

## **Peirce on Assertion, Speech Acts, and Taking Responsibility**

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C.S. Peirce held what John MacFarlane (2011) calls a “commitment view” of assertion. According to this type of view, assertion is a kind of act that is determined by its “normative effects”: by asserting a proposition one undertakes certain commitments, typically to be able to provide reason to believe what one is asserting. Peirce’s most identifiable statement of his commitment view of assertion is that when one asserts a proposition one “takes responsibility” for its truth. Despite being an early adopter of the view, if Peirce’s commitment view of assertion is mentioned at all in contemporary discussions it is only in passing. His view is, however, far more complex and nuanced than he has been given credit for. My primary goal here, then, is to get a better understanding of what Peirce thought about assertion. In order to do this, we need to situate Peirce’s theory of assertion within the broader frameworks of his theory of speech acts and his pragmatism more generally.

Figuring out the details of Peirce’s theory of assertion will not only give us a better understanding of a too often passed over aspect of Peirce’s philosophy, but can also provide us with a viable way to respond to problems that contemporary commitment views of assertion face. For example, a problem that has been raised for contemporary commitment views is that there are cases in which one performs a speech act and, by doing so, takes responsibility for the

truth of a proposition, yet does not seem to be *asserting* that proposition. These kinds of cases present problems for commitment views that either single-out assertion as the unique act that involves the undertaking of a commitment, or posits that taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition is sufficient for a speech act being an act of assertion. I will argue that Peirce's particular commitment view does not face these problems, since Peirce did not think that assertion is the sole speech act that involves taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition. What distinguishes speech acts from one another for Peirce is not that some involve undertaking a commitment while others do not; instead, by performing different speech acts we simply take responsibility for different propositions.

This paper will proceed in six parts. In section 1 I assemble some of Peirce's remarks about assertion in an attempt to flesh out a more complete theory<sup>1</sup>. In section 2 I consider a number of objections to contemporary commitment views of assertion, specifically those that view assertion as a "special" kind of speech act. In section 3 I defend the view that Peirce did not think that assertions were the sole speech act that involved the taking of responsibility for the truth of a proposition, but rather that the taking of responsibility for a proposition is a component in any speech act that involves a "compulsive act" on the part of the speaker. In section 4 I apply these arguments to Peirce's treatment of interrogatives and imperatives specifically, and in

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<sup>1</sup> Two things to note: first, although these remarks come from many different places in Peirce's work, the assemblage is not an arbitrary one: Peirce's view of assertion and other speech acts is generally consistent, and his remarks are indicative of an ongoing interest in the nature of assertion. Second, as an anonymous referee has indicated, Peirce does not explicitly distinguish between propositions and acts of assertions until after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Passages that I appeal to throughout, however, sometimes fall before the turn of the century and sometimes after it. Given the content of these passages, however, I do not think that there is any risk of conflating Peirce's respective views on assertions and propositions. While Peirce's intellectual development as it pertains to the nature of meaning, propositions, and assertions is an interesting and worthwhile one, the project that I am engaged in here is not primarily a historical one; rather, it is an investigation of what might be called a Peircean theory of assertion, and the application of such a system to problems in contemporary theories that share common features with such a theory.

section 5 I show how the view I attribute to Peirce demonstrates that his view of assertions is impervious to the objections I consider in section 2. In section 6 I briefly conclude.

## 1. Assertions and Commitments

[T]o *assert* [a] proposition is to make oneself responsible for it, without any definite forfeit, it is true, but with a forfeit no smaller for being unnamed. (CP 5.543)

The most recognizable aspect of Peirce's theory of the speech act of assertion is encapsulated in the above passage: the act of asserting a proposition involves making "oneself responsible for it." For this view to be substantial, however, we need to know both what it means for one to "take responsibility" for the truth of a proposition, as well as how assertions and taking responsibility are related. It is not terribly clear what Peirce thinks about either of these issues. The confusion is partially our fault and partially Peirce's: ours, because insufficient attention has been paid to Peirce's theory of speech acts in general, let alone assertion specifically<sup>2</sup>, and Peirce's, because his writings on assertion are generally incomplete and scattered throughout his works. Perhaps the most thorough statement of Peirce's views on assertion and responsibility can be found in the fragment "Judgment and Assertion":

If a man desires to assert anything very solemnly, he takes such steps as will enable him to go before a magistrate or notary and take a binding oath to it...At any rate, it would be followed by very real effects, in case the substance of what is asserted should be proved untrue. This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion. For clearly, every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted, to which end a reason for believing it must be furnished. But if a lie would not endanger the esteem in which the utterer was held, nor otherwise be apt to entail such real effects as he would avoid, the interpreter would have no reason to believe the assertion. Nobody takes any positive stock in those conventional utterances, such as "I am perfectly delighted to see you," upon whose falsehood no punishment at all is visited. At this point, the reader should call to mind...that even in solitary meditation every judgment is an effort to press home, upon the self of the immediate future and of the general future, some truth...Consequently it must be equally true that here too there is contained an element of assuming responsibility, of "taking the consequences". (CP 5.546)

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<sup>2</sup> There are a few notable exceptions; see Brock (1981), Martens (1981), and Atkins (2011).

The above passage suggests that by taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition one undertakes a commitment to provide reason to believe the proposition one is asserting. This commitment is rooted, in part, in the fact that by asserting a proposition one tries to convince someone (be it one's audience or oneself) of its truth. In another passage from his 1896 *Monist* article, "The Regenerated Logic: Mathematics Practical Science", Peirce adds more detail:

When an assertion is made, there really is some speaker, writer, or other signmaker who delivers it; and he supposes there is, or will be, some hearer, reader, or other interpreter who will receive it. It may be a stranger upon a different planet, an aeon later; or it may be that very same man as he will be a second after. In any case, the deliverer makes signals to the receiver. (CP 3.433)

These passages also indicate that the act of assertion is, for Peirce, an inherently social act: assertion requires the presence of a speaker and the supposition of an interpreter (even if they should be one and the same), it is to the interpreter that one makes commitments, and it is the relationship between oneself and others that grounds the nature of the commitments one makes.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Peirce's theory of assertion is the emphasis on the consequences of uttering something false. For Peirce, the commitment to try to prove that what you are saying is true brings along with it potential consequences for being proven wrong, and, as a result, if there are no possible consequences for being proven wrong (say, when one utters "I am perfectly happy to see you") then one's utterance does not qualify as an assertion. What kinds of consequences is Peirce talking about here? One of his favorite illustrations of "taking the consequences" involves a legal analogy. For example, in his "New Elements" he notes how perjury may cause "assent in judge and jury's minds [that] may effect in the minds of sheriff and posse a determination to an act of force to the detriment of some innocent man's liberty or property" (EP2: 312). It is certainly a significant, real consequence that, by committing perjury, an innocent person is punished by a sheriff and posse.

