Assertion and certainty

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Abstract: Assertions have a curious relationship to certainty. On the one hand, it seems clear that we can assert many everyday propositions while not being absolutely certain about them. On the other hand, it seems odd to say things like "p, but I am not absolutely certain that p." In this paper I aim to solve this conundrum. I suggest a pretense theory of assertion, according to which assertions of p are proposals to act as if the conversational participants were absolutely certain of p. I suggest that this explains why absolute certainty is not required to make assertions while it is still problematic to voice your uncertainties once you have made an assertion. By voicing your uncertainties, you thwart your very own proposal to act as if everybody was absolutely certain.

1 Introduction

Assertions have a curious relationship to certainty. On the one hand, it seems clear that we can assert many everyday propositions while not being absolutely certain about them. For instance, I can assert that I have leftovers in the fridge even though I am aware that, in principle, someone might have stolen them. On the other hand, it seems odd to say things like "I have leftovers in the fridge, but I am not absolutely certain about this." Once you have asserted something, it seems that you cannot admit any uncertainty about the target proposition. This suggests that assertion requires certainty after all.

In this paper I aim to solve this conundrum. I suggest a pretense theory of assertion, according to which assertions of p are proposals to act as if the conversational participants were absolutely certain of p. I argue that this explains why certainty is not required to make assertions while it is still problematic to voice your uncertainties once you have made an as-

sertion. By voicing your uncertainties, you thwart your very own proposal to act as if everybody was absolutely certain.

Here is the structure of the paper. I begin by presenting the indicated puzzle about assertion in more detail (§2). I then explain the indicated pretense-theory of assertion (§3) and how it solves the puzzle (§4). I compare the resulting account to some alternative approaches from the literature (§5), before I conclude (§6).

2 Puzzle

Many authors note that assertions clash with avowals of even the tiniest amount of uncertainty. Not only familiar Moore sentences sound odd.

(1) # It is raining, but I don't believe that it is raining.
(2) # It is raining, but I don't know that it is raining.

As e.g. Mandelkern & Dorst (2022: 13) point out, all of the following sentences sound odd too (see also e.g. Unger 1971: 259–260; Stanley 2008: 47; Cappelen 2011; Mandelkern 2021: 58).

(3) # John will bring Indian, but I'm not completely confident that he will.
(4) # John will bring Indian, but there's the tiniest chance that he won't.
(5) # Miriam lost, but I wouldn't bet my life that she lost.
(6) # Slippery Pete's going to win this, but I'm not absolutely certain he will.
(7) # The butternut squash are in aisle 4, but I can't absolutely, infallibly rule out every possibility in which they aren't.

These data suggest that assertion is very strong and somehow requires absolute certainty on behalf of the speaker.

But this cannot be right. Assertion isn't that strong. For instance, I might say "It's raining" as I enter the apartment while being fully aware that, in principle, it might have stopped raining while I was in the hallway. We can spell this out with some linguistic observations. First, it is frequently odd to continue an assertion with an overt statement of absolute certainty even when the assertion would otherwise be fine. The following sentences, for instance, could be odd even in a situation where it would be fine to say "It is raining" (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 15n20).

(8) # It is raining, and I am absolutely certain about this.

(9) # It is raining, and there isn't even the tiniest chance that it is not.

Second, it is odd to ask asserters about a presumed state of absolute certainty. For instance, B's questions in the following dialogue are odd while they should be fine if A's assertion required A to be absolutely certain (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 14).

(10) A: It is raining.
B: # Why are you willing to bet your life on that? / What makes you absolutely certain of that? / When did you become absolutely certain of that?

Third, in some linguistic contexts, it can even be fine to admit that one is less than fully certain of a previously asserted proposition while standing by the assertion (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 14).

(11) *Z invited A, B and C to her party. A and B are discussing what to bring.*
A: Z said we should bring snacks and drinks.
B: C bought snacks already.
A: Are you *absolutely* certain?
B: I am not *absolutely* certain, but I stand by what I said.

The latter data suggest that assertions do not require absolute certainty while the Moorean sentences above suggest that they do. In the following, I propose a solution to this conundrum.

