

Questions, content and the varieties of force

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Abstract

In addition to the 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 and present 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 assertive 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.

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 (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 such a difference if 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 a misnomer: cancellation contexts actually contain more than non-cancellation contexts rather than 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 pretense. Such higher level acts allow us to present forceful assertive 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, 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. 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 and affirmation

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” (1). But this is only intelligible if the question and the assertion share the same thought as their content (2). This seems obvious, but to justify it we could say something like this: it is not intelligible how merely by saying “yes”, a subject would add something to the content of that question (3). (A subject might implicate something more, but we are not talking about implicature here, but about what any utterance of “yes” would say in virtue of its literal meaning.)

- 1) An affirmative answer to a yes-no question Q equals an assertion A .
- 2) This is only intelligible if Q and A contain the same thought T .
- 3) An affirmative answer to Q cannot add (content) to it. (Justifies 2))
- 4) A contains T and an assertion / assertive force.
- 5) Q does not contain assertive force.
- 6) By giving an affirmative response to Q , assertive force must have been added to Q so as to yield A . (From 4), 5) and 1); conflicts with 3))

In the next steps Frege in effect says that an assertion contains a thought plus assertive force (4), while the question does not contain assertive force (but instead a request) (5). With this Frege embraces the idea that the assertion contains more than the thought. The problem is that this commits him to the notion that a mere affirmative answer to a question can add something to the content of that question (6), and this conflicts with the principle (3) which he seems to rely on in his own inference to (2), and which in any case seems rather plausible, if not obviously true. (Note that, contrary to current terminology, for Frege content encompasses force, not only the thought. But nothing substantial hinges on this; it is hard to understand how “yes” can add force regardless of whether we count it as part of content or not.)

“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 new subject, because I make myself a co-asserter in this way. But it seems clear that this cannot be what the addition of force amounts to. (When Wittgenstein claimed in the *Tractatus* (§ 4.063) that the judgment stroke only indicated that Frege took certain judgements to be true, this was of course meant as an objection.)

But what does the act of assertion amount to then, and how can force be added to a proposition merely by affirming it? I believe that satisfactory answers to these questions from a Fregean perspective must remain elusive. It is better to pursue an alternative account and then a diagnosis where Frege went wrong. The alternative proposal is that a question is a higher level act or (non-logical) operation performed on the assertion itself. It is a device for presenting an assertion in order to get a yes-or-no response to it. That is why an affirmative answer is tantamount to the assertion. To paraphrase Hanks, the question is more, not less, than the corresponding assertion. It adds an interrogative act to it. It does not remove anything from the assertion. It would be more apt to say that an affirmative answer removes the question from the questioned assertion.

I therefore propose to symbolize questions like “Did Peter meet Holly?” as follows, with “AS” for assertive and “?” for interrogative force:

?AS (pMh)

This proposal is supported by common sense at least insofar as we normally find nothing paradoxical in the idea that an assertion or statement – rather than something supposedly distinct from it – is questioned. Likewise we do not seem to have any difficulty accepting that a proposition can be an assertion. Thus Google dictionary defines the first sense of “proposition”

as follows: “a statement or assertion that expresses a judgement or opinion.” The mistake is to think that being an assertion and being a proposition is incompatible. Being a proposition is just a role an assertion can have, namely when it is put merely forward for consideration.

The second sense of “proposition” according to Google dictionary is: “a suggested scheme or plan of action.” Accordingly, common sense has it that we cannot only question assertions, but also orders, commands, advice and other practical speech acts. A discussion of this much-neglected category of practical questions will further support the account of questions as higher-level acts.

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. I conclude that the relation between directives and practical questions is just like the relation between assertives and theoretical questions. Accordingly, if DIR represents directive force, the structure of (1) should be represented as:

? DIR (We go for a walk)

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. Assertive 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, execution or fulfillment conditions and are reported using to-clauses. Interrogative acts have mind-to-mind direction of fit, answerhood conditions and are reported through whether-clauses.

Since Hanks, along with the entire tradition, neglects practical questions, he only has reports like (2) in mind, that is, reports of theoretical questions. Theoretical questions are reported through whether + finite clause. But, as (3) shows, there are also reports of practical questions, which are reported through whether + to-clause:

(2) He asked whether the door is closed.

(3) 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 analysis of questions as higher level acts that can operate on theoretical or practical acts. That questions are higher level acts is also consonant with Hanks's illuminating suggestion that questions have mind-to-mind direction of fit and with the ideas familiar from the tradition of 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.

3. Commitments and the varieties of force

But how is it possible that a question contains an indicator of assertive or directive force even though it would not be correct to say that its subject asserted or directed something? As a first step, I propose to distinguish between commitment *in* a speech act (or attitude) and commitment *to* that speech act. Consider the assertion that Peter closed the door and the order to him to close 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 is not forceful in the sense of being committal with regard to whether things hang together in the way they are represented. The subject must 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. So any speech act (or attitude) that can bear a truth or other satisfaction value must contain a theoretical or practical commitment to the reality of the represented SOA. Assertive acts tell what is the case, directive acts what to do.