There are, though, plenty of cases of genuine assertions in which there are no *significant* consequences if it turns out that the asserter utters a falsehood: our mundane day-to-day assertions, for example, are typically not so important as to affect, say, the imprisonment of an innocent person. However, the legal analogies that Peirce draws are examples of the most stringent kind of standards for assertions: he is deliberately rendering the features of assertion more prominent in order to pick out its most salient aspects. The potential consequences, while always real, are not always so severe: elsewhere, Peirce provides an example of taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition such that if the proposition asserted turns out to be false, the person asserting is merely chastised:

Men who are ready to pronounce a thing impossible before they have seriously studied out the proper way of doing it, and especially without having submitted to a course of training in making the requisite exertion of will, merit contempt. When a man tells us something is inconceivable, he ought to accompany the assertion with a full narrative of all he has done in these two ways to see if it could not be conceived. If he fails to do that, he may be set down as a trifler. (CP 1.274)

Having a bad reputation, while not nearly as bad as being subject to penalties that a court of law might dish out, is still a real consequence. As another example, Jarrett Brock (1981) mentions similar possible consequences for asserting falsehoods, including when someone who believes the asserted falsehoods “has been damaged, misled, or inconvenienced as a result of his believing a false assertion” (286). In general, on Peirce’s view real consequences are those that one incurs as a result of not being able to adequately fulfil the commitments one has undertaken.

While it seems clear that taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition is *necessary* for making an assertion for Peirce (i.e. one’s act does not qualify as an assertion unless one has taken responsibility for the truth of the relevant proposition), it’s less clear whether Peirce thinks that it’s also *sufficient* (i.e. whether all instances of speech acts in which one takes responsibility for the truth of a proposition are acts of assertion). There are times at which it seems that Peirce

*does* think that taking responsibility for a proposition via the performance of a speech act is sufficient for asserting it. Consider, for instance, the passage above: “to *assert* that proposition is to make oneself responsible for it,” in which Peirce seems to equate the asserting of a proposition with a taking of responsibility for it. Elsewhere, Peirce states that an act of assertion,

supposes that, a proposition being formulated, a person performs an act which renders him liable to the penalties of the social law (or, at any rate, those of the moral law) in case it should not be true, unless he has a definite and sufficient excuse... (CP 2.315)

Again, this passage might lead us to think that Peirce holds the view that by performing an act that renders oneself liable to consequences should a proposition turn out false, that one *thereby* asserts that proposition. Perhaps the best evidence for the view that Peirce thought that the taking of responsibility for a proposition via a speech act is sufficient for asserting comes from the following:

A proposition may be stated without being asserted. I may state it to myself and worry as to whether I shall embrace it or reject it, being dissatisfied with the idea of doing either. In that case, I doubt the proposition. I may state the proposition to you and endeavor to stimulate you to advise me whether to accept or reject it: in which I put it interrogatively. I may state it to myself; and be deliberately satisfied to base my action on it whenever occasion may arise: in which case I judge it. I may state it to you and assume a responsibility for it: in which case I assert it. (From “Excerpts From Earlier Drafts of Carnegie Application” MS75, in Eisele (1976): 39)

On the basis of these passages, we might then think that assertion is both *a* speech act, the performance of which commits one to the truth of a proposition, as well as *the* speech act that commits one to the truth of a proposition. Conceiving of assertion in this way, however, will lead us into difficulty.

## 2. The “Specialness” of Assertion

We can portray the question concerning the relationship between assertion and commitments in a different way: is there anything *special* about assertion, such that the conditions for asserting a proposition should be importantly different from the conditions for

performing other kinds of speech acts? Certainly, assertion has been given special status by philosophers. For example, Robert Brandom (1983) states that, “No sort of speech act is as important for philosophers to understand as assertion”; Peter Pagin (2004) argues that assertion is “essentially different from virtually all other types of act”; MacFarlane (2011) states that assertion is an act that is “different in kind both from other speech acts, such as questions, requests, commands, promises, and apologies, and from acts that are not speech acts, such as toast buttering and inarticulate yodelling” (79); and John Searle (1969), argues that assertion involves a “very special kind” of commitment<sup>3</sup>.

However, the problem with the view that the taking of responsibility for a proposition when performing a speech act is sufficient for, or somehow distinguishes that act as being an act of assertion, is that there are going to be cases in which it seems that one commits oneself to the truth of a proposition via the performance of a speech act, but in which it is counterintuitive to say that one is asserting it. These kinds of cases are central to Pagin’s (2004) challenges to commitment views. His thesis is that:

Although making an assertion can be described as “making a move in the language game,” the significance of the assertion isn’t exhausted by a description of that “move,” for you can make such a “move” without making an assertion. (836)

Pagin is taking aim at the view that assertion is an inherently social act: he argues that even if assertions do involve some kind of social relationship, that relationship does not uniquely pick out a speech act as an act of assertion. Again, Pagin argues:

As far as I can see, it is correct to say that when someone asserts that *p* she *does* commit herself to the truth of *p*. She puts her authority behind the proposition, so to speak, and has to retract should it turn out to be false. The question is whether the converse also holds: is it the case that whenever I commit myself to the truth of some proposition, I also assert it? This, I think, does not hold. (838)

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<sup>3</sup> Commitment-view theorists are not the only ones who ascribe assertion a “special” role. Timothy Williamson (2000), for example, argues for the implicit specialness of assertion in defending his view that knowledge warrants assertion, but not other speech acts (see 2000, chapter 12).

Pagin provides three potential counterexamples to the view that commitment to the truth of a proposition is sufficient for assertion. First, by uttering “I hereby commit myself to the truth of *p*” it seems that I am, in fact, committing myself to the truth of *p*, but I am not *asserting* that *p*. Second, I can utter that “I guarantee that *p*,” and by doing so I seem to commit myself to the truth that *p*, but again, I do not seem to be asserting it. Finally, the same can be said of an utterance of “I promise that *p*.” As we have seen in the passages above, Peirce does, at least at times, seem to endorse the view that by taking responsibility for a proposition via an utterance one thereby asserts that proposition. It would seem, then, that Peirce also must say that in cases in which one states one’s commitments, guarantees, and promises, that one is also thereby asserting.