3 Towards a solution

The proposed solution centrally relies on the following hypothesis about the nature of assertion.

Assertion If x asserts p, then x proposes that the conversational participants act as if they are absolutely certain of p.

The major selling point of this hypothesis is that it solves the outlined puzzle, but it is also rooted in familiar thoughts. According to Stalnaker and many others, assertions are proposals to update the common ground with the asserted proposition (e.g. Stalnaker 1978).

Update If x asserts p, then x proposes to add p to the common ground.

Initially, it may seem natural to define the common ground in terms of mutual belief.

Common ground p is common ground iff the conversational participants mutually believe p, i.e., they believe p, believe that all believe p, etc.

As Stalnaker (2002: 715–20, 2014: 45–6) points out, though, propositions can be common ground without being mutually believed—e.g. when we make temporary assumptions or accommodate false beliefs to simplify the conversation—and they can be mutually believed without being common ground—e.g. when some interlocutor refuses to acknowledge an obvious truth. He thus suggests that the common ground should be defined in terms of acceptance rather than belief, and he offers the following definition (see Stalnaker 2014: 25; see also Stalnaker 2002: 716 for a slightly different definition that would equally serve my purposes).

Common ground* p is common ground iff the conversational participants mutually accept p, i.e., they accept p, accept that all accept p, etc.

Now the notion of acceptance can be understood in many ways, and Stalnaker himself offers various definitions. Sometimes he suggests that accepting a proposition entails that one "ignores, at least temporarily, and perhaps in a limited context, the possibility that it is false" (Stalnaker 2002: 716; see also Stalnaker 1984: 79), where ignoring the *possibility* of falsehood arguably entails treating the target proposition as absolutely certain.[1] Given this understanding of acceptance, and focusing on just the first iteration of acceptance in Common ground*, Update and Common ground* suggest the principle Assertion above. (I focus on the first iteration only for simplicity.)

Some remarks are in order. First, it can be rational for conversational participants to act as if they are absolutely certain of a given proposition even if they are not, that is, they can rationally accept the proposals asserters make according to Assertion. It is a common theme in the literature on individual decision-making that it is often rational to treat merely probable propositions as certain to simplify your reasoning. As e.g. Harsanyi (1985: 2) puts it, "[i]f we do not have enough evidence to assign probability 1 to a given statement, then its

[1] See e.g. Locke 2015: 87. Harsanyi (1985: 5) independently develops a notion of acceptance which entails that one treats the accepted proposition "*as if* [one] assigned probability 1 to it, even though in actual fact [one] assigns only a *lower* probability to it." See also Dinges 2022: 579–80.

acceptance as a true statement can never be *intrinsically* justified, though it may be justified *instrumentally* as a policy simplifying or [sic] decision-making process" (see also e.g. Bratman 1992; Ross & Schroeder 2014; Staffel 2019 and Dinges 2021, 2022). Ideally, we always reason with our actual credences, but due to our cognitive limitations, we sometimes have to take things for granted in order to reach any decision at all. To the extent that this holds in individual reasoning, there is all the more reason to think it holds in joint deliberation in conversation. It is hard enough to make up one's own mind. It is even harder to coordinate on a joint perspective on the world.

Second, and relatedly, acting as if you are absolutely certain of p in the sense relevant for Assertion doesn't entail you do everything that someone who is actually absolutely certain of p would do. For instance, it doesn't entail that you (irrationally) bet your life on p when you get the chance. Similarly, a child may act as if they are a bus driver without ever entering a real bus. To act as if you are absolutely certain of p in the sense relevant for Assertion, you have to show *relevant* certainty-behavior, where what counts as relevant is determined by the nature of assertion. To a first approximation, relevant certainty-behavior is certainty-behavior that bears on the purposes of the conversation. If, for instance, we are deciding which movie to see next, then we should approach this task as if we are absolutely certain of the propositions asserted in the pertinent conversation. To figure out the details, one would have to investigate the various effects assertions can have on a discourse and reverse engineer the principles of relevance on that basis.[2] I will mainly be concerned with the effects of assertions on linguistic behavior concerning one's uncertainty as described in the puzzle above. On this basis, I will later draw out some hypotheses about what assertion-relevant pretend-certainty requires. Most importantly, I will suggest that it requires refraining from admitting any uncertainty.