But this commitment *in* the position can be embedded in a higher level act such as questioning through which commitment *to* the position is suspended. This does not mean that the commitment in the position is somehow removed. That's why talk of cancellation is so misleading. A demonstration of this is that the committal position can be retrieved from the embedding higher level act. We saw how this happens through an affirmative answer to a yes-no question. A view that treats the question as operating on something forceless cannot straightforwardly explain this.

It's also not quite correct to say that higher level acts cancel in the sense that common implications of positions are removed so that, for example, the requirement to provide justification for an assertion is removed (Hanks 2015). A better way to think about this is that such implications are transferred (Recanati 2016). For example, questioning transfers the requirement from the asker to the answerer; playacting from the actor to the character played; the conditional from the context of utterance to that of detaching the antecedent.

To report a question or a joke just by saying that somebody asserted (or directed) something is therefore incorrect because it is incomplete. It leaves out the essential information that a higher level act was performed. One would be right to complain: “It was just a question!” or “I was only joking!”. But to understand what was said we still need to know whether I was jokingly asserting or directing, or whether my question was theoretical or practical.

The Frege point goes wrong when it concludes from e.g. the fact that an utterance was not serious, or that it was the clause of a conditional, that it was not an assertion. This confounds different layers of meaning. It confounds what distinguishes assertives and directives – what R.M. Hare (1971) called the “tropic” – with what distinguishes serious from non-serious utterances and with what distinguishes antecedents and consequents from free-standing acts. It confounds the question whether something is a proposition in the sense of something put forward for consideration with the question *what* is so put forward.

We need to clearly separate these different layers in our analyses and our notations, regardless of whether we think of them as different kinds 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 of logical acts such as conditionalizing as belonging to different higher level dimensions of meaning.

Frege’s assertion sign could only have the function of indicating the *absence* of an additional act of e.g. disjoining 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 Donald 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.

The upshot is that there is no act of either adding force – asserting – or removing it – cancelling. These notions are idle, all the work is done by “what’s more”: by higher level acts and the signs that indicate them. Accordingly, an affirmative answer to a question removes the

question mark from the assertion or directive, and an act of detaching the antecedent removes the conditional marker. This is not to deny that there must also be something more present for an affirmative answer to the question or the affirmation of the antecedent 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 assertive or directive force is present in both contexts and actually performed rather than merely displayed (pace Kimhi 2018), while the interrogative or conditionalizing act of course is only performed in the question or conditional.

To make this fully intelligible we need to understand the meaning or content of force indicators. Otherwise it will remain mysterious what it means to perform an act of indicating assertive or directive force, especially if the subject is not committed to it when it occurs embedded in a higher level act.

4. The content of force

The Frege point has been used to support a force-content dichotomy according to which force indicators mean in some 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 (or aspects of it) is reduced to truth-evaluable representation of what is the case as e.g. in the proposals of Davidson (1979) and David Lewis (1970). But by treating force as part of what is the case, these proposals can at best explain non-indicative moods / force indicators, while leaving the indicative mood unexplained and privileged (compare Ludwig 1997). This privileging of what is truth-evaluable and theoretical is endemic to truth-conditional semantics and also explains the neglect of recalcitrant phenomena such as practical questions.

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 privileging theoretical force. The way to do this is to understand basic, assertive or directive, force indicators in terms

of the subject representing 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 self-aware theoretical or practical position. 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. A mere representation of a SOA is not yet “a *move* in the language game”, as Wittgenstein put it (PI, §22).

This basic idea is compatible with different accounts of the nature of the indicated positions. I'll work with the idea that through assertion proper – as opposed to the broader class of assertive 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 (e.g. Unger 1975). How is this norm connected to assertion, one might ask. The straightforward answer is: because an asserting subject presents itself as knowing. 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 (Schmitz 2013). 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, and Searle (1976) suggested that questions are therefore a subcategory of directives. But if one formulates questions as requests it becomes apparent why this account fails:

(4) Tell me whether the door is closed!

(5) 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 a question can also be put in the form of “I wonder whether / what / where” in both practical and theoretical cases.

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 is connected to reflective abilities. A subject may be able to perform assertive, 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.

The representation of the subject's position remains even when the assertive or directive act is embedded in a higher level act. It still needs to be indicated e.g. whether we are dealing with an absence of theoretical or practical knowledge, or generally whether the reality of the SOA is considered from a theoretical or a practical position. And as I have argued, that one undertakes a commitment through an affirmative answer to a yes-no question is only readily intelligible if such a position of commitment is contained in the question and has been embedded rather than removed. Analogous arguments could be made for conditionalizing and other higher level acts. But if no higher level act is performed, the subject counts as having taken the position it indicates. No further act to add force is required.

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