MacFarlane (2011) presents another problem case for commitment views of assertion. His case, like Pagin’s, targets the view that assertion is the speech act uniquely identified as the act that involves taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition:

[S]uppose I hire a lawyer to defend me in a criminal trial. I might ask her to sign a contract that commits her to vindicating my innocence in the face of challenges. It seems to me that she can sign this contract, and do so overtly, without having asserted that I am innocent. When she is at home with her family, she might assert to them that I am guilty, and she would not be subject to criticism for having asserted contradictory things. (95)

The lawyer, then, takes responsibility for the proposition ‘my client is innocent’, is subject to penalties if her client turns out to be guilty, and, say, utters the proposition in court<sup>4</sup>. It seems that the lawyer has fulfilled all of the conditions for her utterance to qualify as an assertion according to Peirce (as well as the other commitment-view adherents listed above), but it does not seem that she actually asserts the proposition. Furthermore, if we assume that she *does* assert this

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<sup>4</sup> Although MacFarlane’s example does not involve an *utterance*, it does not seem to change the example in any significant way by adding the condition that the lawyer instead (or perhaps, also) utters the relevant proposition.



proposition, we would be forced to say that she asserts contradictory propositions when she later asserts “my client is guilty” at home. But, as MacFarlane notes, she does not seem to be contradicting herself in this way.

My main argument in what follows is that Peirce’s view of assertion is not susceptible to Pagin’s or MacFarlane’s criticisms. This is because while taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition is, for Peirce, the mark of some act’s having what he calls an *assertory element*, it is not necessarily indicative of it being an act of assertion. I will argue that, for Peirce, what distinguishes an act of assertion from other speech acts is *what one takes responsibility for* in performing those acts: in the case of an assertion, one takes responsibility for the proposition asserted, whereas by performing other acts with assertory elements one takes responsibility for some different proposition, one that is determined by a combination of the explicit content of the utterance, the common-sense interpretation of it by one’s audience, and the compulsive effects of the act. Spelling out the relationships between assertion, propositions and compulsive effects is the task of the next section.

### **3. Speech Acts, Assertory Elements, and Compulsive Effects**

The passages I cited above seem to imply that Peirce endorsed the view that an act of taking responsibility for a proposition was sufficient for that act to be an act of assertion. However, Peirce cites plenty of speech acts other than assertion that involve taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition. Consider the following passage concerning “laying a wager”:

What is the difference between making an *assertion* and *laying a wager*? Both are acts whereby the agent deliberately subjects himself to evil consequences if a certain proposition is not true. Only when he offers to bet he hopes the other man will make himself responsible in the same way for the truth of the contrary proposition; while when he makes an *assertion* he always (or almost always) wishes the man to whom he makes it to be led to do what he does. (CP 5.31)

This passage seems to contradict what Peirce has said earlier (especially in the above passage from MS75): here, Peirce is saying that one can state something, assume responsibility for it, but not assert it, since one can be wagering that it is true rather than asserting that it is true. What's going on?

To answer this question we need to look at what Peirce takes to be the components of assertion. First, let us consider the proposition itself. Contemporary views of assertion do not pay much mind to the nature of propositions. Consider what the commitment-view theorists mentioned earlier say: MacFarlane refers to propositions as “the content of an assertion or conjecture” (1); Pagin seems to equate propositions with “a representation of the world” (836 fn. 10); Brandom (1994) conceives of propositions as “primitive”; Searle (1965), in the context of the discussion of speech acts, defines a proposition as the “common content” of various illocutionary acts<sup>5</sup> (226). These conceptions of propositions do not shed a great amount of light on the nature of assertion.

Peirce's view of propositions, on the other hand, was much more involved. His view of propositions does, at times, incorporate aspects of a view that resembles MacFarlane's or Searle's – for instance, Peirce states that “A proposition is a sign which is capable of being asserted” (CP 2.252) – while at other times it resembles Pagin's view – for instance, Peirce states that a proposition refers to a “state of things”, where “A *state of things* is an abstract constituent part of reality, of such a nature that a proposition is needed to represent it” (CP 5.549), and that “A proposition may be defined as a sign which separately indicates its object” (CP 2.357). However, Peirce's view of the relationship between propositions and assertions seems to be deeper than that of other commitment-view theorists: for instance, at times Peirce seems to

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<sup>5</sup> Although Searle does examine the nature of propositions in greater detail elsewhere in his works.

equate a proposition with a *potential* assertion, as in CP 2.315 when he states that “a proposition is always understood as something that *might be* assented to and asserted.”

The proposition, for Peirce, also plays a significant part in his semiotic: he calls a proposition a “Dicent Symbol”, which is,

a sign connected with its object by an association of general ideas, and acting like a Rhematic Symbol, except that its intended interpretant represents the Dicent Symbol as being, in respect to what it signifies, really affected by its Object, so that the existence or law which it calls to mind must be actually connected with the intended Object. (2.262)

Peirce’s classification of signs is complex, and I do not intend to unravel all of the complexities here. What’s most important for my purposes here is that when we assert, we assert a proposition, and propositions for Peirce consist of two components: a *predicate* and a *subject* (MS280). Risto Hilpinen (1982) describes the subject of propositions in terms of an *index*: “the subject of a proposition is an indexical symbol; its function is to direct the interpreter’s attention to a certain object or objects” (183), where an index is a kind of sign which “denotes a thing by forcing it upon the attention” (CP 3.434). Predicates, in turn, are defined in terms of what Peirce calls *icons*:

Not only is the outward significant word or mark a sign, but the image which it is expected to excite in the mind of the receiver will likewise be a sign – a sign by resemblance, or, as we say, an *icon* – of the similar image in the mind of the deliverer, and through that also a sign of the real quality of the thing. (CP 3.433)

The content of what we communicate via assertion or any other kind of communicative act, then, can ultimately be understood in terms of an icon, or set of icons. Elsewhere, Peirce spells out the relationship between icons and assertions directly: “every assertion must contain an icon or set of icons, or else must contain signs whose meaning is only explicable by icons” (CP 2.278). What happens when we assert, then, is that we try to put an icon in the mind of our audience.

Contemporary commitment views of assertion will often claim something similar, namely that by asserting we are trying to get members of our audience to believe something.