Third, even setting the just-indicated questions aside, the principle Assertion is not supposed to yield a complete account of assertion. Stalnaker (2014: 89) similarly points out that he is "not claiming that one can define assertion in terms of a context-change rule, since

[2] Compare the rules of relevance in relevant alternatives theories of knowledge (e.g. Lewis 1996; Blome-Tillmann 2014). They are determined by the nature of knowledge and you figure them out based on intuitions about individual cases.

that rule will govern speech acts that fall under a more general concept. A full characterization of what an assertion is would also involve norms and commitments." For instance, it is possible to combine Assertion with a knowledge norm of assertion (e.g. Williamson 2000).

Knowledge Norm It is permissible to assert p only if you know p.

This norm may explain, for instance, why trusting hearers frequently believe what they are told rather than just pretending to do so. Trusting hearers might assume that speakers abide by the Knowledge Norm and believe what they are told on this basis. To be clear, my account is also compatible with much weaker norms than the Knowledge Norm. For instance, it is compatible with a weak belief norm as recently proposed by Mandelkern & Dorst (2022).[3]

The principle Assertion is a major ingredient in my account of the puzzle above, but two further principles are required: a principle about sincere proposals and a principle of rationality. I present these principles in the following.

I suggest the following sincerity principle for proposals, which I will qualify in one respect below. While I tend to think that this principle is descriptively adequate, I am likewise happy to see it as a partial regimentation of our ordinary notions. I am only interested in the notion of a proposal insofar as it plays a certain theoretical role in principles like Assertion that encode a Stalnakerian account of assertion.

Sincerity You sincerely propose that we φ only if you believe that we should φ.[4]

This principle seems intuitively plausible I think, and it is supported by the following two considerations. First, sentences of the following kind sound odd (see also Kauffeld 1998: 248 and Walton 2006: 198).

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[3] If any such norm holds, it follows from my views that different Moorean sentences are odd for different reasons. Some of these sentences violate the norm of assertion, others are odd for the reasons outlined in this section. I do not find this worrisome because not all Moorean sentences are created equal. Mandelkern & Dorst (2022), for instance, point out various differences between Moorean data involving belief and Moorean data involving stronger doxastic or epistemic states. Similarly, van Elswyk & Benton (2022: 9) observe that intuitions about Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty are less stable than intuitions about familiar Moorean sentences involving belief or knowledge.

[4] Walton (2006: 204) likewise suggests that a proposal "expresses an attitude toward [the proposed action], saying essentially, 'We ought to do it'."

(12) # I propose that we check the map at the next crossroads, but I am not saying that we should do this.

The given sincerity principle explains why this sentence sounds odd. The sentence sounds odd because the second conjunct reveals that the speaker was insincere when she uttered the first conjunct. Second, suppose I propose that we check the map at the next crossroads. You can properly respond "Why do you think we should do this?" This question presupposes that I think we should check the map. The indicated sincerity principle explains why this presupposition is warranted. If the speaker was sincere, she must have had this belief.

Despite the indicated support, the proposed principle is not quite correct. It has to be restricted to cases where we do not have more than one sufficiently good option. Suppose that we can order burgers or pizza and that we have no preference either way. I can properly propose that we order burgers to break the tie even though I do not believe that we should order burgers. I might only believe that we should order burgers or pizza. The indicated restriction is unproblematic for present purposes because, as we will see, the cases of interest feature no such ties. Consider e.g. the above case where I propose that we check the map at the next crossroads. This case seems to feature no tie between the option of checking the map and not checking it. Presumably, I would have had no reason to make the proposal otherwise. Correspondingly, my sincerity principle makes right predictions here.[5]

In addition to the indicated sincerity principle, I suggest the following principle of rationality.

Rationality If you believe that we should φ, then it is irrational for you to thwart our φ-ing.

