language Typology and Syntactic Description* 1: 276–324.
- Lewis, David. 1970. “General Semantics.” *Synthese* 22 (1): 18–67.
- Recanati, François. 2016. “Force Cancellation.” *Synthese*, 1–22.
- Reiland, Indrek. 2012. “Propositional Attitudes and Mental Acts.” *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 1 (3): 239–245.
- Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Vol. 626. Cambridge university press.
- . 1976. “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts.” *Language in Society* 5 (1): 1–23.
- Unger, Peter. 1975. *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.