For Peirce, the commitments that we undertake by asserting a proposition are rooted in the compulsive effects that our assertion has on our audience: this is why if there are no *real* effects of an assertion – if nothing happens (or nothing could happen) when you make an utterance, if no one acts or believes (or would act or believe) any differently on the basis of your utterance – then you have not asserted at all, since there is no way in which an icon could be put in the mind of your audience. Again, we can express this in a more contemporary way – namely, in terms of belief – as long as we keep a pragmatic conception of belief in mind. For Peirce, belief and action are fundamentally connected: one does not believe a proposition if it does not impact one’s behavior or potential behavior. If one does not or would not be disposed to act any differently on the basis of an assertion, then, one does not believe the content of that assertion. If there was no way that one’s utterance of a proposition would affect anyone’s behavior, then one has not compelled any icons into anyone’s mind, and, as a result, has not asserted.

With this relationship between assertion and commitments in place, we can now see how Peirce conceives of the relationship between commitments and other kinds of speech acts. Since the commitments that we undertake by performing a speech act are rooted in the compulsive effects of that act, any other speech act that has compulsive effects will also involve the taking of responsibility. And there are clearly other kinds of speech acts that we can perform that have compulsive effects. For example, Peirce categorizes an assertion as a kind of “Pheme”, by which he means:

[A] Sign which is equivalent to a grammatical sentence, whether it be Interrogative, Imperative, or Assertory. In any case, such a Sign is intended to have some sort of compulsive effect on the Interpreter of it (CP 4.538).

Phemes are those kinds of signs that have compulsive effects, and are part of a trichotomous classification of signs, including Semes and Delomes. Peirce spells out the natures of Semes, Phemes, and Delomes in different ways at various points in his writing; generally, Semes are associated with singular terms (or “simple signs”), Phemes with sentences (or “antecedent and consequent”), and Delomes with arguments (or “antecedent, consequence, and principle of sequence”) (CP 4.538; CP 8.373). That a PHEME can take the form of an assertion, imperative, or interrogative is entailed by what Peirce says above in CP 4.538; that assertions, imperatives and interrogatives are all Phemes is entailed by impropriety of categorizing them as either Semes or Delomes, since they are neither singular terms nor arguments. To get a better idea of how Peirce conceives of the relationship between speech acts and commitments, then, I will look at how he conceives of Phemes other than assertion.

At this point, however, one might be concerned that there are more differences than similarities between Peirce’s and a contemporary commitment-view theorist’s conception of an assertion. Contemporary views of assertion conceive of it as an *illocutionary act*, which can be generally defined as an act that has a kind of illocutionary force and a propositional content, where the illocutionary force is typically defined in terms of the speaker’s intent when producing the relevant utterance (see, for example, Searle and Vanderveken (2005): 109). We might, then, be worried as to whether we can draw general lessons about contemporary views of assertion from a view that seems, on many levels, to be fundamentally different from them<sup>6</sup>. After all, while contemporary views of assertion conceive of assertion in terms of an illocutionary force, Peirce conceives of the force of an assertion in a different way:

Neither the predicate, nor the subjects, nor both together, can make an *assertion*. The assertion represents a compulsion which experience, meaning the course of life, brings upon the deliverer to attach the predicate to the subjects as a sign of them taken in a

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address this concern directly.

particular way. This compulsion strikes him at a certain instant; and he remains under it forever after. (CP 3.435)

The compulsion of experience to which Peirce refers is fundamentally tied up with his category of *secondness* – in general, the brute effect that one thing has on another, in the present context the force of experience of being compelled by an act. Does the fact that contemporary views conceive of assertion in terms of its illocutionary force while Peirce conceives of assertion in part in terms of its compulsive effects mean that we cannot apply lessons from Peirce’s view of assertion to contemporary views? I don’t think so. As we saw above, opposition to commitment views of assertion target those views merely inasmuch as they conceive of assertion as involving the undertaking of a commitment, and in this respect Peirce’s view is in the same boat as the contemporary views. It is the differences between the views, however, that are central to my purposes here: Peirce’s conception of the relationship between an act’s compulsive effects and the taking of responsibility is that which prevents his commitment view of assertion from being susceptible to the problems of contemporary commitment views face.

#### **4. Imperatives and Interrogatives**

We have seen how assertions have compulsive effects: by asserting a proposition one attempts to get one’s audience to accept that proposition as true. However, imperatives and interrogatives also have compulsive effects on our audience: by uttering an imperative sentence we try to get someone to do something, whereas by uttering an interrogative sentence we try to get someone to answer our question. According to Peirce, however, imperatives and interrogatives do not *just* have the compulsive effects of trying to get someone to do something or answer a question, respectively: they *also* attempt to get one’s audience to accept something as true. Peirce illustrates this aspect of his theory of speech acts when he states that Phemes have “assertory elements,” and provides an example involving interrogatives:

The distinction between an assertion and an interrogatory sentence is of secondary importance. An assertion has its *modality*, or measure of assurance, and a question generally involves as part of it an assertion of emphatically low modality. In addition to that, it is intended to stimulate the hearer to make an answer. This is a rhetorical function which needs no special grammatical form. If in wandering about the country, I wish to inquire the way to town, I can perfectly do so by assertion, without drawing upon the interrogative form of syntax. Thus I may say, "This road leads, perhaps, to the city. I wish to know what you think about it." The most suitable way of expressing a question would, from a logical point of view, seem to be by an interjection: "This road leads, perhaps, to the city, eh?" (CP 4.57)

There are a few key components of the above passage that are worth highlighting. Peirce portrays the difference between assertions and interrogatives as one of "secondary importance": the act of asserting and the act of questioning are not, then, fundamentally different kinds of acts. The difference between the two acts is that assertions typically involve expressions of higher modality than those involved in interrogatives, and that interrogatives have the additional rhetorical function of soliciting an answer. Peirce mentions only in passing that by the "modality" of the speech act he means its "measure of assurance", which we might think of as the degree to which one is confident in the truth of what one is saying. We might think, then, that an expression like "I am confident that  $p$ " has a higher modality than "I have an inkling that  $p$ "; Peirce's own example is that the expression "this roads leads, perhaps, to the city" has a low modality, whereas we might think that the expression "this road certainly leads to the city" would have a comparatively high modality. That interrogatives involve assertions of low modality makes sense in terms of the purpose of asking a question: if by expressing something to you I thereby also express a high degree of confidence that what I'm saying is true, then it seems to defeat the purpose in questioning that which I am confident is true.