This principle is a principle about collective action, about things that *we* should do. As such, it is not immediately derivable from more familiar, individualistic principles, such as e.g. the

[5] Bach & Harnish (1979: 48–9), for instance, suggest that "advisories," which include proposals, "express[] […] the belief that there is (sufficient) reason for *H* to *A*." This principle accommodates cases with ties where we arguably have sufficient reason for more than one option. At the same time, it plausibly gives rise to the sincerity principle in the main text in cases without ties. For if you believe that there is *sufficient reason* for *only one* of our options, you arguably also believe that we *should* choose this option.

"enkratic principle" that it is irrational for you to believe that you should φ while not intending to φ.[6] I still take the above principle to be a plausible generalization of intuitive assessments of individual cases along the following lines. Suppose I believe that we should carry the piano across the street. Then it is intuitively irrational for me to hide the gloves you need to carry it. Or suppose I believe that we should go to the movies. Then it seems irrational for me not to tell you when the movie starts.[7]

One may worry about counter-examples of the following kind. I believe that we should hand over our weapons to a neutral party. You agreed, but I cannot fully trust you. In this case, it might be rational to keep my weapons to be safe. Thus, it may seem rational to thwart the course of action I think we should pursue by keeping my weapons, contrary to the above principle. To respond, I am not thwarting my favored action in this case by keeping my weapons. Our lack of trust thwarts this joint endeavor, and given that this endeavor has been thwarted already, I cannot thwart it anymore. If I trusted you and still kept my weapons, then I would be thwarting my favored action. But in this revised situation, keeping my weapons also seems irrational, as predicted by the above principle. A key assumption in the background of this response is that thwarting an action presupposes that the action has not been thwarted already. This principle should be kept in mind.

If we put Sincerity and Rationality together, we get the following principle, which is key to my account of the puzzle about assertion above.

No Thwarting If you sincerely propose that we φ, then it is irrational for you to thwart our φ-ing.[8]

No Thwarting follows from the previous principles, but it is independently plausible as well.

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[6] See e.g. Broome 2013 and Kolodny 2005.

[7] Bratman (2014: 56) discusses joint intention and suggests that "if I intend our going [to NYC] then […] I need to be set not to thwart you". This principle may be connected to my principle if there is a relevant connection between intending that we φ and believing that we should φ. I will not discuss this further though.

[8] This principle differs from the principle that if you propose that we φ *and this proposal is accepted*, then you should do your part in our φ-ing (see de Kenessey 2020: 212–3). The latter principle puts normative constraints on a proposer only after their proposal has been accepted. As such, it cannot help to explain the oddity of Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty, which sound odd independently of whether the interlocutors subsequently accept or reject whatever proposals these sentences make.

Consider a case where I sincerely propose that we do not talk about politics at family dinner. Other things being equal, it would be irrational for me to go on to talk about politics, in line with No Thwarting. If, despite my proposal, everybody talks about politics anyways, I might well engage. This is consistent with No Thwarting. For if everybody talks about politics anyways, my talking about politics does not thwart my proposal anymore. This proposal has been thwarted already, and as indicated, you cannot thwart a proposal twice.

4 Solution

Based on Assertion and No Thwarting, we can explain why assertions sometimes seem to require absolute certainty and, in particular, why Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty sound odd. Suppose you assert "It is raining" and in the same context "I am not absolutely certain that it is raining." By Assertion, the first utterance is a proposal that we, the conversational participants, act as if we are absolutely certain of rain. Now if this proposal is sincere, then, by No Thwarting, it is irrational for you to thwart our acting as if we are absolutely certain. But that is exactly what you do when you assert "I am not absolutely certain that it is raining." Someone who is actually absolutely certain of rain would not normally say that, and I submit that this certainty-behavior is relevant for assertion. So, either the proposal is insincere, or the uncertainty claim is irrational. Either way, something has gone wrong, and that makes it odd to combine assertions with avowals of even tiniest amounts of uncertainty.[9]

We can also explain the data that suggest that assertions do not require absolute certainty. Consider the observation that even after a proper assertion, it is odd to say that you are absolutely certain of the asserted proposition. On my view, these statements of absolute certainty are odd simply because they are knowingly false and therefore violate whatever

[9] One may worry that my account cannot be correct because the Moorean phenomena I describe are not restricted to the linguistic domain but arise in thought as well (see e.g. Williams 2015 for an overview). I doubt that they do though, at least when it comes to "I am not absolutely certain that p." For instance, I frequently believe that I turned the stove off while being fully aware that I am not entirely certain about this, and this does not appear at all odd to me (see similarly Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 17n23). It may be odd to inwardly assert "p, but I am not absolutely certain that p," but inward assertions may target an "inner" common ground and thus the principles from above may apply (see Blome-Tillmann 2014: 63–4 for similar ideas).

"norms and commitments" govern assertions (e.g. the Knowledge Norm). Speakers are not absolutely certain of what they assert, they merely act as if this was so.[10] To be sure, a child can properly utter "I'm a bus driver!" while acting as if they are a bus driver. But this is because this utterance is not an assertion of the proposition that the child is a bus driver but some fictional correlate of that (e.g. it is a different speech act or the same speech act with a different content). I see no reason to think that the certainty claim in question is likewise fictional in this way. The same explanation can be offered of the oddity of asking asserters about a presumed state of absolute certainty. You shouldn't semantically presuppose known falsities, and you can't satisfy this norm by just pretending to do so.[11]

Consider the observation that it is sometimes fine to admit that you aren't absolutely certain of what you assert, for instance, when an interlocutor asks whether you are absolutely certain, as in dialogue (11). Initially, this may seem puzzling on my account. After all, doesn't this thwart your own proposal, just as the second conjunct of Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty?[12] It doesn't, because your interlocutor thwarts this proposal already, and as indicated, you cannot thwart a proposal that has been thwarted already. Consider the question "Are you absolutely certain?". You can refuse to answer this question, but this would be uncooperative. You can answer "Yes," but this would be knowingly false (see above). The only remaining option is to answer "No," contrary to the proposal to act as if all are absolutely certain. The question therefore makes it impossible for a cooperative and

[10] Mandelkern & Dorst (2022: 15n20) respond similarly to an analogous concern with their account in terms of Epistemic Posturing (see below).

[11] García-Carpintero (2020) defends a common knowledge norm of presupposition (see also Keller 2022 and, similarly, Hawthorne 2012: 107–8), but of course, much weaker norms would do for my purpose, even one's that merely require that the presupposition is antecedently common ground. The (probably true) proposition that it is raining may be common ground, but the (patently false) proposition that the speaker is absolutely certain of that is not.

[12] Mandelkern & Dorst (2022: 16) briefly discuss an account that, like mine, assumes a "conversation-level pretense" of absolute certainty. They take the felicity of dialogues like (11) to count decisively against this type of position. In addition, they report intuitions to the effect that, in guessing contexts, it is frequently fine to make assertions while admitting uncertainty (or even a lack of knowledge). The status of these latter intuitions, however, is unclear, and e.g. van Elswyk & Benton (2022: 8n10) reject them. I will leave guessing contexts for another occasion.

truthful speaker to uphold their proposed pretense, and thereby thwarts this proposal. The same goes for questions like "What makes you absolutely certain?" or "When did you become absolutely certain?". A cooperative and truthful speaker can only respond that they are in fact not absolutely certain, contrary to their proposal, and thus these questions thwart this proposal.[13]

To corroborate this account, consider the following dialogue.

(13) *Z invited A, B and C to her party. A and B are discussing what to bring.*
A: Z said we should bring snacks and drinks, but I think C bought snacks already.
B: C bought snacks already.
A: Great, then let's just get drinks.
B: Nah, I am not absolutely certain that C bought snacks already. Let's get snacks and drinks.

Here A plays along with B's proposal and so if B admits uncertainty, she thwarts her own proposal. B's last utterance should thus be odd on my account, and this prediction seems borne out. The utterance sounds odd, unless we hear it with special intonation that indicates a change of mind (or flag this explicitly as in "On second thought/Actually, I am not absolutely certain …").[14]

Before moving on, consider the following objection to my account. I have argued that Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty sound odd because one conjunct is a proposal to treat the asserted proposition as absolutely certain and the other conjunct thwarts this very proposal. If this is so, the worry goes, then the following sentence should sound odd too.