That an interrogative has the effect of soliciting an answer is thus a product of its rhetorical function. As Peirce notes above, however, since an interrogative has an assertory element, interrogatives thus still involve our undertaking a certain kind of commitment towards

the truth of a proposition. As Peirce illustrates above, the interrogative sentence “Is this the way to town?” commits one to the truth of the proposition ‘This road leads, perhaps, to the city and I wish to know what you think about it’. This assertory element has “emphatically low modality” because one is committing oneself to something very speculative. One is still making a commitment, however, because, by asking a question, one is still trying to get one’s audience to believe something. This is clearly not the *only* thing that one tries to get one’s audience to do by asking a question; indeed, the primary point of asking a question is to try to get one’s audience to provide an answer. Nevertheless, asking a question still involves a commitment of sorts: if, perhaps, one did not actually believe that the indicated path was a possible route to town, one could be chastised for asking whether it was the correct way to town. This is because part of asking the question “is this the way to town?” involves compelling you to believe that I am interested in how you think I can get to town, or that I think you are capable of answering my question. By either making an assertion or posing a question, then, one commits oneself to the truth of a proposition, they are simply different propositions. Which propositions? In the case of the speech act of assertion, one will take responsibility for the proposition itself. In the case of other speech acts, I have argued thus far that it will depend on the proposition that is the content of the speech act and the rhetorical function of the act.

Two components that determine which proposition one takes responsibility for when performing a speech act, then, are the speaker who expresses a proposition, and the context in which it is expressed. There is a third component, however, that is necessary to determine what one takes responsibility for: one’s audience. This is because, according to Peirce, the meaning of an utterance is partially constituted by the hearer’s (or potential hearer’s) interpretation of it. For instance, Peirce notes that when “honest people” perform speech acts, “the character of their



meaning consists in the implications and non-implications of their words”, and that sincere expressions are ones in which the speaker intends “to fix what is implied and is not implied” (CP 5.447). Of course, everyday speech is rarely so precise as to leave, in Peirce’s terms, “no latitude for interpretation” (CP 5.448 fn1), and as a result it is partially up to the hearer to provide an interpretation that helps determine what is being said. This is not to say that a hearer can interpret an utterance in any which way they please. As Peirce states:

Every sign has a single object, though the single object may be a single set or a single continuum of objects. No general description can identify an object. But the common sense of the interpreter of the sign will assure him that the object must be one of a limited collection of objects... If one mentions Charles the Second, the other need not consider what possible Charles the Second is meant. It is no doubt the English Charles the Second. (CP 5.448 fn1)

The meaning of one’s expressions, then, are constrained by the common-sense interpretations of a hearer; or, in the case in which one’s audience has a problematical existence, what the common-sense interpretation of one’s potential audience would be. The proposition that one takes responsibility for when making such an expression is thus similarly constrained: one cannot simply choose to take responsibility for whatever proposition one pleases via any utterance one performs. That these constraints exist are reflected in our everyday practices of making linguistic expressions and holding people responsible for them. Indeed, we can easily imagine situations in which a hearer holds a speaker responsible for a proposition that is not the result of a common-sense interpretation of an utterance (we can imagine a speaker who rightfully pleads against certain accusations, “That’s not what I said!”<sup>7</sup>). Similarly, we can also easily

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<sup>7</sup> Peirce makes a point similar to this one, by providing the example of the utterance “A man whom I could mention seems to be a little conceited.” He says the following: “The *suggestion* here is that the man in view is the person addressed; but the utterer does not authorize such an interpretation or *any* other application of what she says. She can still say, if she likes, that she does *not* mean the person addressed. Every utterance naturally leaves the right of further exposition in the utterer; and therefore, in so far as a sign is indeterminate, it is vague, unless it is expressly or by a well-understood convention rendered general.” (EP2: 351) (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing me towards this passage.)

imagine situations in which a hearer holds a speaker responsible for a proposition that is the results of a common-sense interpretation of an utterance, but which was not the proposition the speaker intended to make themselves responsible for (we can imagine a speaker who recognizes in the face of certain accusations that “I realize I said it, but I didn’t mean to”).

There is, then, an important distinction to be drawn between the proposition that is the explicit content of an expression and the proposition that is the implicit content of an expression that is determined by a combination of the speaker, context of utterance, and hearer<sup>8</sup>. The explicit content is that which is associated with an expression’s grammatical form, whereas the implicit content is that which is associated with the intentions of the speaker, the rhetorical function of the act, and the common-sense interpretation by the hearer. My argument here, then, is that Peirce thinks that it is this latter proposition that one takes responsibility for in performing any kind of speech act. These propositions need not be different: indeed, in the case of an assertion, it happens to be the case that the proposition expressed explicitly and that expressed implicitly are the same. In other words, it happens to be the case that when asserting, one performs an utterance of the form “*p*”, and one takes responsibility for the truth of *p*. However, as we have seen Peirce does not think that the proposition explicitly expressed is of primary importance in determining the propriety of a given speech act, and, as a result, the locus of responsibility when performing a speech act is the proposition implicitly expressed<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> An anonymous referee suggested that I make this distinction explicitly, and it is to them that I owe the labels of “explicit” and “implicit” propositional content.

<sup>9</sup> An interesting consequence of Peirce’s view that the interpreter of an expression partially determines its meaning is that for every expression there is an aspect of responsibility that falls on the shoulders of the hearer, as well as the speaker, namely the responsibility of proper interpretation. And as I mention above, there do seem to be instances in which one can be an “irresponsible interpreter” of an utterance, namely when one fails to employ common sense in interpreting an utterance in the obvious way. Contemporary commitment views of assertion, however, do not, at least to my knowledge, typically discuss this kinds of responsibilities that interpreters of utterances have. As one of my central aims here is to compare the Peircean view to the contemporary view, I will continue to focus predominantly on the responsibilities undertaken by the utterer that serve as a basis for determining the propriety of a speech act.