(14) I propose that we act as if we are absolutely certain that it is raining, but I am not absolutely certain that that it is raining.

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[13] To thwart a proposal, you do not have to make it absolutely impossible to comply. When I hide your carrying gloves, I thwart the proposal to carry the piano together even if you could carry it without them at the cost of minor bruises.

[14] The principle attributed to de Kenessey in footnote 8 may also play a role in dialogues like (13) because, arguably, the relevant proposals are accepted here (see de Kenessey 2020: 214 on the idea that failure to object can entail acceptance of a proposal).

After all, it seems that the second conjunct likewise thwarts the proposal made with the first conjunct. In fact, though, this sentence sounds fine.

Here is my response. As indicated, you can act as if something is the case in some respects but not others. For instance, I can act as if I was certain that it is raining for the purposes of contingency planning while not acting as if I was certain that it is raining for the purposes of betting on this proposition. By making an assertion, you propose to act as if we are certain in a relevant range of respects that is determined by the nature of assertion. For instance, I assumed previously that, in order to act as if you are certain in the assertion-relevant respects, you must refrain from saying that you are uncertain. Meanwhile, when you explicitly say "Let's act as if we are absolutely certain that it is raining," the context determines the respects in which you propose to act as if we are absolutely certain that it is raining. As with any form of context-sensitivity, accommodation will be a major force here. This means that, within certain limits, the contextual parameters will be adjusted such that the target utterance comes out fine (e.g. Lewis 1979: 341).

I have argued that Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty sound problematic because one conjunct thwarts the proposal made with the other. Given the previous remarks, it should be clear why this account does not carry over to sentence (14), contrary to the above concern. The latter sentence would sound problematic if the first conjunct was a proposal to treat rain as absolutely certain in just the assertion-relevant respects. But it is not. The context determines these respects, and accommodation pressures us towards a different interpretation. Specifically, it pressures us towards an interpretation where the proposal does not concern avowals of uncertainty. For otherwise, the speaker would thwart her own proposal, which would be odd. Instead, the proposal could be interpreted as a proposal to act as if we are absolutely certain of rain just for the purpose of, say, solving a salient theoretical or practical problem.

One may worry that my account still predicts too many infelicities. The following sentences sound fine even though my account may seem to predict otherwise because it may seem that the speaker thwarts their own proposal.

(15) I propose that we act as if we are certain that it is raining for the purposes of this conversation, though of course this is just a pretence: I am not certain that it is raining.

(16) Although I propose that we talk as if it's certain that it is raining, I admit that this is just a way of talking: I am definitely not certain that it is raining.

(17) Starting now, let's talk as if we were certain it is raining. Don't let the fact that you're obviously not certain bother you.[15]

My account makes no such prediction however. First, you can speak as if you are certain or act as if you are certain for the purposes of a conversation in some respects but not others, and these respects may be contextually adjusted such that the speaker of the above sentences does not thwart their own proposal. Second, consider the following sentences.

(18) # I propose that we stop talking. But let me tell you this story about Jones. …

(19) I propose that we stop talking, though, of course, you should feel free to speak up in case of emergency.

(20) Although I propose that we stop talking, I am not suggesting that we have nothing to talk about. I just think we shouldn't disturb the others.

(21) Starting now, let's be quiet. Don't let Jones' questions bother you. She's just trying to tempt you.

Sentence (18) sounds odd probably because the second conjunct thwarts the proposal made with the first conjunct. Still, the remaining sentences (19) to (21) are fine. This may be because the added conjuncts in some sense elaborate on the initial proposal, which is supposed to take effect only after these elaborations. In any case, it seems that whatever explains that the speaker doesn't thwart their proposal in (19) to (21) also explains why they don't thwart their proposal in (15) to (17).

One may continue worrying that, on my view, there should be *some* way of specifying the proposal in (14) such that the sentence becomes odd. This is not clear though, for it may just be impossible to state the assertion-relevant respects of pretend-certainty in any straightforward, context-invariant way.[16] What we can do is make aspects of these respects explicit and generate an odd sentence in this way. For instance, and as indicated, pretend-certainty of the relevant kind entails that you don't say that you are not absolutely certain,

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[15] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for these sentences.