One might think, however, that there are some questions that do not commit one to the truth of anything at all, since some questions are not ones that are intended to convey any information. Consider, for example, asking someone in a casual setting, “How are you?” This is a question that does not appear to commit one to the truth of any kind of proposition, and thus might seem to be a counterexample to either Peirce’s view or my interpretation of it that all interrogatives involve a kind of commitment.<sup>10</sup> However, as we saw above in CP 4.57, Peirce does not think that a linguistic expression, by virtue of having a form that is paradigmatic of a certain kind of act, is thereby that kind of act. We also saw earlier Peirce’s example that “It is perfectly delightful to see you” does not qualify as an assertion when expressed in a context in which one could not possibly suffer any consequences if the proposition expressed turned out to be false, and this case is exactly analogous to the case in which one utters “How are you?” under similar circumstances. Again, that such an expression should share the paradigmatic syntactic form of an interrogative does not an interrogative make. This is not to say that one could not, in another context, legitimately ask how someone is, in a way that expects the hearer to provide an answer, just as one could, in another context, legitimately assert that one is delighted to see someone. However, in the situations in which one legitimately asks how someone is doing, one also thereby commits oneself to a proposition of low modality, namely a proposition like ‘your well-being, I wish to know about it.’

I have argued that, in addition to assertions, interrogatives also involve a commitment to the truth of a proposition. Peirce also notes that, as a *Pheme*, an imperative sentence has an assertory component, again, a component that amounts to as an assertion of low modality. We should also, then, expect imperative sentences to be structured in the same way as interrogatives:

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I address this kind of case.

we might think that they differ from assertions again only in a “secondary sense”, where their rhetorical function would be something like “commanding someone to do something.” It is somewhat strange, then, what Peirce says in “Reason’s Rules,” where he discusses an imperative sentence uttered by Jesus to his disciples:

The other illustration is afforded by the proposition ‘you will go your way into the village which is over against us.’ Jesus does not assert this proposition, that is, does not make himself responsible for it. On the contrary, he enjoins or commands it, that is, makes the two disciples responsible for it. But that does not affect the proposition itself. (MS 599)

In this example, although Jesus has issued a command, he does not take responsibility for the proposition expressed by the imperative sentence. This seems at odds with what we have seen above: if imperatives are kinds of Phemes, and all Phemes have assertory elements (and thus involve taking responsibility for something), then by performing his speech act Jesus should be taking responsibility for the truth of some proposition.

However, I think what Peirce says in this passage is misleading. While it seems right to say that Jesus does not take responsibility for the truth of *the proposition he utters* – namely ‘you will go your way into the village which is over against us’ – he *does* take responsibility for the truth of some other proposition: as was the case for interrogatives, the locus of responsibility is not the explicit proposition expressed, but the implicit one that is determined by speaker, hearer, and context. This is the proposition that captures the content of the command along with its rhetorical function and the common-sense interpretation of it – something like ‘you must make your way into the village which is over against us, I command it’. Again, by issuing an imperative we are certainly trying to get someone to do something, but we are also trying to get someone to believe something: namely, that this or that is to be done. Even an imperative sentence, then, involves a commitment of a sort: if it turned out that the proposition that Jesus takes responsibility for by uttering the imperative is false (say, that it is not the case that his

disciples must go to the village, or there is no village after all, or he is in no position to issue such a command, etc.) then he is subject to penalty.

An interpretation in which uttering an imperative sentence involves the taking of responsibility for the proposition implicitly expressed rather than the explicit propositional content of the utterance can also make sense of what Peirce says about imperatives elsewhere, namely that imperatives are not the kinds of things that can be true or false<sup>11</sup>:

Truth is the conformity of a representamen to its object, *its* object, ITS object, mind you... There must be an action of the object upon the sign to render the latter true. Without that, the object is not the representamen's object. If a colonel hands a paper to an orderly and says, "You will go immediately and deliver this to Captain Hanno," and if the orderly does so, we do not say the colonel told the truth; we say the orderly was obedient, since it was not the orderly's conduct which determined the colonel to say what he did, but the colonel's speech which determined the orderly's action... So, then, a sign, in order to fulfill its office, to actualize its potency, must be compelled by its object. This is evidently the reason of the dichotomy of the true and the false. For it takes two to make a quarrel, and a compulsion involves as large a dose of quarrel as is requisite to make it quite impossible that there should be compulsion without resistance. (CP 5.554, emphases in original)

Again, the above passage seems to be saying something similar to the passage in MS 599, namely that by uttering an imperative sentence one does not take responsibility for the truth of the proposition uttered. But by uttering his imperative sentence the colonel is still taking responsibility for *something*, some proposition that *is* made true by its conformity to its object. I have suggested here that this proposition is in part determined by the explicit propositional content of the utterance, the rhetorical function of imperative sentences, and the common-sense interpretation of such a sentence. In this case, then, the proposition that the colonel takes responsibility for might be 'deliver this to Captain Hanno immediately, I command it.' The relevant object that this sentence can conform to is the colonel's position as being able to issue a command of the relevant kind: if there is no Captain Hanno to make a delivery to, or if the

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<sup>11</sup> Many thanks to Richard Kenneth Atkins for pointing me to this passage.

colonel is unable to issue commands at all (perhaps he has been stripped of his rank), then the colonel will not be able to fulfil his commitments.

Other cases of imperatives, however, might be less open to the interpretation I have provided here. Elsewhere, Peirce gives the following example of a command:

Suppose, for example, an officer of a squad or company of infantry gives the word of command, "Ground arms!" This order is, of course, a sign. That thing which causes a sign as such is called the *object* (according to the usage of speech, the "real," but more accurately, the *existent* object) represented by the sign: the sign is determined to some species of correspondence with that object. In the present case, the object the command represents is the will of the officer that the butts of the muskets be brought down to the ground. (CP 5.473)<sup>12</sup>

We might think that, when the officer commands his infantry to "Ground arms!", he does not thereby attempt to get his infantry to *believe* anything; rather, he only attempts to get them *do* something. We might also think that, in general, the less believing the infantry does, the better: a well-trained infantry, after all, follows commands more than they think about them.

As we saw above, however, simply because an expression has the form of an assertion does not thereby make it an assertion, and simply because an expression has the form of an interrogative does not thereby make it an interrogative. The same can be said for imperatives: there will be contexts in which an expression of "Ground arms!" functions as an imperative, and other contexts in which it does not. To see why, consider what Peirce says immediately after the above passage:

However, although this condition is most usually fulfilled, it is not essential to the action of a sign. For the acceleration of the pulse is a probable *symptom* of fever and the rise of the mercury in an ordinary thermometer or the bending of the double strip of metal in a metallic thermometer is an indication, or, to use the technical term, is an *index*, of an increase of atmospheric temperature, which, nevertheless, acts upon it in a purely brute and dyadic way. (CP 5.473)

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I address this case.

The relationship between the will of the commander and the order he gives is mediated by something else, namely his belief that his order will be understood, otherwise he could not be considered to be issuing a command in any real sense, as the relationship between his will and his act would be merely dyadic and brute. My claim is that something similar has to be the case when it comes to the effect of the command on the soldiers: if there is no attempt to convey any information, but to *merely* produce a reaction, then although one's expression might have the form of an imperative, it should not properly be considered to be an instance of an imperative speech act.

Consider, for example, the following: I might leap out from behind a corner and yell, "Jump!" Since you are startled, you do indeed jump; however, even though my expression had its intended effect, this does not mean that I have issued an imperative. In contrast, if you are a student in a fitness class and the instructor yells "Jump!", it seems an imperative *has* been issued. The difference between the cases seems to come down to the fact that in the case in which I startle you there is no sense in which I am taking responsibility for the truth of anything, whereas there is in the case of the fitness instructor: in the latter case it seems that the fitness instructor is taking responsibility for the truth of the proposition, 'You ought to jump now, I command it'. Whether the command "Ground arms!" qualifies as an imperative, then, depends on whether it acts like someone startling someone or someone telling someone to do something: when the command of "Ground arms!" results in the infantry grounding their arms in a brute, unmediated way – that is, it does not require an interpretation of a sign, merely a reaction to it – the command no longer qualifies as an imperative. This is, of course, not to say that the command can *never* qualify as an imperative: as we saw above, "I am perfectly delighted to see you" sometimes qualifies as an assertion and sometimes does not, and "How are you?" sometimes

qualifies as an interrogative and sometimes does not. Ultimately, then, it is important to look past the mere syntactical form of the relevant expression when determining what kind of act is being performed: if the expression does not involve any kind of assertory element, it does not qualify as an interrogative or imperative, properly speaking.

If the syntactic form of an expression does not in itself determine that expression to be a particular kind of speech act, could there then be expressions that qualify as a certain kind of speech act – be it an assertion, interrogative, or imperative – that do not have any *linguistic* form at all? Consider, for instance, an act of gesturing towards something<sup>13</sup>: if you ask me where the library is, I can either assert that “It is straight ahead”, or I can simply point straight ahead. Would pointing, on Peirce’s account, qualify as an assertion? It seems that it would. After all, by pointing I seem to be committing myself to some truth, namely that the library is, in fact, in that direction (if you went off in that direction and could not find the library it seems that you are also justified in admonishing me). We might worry, however, that by pointing I do not seem to commit myself to the truth of any *proposition*, since pointing is, by its very nature, something that does not deal in propositions. Peirce says as much:

In ordinary life all our statements, it is well understood, are, in the main, rough approximations to what we mean to convey. A tone or gesture is often the most definite part of what is said. Even with regard to perceptual facts, or the immediate judgments we make concerning our single percepts, the same distinction is plain. The percept is the reality. It is not in propositional form. But the most immediate judgment concerning it is abstract. It is therefore essentially unlike the reality, although it must be accepted as true to that reality. Its truth consists in the fact that it is impossible to correct it, and in the fact that it only professes to consider one aspect of the percept. (CP 5.568)

However, the above passage shows that while the gestures and tones are not themselves propositional, they still seem capable of *expressing* propositions. I therefore see no reason to deny tones and gestures, at least in certain contexts, the status of being assertions.

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<sup>13</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting I address this question.



According to my interpretation of Peirce's theory of speech acts, by performing a speech act that involves taking responsibility for a proposition one does not necessarily assert that proposition. One might still be doing *something* with a proposition: a proposition can, after all, be asserted, commanded, questioned, hypothesized, promised, guaranteed, etc. By performing any of these acts with a proposition  $p$  we will still be taking responsibility for the truth of something, it just might not be  $p$  itself. As we saw above, when one asks whether  $p$  one takes responsibility for the truth of the proposition 'perhaps  $p$ , I wish to know this'; I have also suggested that in commanding that  $p$  one takes responsibility for the proposition 'you must  $p$ , I command it.' Assertion is unique amongst the illocutionary acts, then, because it is the one act by which performing it with content  $p$  makes one responsible for the truth of  $p$  itself. This is because, as Peirce claims, the compulsive effect of asserting that  $p$  involves getting one's audience to believe that  $p$ , whereas, I have argued, what we attempt to get others to believe when we ask whether  $p$  or command that  $p$  are the respective propositions that I outline above. While assertion is somehow "unique" in this way, it is still not "special": that it involves the taking of responsibility does not distinguish it from other speech acts. With all this in mind, we can now apply Peirce's theory of assertion to Pagin's purported counterexamples and MacFarlane's lawyer case.

## 5. Lawyers and Assertions

Recall Pagin's objection: I can utter "I take responsibility for  $p$ ," in which case it seems that I do, in fact, take responsibility for the truth of  $p$ , but do not seem to be asserting that  $p$ . This is a counterexample to a commitment view of assertion only if we think that such a view requires one to accept assertion as the "special" speech act that involves a taking of responsibility. But, as

we have seen, this is not Peirce's view. On Peirce's view, assertion occurs when one takes responsibility for the proposition that one utters. In Pagin's case, then, an utterance of "I take responsibility for  $p$ " *can* be an assertion, it is just an assertion of the proposition 'I take responsibility for  $p$ ,' not an assertion that  $p$ . Pagin argues that the reason why it does not seem that an utterance of "I take responsibility for  $p$ " should be considered an assertion that  $p$  is because it is consistent to make such an utterance and for  $p$  to be false, whereas it is not consistent to assert that  $p$  when  $p$  is false (839). Peirce can, however, accept all of this. What *would* be inconsistent is if one uttered "I take responsibility for  $p$ " and *that* proposition was false, namely that one did not, in fact, take responsibility for  $p$ . Pagin's purported counterexamples, then, rely on treating assertion as special in its relationship to the taking of responsibility. As Peirce shows us, this is not, however, a view that the commitment-view adherent needs to hold.

The second problem for contemporary commitment views I considered came from MacFarlane, who presented a case in which a lawyer seems to take responsibility for the truth of the proposition 'my client is innocent' while in court, yet does not seem to be *asserting* that proposition; it would seem, then, that not all cases in which one takes responsibility for the truth of a proposition by performing a speech act are instances of assertion. This case is perhaps trickier than Pagin's, since here it seems that the lawyer *is*, in fact, taking responsibility for the truth of the proposition that she utters, and thus should, even on the view I have attributed to Peirce here, be considered to be asserting that proposition.

However, we have seen that one can take responsibility for a proposition by uttering that proposition and *still* not be considered to be asserting that proposition because different kinds of utterances can have different compulsive effects. We saw above that Peirce distinguishes asserting a proposition from wagering that a proposition is true: the difference came down to

what we are trying to get our audience to believe when we either assert or wager. While the lawyer, then, can utter “my client is innocent” and take responsibility for the innocence of her client, she need not be considered to be asserting that proposition since the utterance has different compulsive effects in the courtroom than they do, say, when she is at home.

To illustrate this point further, consider the different consequences that would befall the lawyer and her client given their utterance of the same proposition. If the client utters “I am innocent” and the proposition they express turns out to be false, the client is sent to prison, and also considered a liar and untrustworthy. If the lawyer utters “my client is innocent” and the proposition she expresses turns out to be false, the lawyer is neither sent to prison, nor even considered to be a liar or untrustworthy. Rather, the lawyer faces the penalty of being considered a bad lawyer. But there is a difference (perhaps a large one) between being a good lawyer and being trustworthy: good lawyers are not ones that necessarily tell the truth, they are ones that convince you to believe beyond reasonable doubt that something is true.

The lawyer, then, while performing some speech act with the proposition ‘my client is innocent’ need not be considered to be asserting that proposition when in a court of law. Rather, we might say that she is *submitting* it, or perhaps *proposing* it as the best possible option, given the alternatives. The situation is different, however, when the lawyer returns home to her family. Outside of the court her utterances no longer have the same compulsive effects, and thus she does not utter that “my client is innocent” to her family. Her utterance that “my client is guilty” when made to her family *does* constitute a genuine assertion because she takes responsibility for the proposition that is the content of her utterance and *is*, in fact, subject to the penalties of being considered untrustworthy should the proposition turn out to be false. Thus while the lawyer may *utter* contradictory propositions at different times – ‘my client is innocent’ in the court of law

and ‘my client is guilty’ at home with her family – she does so via two different kinds of speech acts, and thus does not *assert* contradictory propositions. Submitting that  $p$  and asserting that  $\sim p$  is not necessarily contradictory behavior, and thus does not present a problem for Peirce’s take on a commitment view of assertion.

That the speech acts that the lawyer performs in the courtroom and at home have different compulsive effects and are thus different acts is furthermore a product of the respective acts having different indices. The following passage from Peirce, which I cite at length, expresses this idea nicely:

What is there in an assertion which makes it more than a mere complication of ideas? What is the difference between throwing out the word *speaking monkey*, and averring that *monkeys speak*, and inquiring *whether monkeys speak or not*? This is a difficult question... It seems certainly the truest statement for most languages to say that a *symbol* is a conventional sign which being attached to an object signifies that that object has certain characters. But a symbol, in itself, is a mere dream; it does not show what it is talking about. It needs to be connected with its object. For that purpose, an *index* is indispensable. No other kind of sign will answer the purpose. That a word cannot in strictness of speech be an index is evident from this, that a word is general -- it occurs often, and every time it occurs, it is the same word, and if it has any meaning *as a word*, it has the same meaning every time it occurs; while an index is essentially an affair of here and now, its office being to bring the thought to a particular experience, or series of experiences connected by dynamical relations. A *meaning* is the associations of a word with images, its dream exciting power. An index has nothing to do with meanings; it has to bring the hearer to share the experience of the speaker by *showing* what he is talking about... It is the connection of an indicative word to a symbolic word which makes an assertion. (CP 4.56)

As we have seen, an index for Peirce is that which “forces attention to the particular object intended without describing it” (CP 1.369); Peirce gives us the example of: “the exclamation “Hi!” as *indicative* of present danger, or a rap at the door as indicative of a visitor” (CP 2.92).

The index of a proposition uttered, then, directs our attention to a particular kind of object.

Importantly, though, Peirce does not think that the index of a proposition can be determined by any part of language. Something that *can* determine the index of a proposition is the context in

which the proposition is uttered. In several places Peirce uses the example that there is no part of language that can indicate whether the real world or a fictional world is being discussed: that “Hamlet was mad” is about Shakespeare’s fictional character or a person in the real world with the same name cannot be determined by the words themselves (CP 2.337; CP 4.172; CP 8.178). What allows us to determine whether one is discussing the fictional Hamlet or a real person named Hamlet is something that can be determined by the context: if we are watching a play or partaking in a seminar on Shakespeare the utterance “Hamlet was mad” will direct us towards Shakespeare’s fictional world, whereas if we are discussing a mutual friend, who is the troubled son of English professors, the utterance “Hamlet was mad” will direct us towards part of the real world (as we have seen earlier, part of the role of determining the meaning of an utterance will also fall to the hearer, and once again with varying degrees of leeway). That the context in which an utterance is made should in part determine which proposition is being uttered fits well with my interpretation of MacFarlane’s lawyer case: although the propositions the lawyer expresses explicitly and at home are contradictory, the contexts in which she utters them, along with the commonsense interpretation of her audience, indicates the propositions that she is attempting to get her audience to accept as true (again, it would not be commonsense to interpret the lawyer as expressing a definitive truth in the court of law, whereas it would be in the case when she is at home), and these propositions are not contradictory. This is why it would be appropriate to chastise the lawyer for uttering a false proposition at home but not in the courtroom.

Peirce’s view of assertion does, then, an especially good job of defusing objections such as those from Pagin and MacFarlane because of his emphasis on the consequences of failing to take responsibility for the truth. Since commitments necessarily involve real consequences for

Peirce, we can look at what the consequences are in a given situation to determine what kind of speech act is being performed.

## 6. Conclusion

If contemporary work on assertion mentions Peirce at all, it is in passing as example of an early version of a commitment view. However, as we have seen, Peirce's view of assertion is not only much more complex than has been given credit in contemporary views, it also has the resources to respond to problems facing its contemporary descendants. Peirce's view permits an inherently social conception of assertion without having to attribute to it any special status. By having the consequences of failing to meet one's commitments play an essential role in determining what kind of act is being performed, we can demarcate different speech acts on the basis of what kinds of propositions, should they turn out to be false, will result in real consequences for us. Contemporary proponents of commitment views of assertion, then, would be wise to look to Peirce.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Many thanks to Diana Heney, Cheryl Misak, Richard Kenneth Atkins, Andrew Howat, the audiences at the 2014 Society for the Study of the History of Analytic Philosophy annual meeting in Montreal, Quebec, and the Peirce Centennial Congress in Lowell, Massachusetts, as well as two anonymous referees, for their plentiful and insightful comments and feedback on this paper at various stages of its development.

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