[16] See again the comparison to relevant alternatives theories of knowledge in footnote 2. What counts as relevant in these theories cannot be stated in a sufficiently concise manner either.

and a corresponding proposal clashes with avowals of uncertainty.

(22) # I propose that we don't say that we are not absolutely certain that it is raining, but I am not absolutely certain that it is raining.

To be sure, pretend-certainty of the assertion-relevant type entails more than just refraining from admitting a lack of absolute certainty, even focusing just on linguistic behavior. For instance, it probably also entails that you don't say that you don't know p or don't believe p or that you are certain you don't know p, etc. You presumably shouldn't use any expression of uncertainty that one wouldn't normally use if one were absolutely certain of p. As indicated, though, I will not try to offer a complete account of assertion-relevant certainty-behavior here.[17]

5 Comparison

In this section, I present challenges to three alternative approaches to the initial puzzle about assertion. As will become obvious, none of these challenges applies to my proposal.

One potentially appealing approach to the outlined puzzle draws on the idea that our practice of assertion is governed by a certainty norm. A certainty norm can be stated either in terms of subjective certainty—a particularly strong form of conviction—or in terms of epistemic certainty—a particularly strong epistemic position.

Epistemic Certainty Norm It is permissible to assert p only if it is certain for you that p (e.g. Stanley 2008; Beddor 2020).

[17] One may wonder about sentences like "I am not certain that it is raining, but suppose it is." According to Stalnaker (1999: 111–2), suppositions are proposals to update the common ground just like assertions are, except that the update is merely temporary. This should guarantee that suppositions are proposals to act as if the target proposition is certain in the same respects as in the case of assertion. But then it is puzzling on my account why the above sentence sounds fine. To respond, I doubt that suppositions add contents to the official common ground. More plausibly, they add contents to "derived" or "secondary" common grounds (e.g. Stalnaker 2014: 88–94). Now for a proposition to be in a derived common ground, speakers presumably have to treat this proposition as certain in certain respects. But these respects will be more limited than the respects in which you have to treat a proposition as certain for it to be in the official common ground. Specifically, I submit that only the latter respects include avowals of uncertainty. To work this out more fully, the notion of a secondary common ground would have to be fleshed out, but this goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

Subjective Certainty Norm It is permissible to assert p only if you are certain that p (e.g. Goodman & Holguín 2022).

These norms might seem to explain the data that constitute our puzzle, but they don't, as Mandelkern & Dorst (2022) argue. The indicated norms are usually combined with the semantic thesis that the term "certain" is context-sensitive and denotes relatively undemanding states in ordinary conversations. They supposedly require "certainty" only in these ordinary senses when the context of the assertion is ordinary as well.[18] Given that, they are too weak to explain the oddity of Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty. After all, ordinary ascriptions of "certainty" combine felicitously with denials of absolute certainty (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 13–4). One could revise the indicated norms to require absolute certainty. But then they fail to explain the residual data. When a felicitous assertion has been made, it should be fine to say that you are absolutely certain of what you asserted, it should be fine to presuppose a state of absolute certainty in follow-up questions and it should be problematic to say that you lack absolute certainty when asked about your certainty (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 14).[19] None of this shows that the certainty norms are univocally false. They might be true on some interpretation, but they lack the explanatory power to solve our puzzle, unlike my pretense-based account above.

A similar approach to this puzzle would draw on the idea that sentences have so-called probabilistic contents as semantic values and that the semantic value specifically of non-probabilistic sentences like "It is raining" assigns probability 1 to the target proposition. On this view, the semantic value of "It is raining," for instance, is a probabilistic content that assigns probability 1 to the proposition that it is raining (e.g. Yalcin 2012: 136; Moss 2017:

[18] The certainty norms could instead be combined with the metaphysical thesis that certainty, or credence 1, varies with the subject's context (see e.g. Dodd 2011, Clarke 2013 and Greco 2015 for this latter position). The worries below would still apply. See additionally Worsnip 2016: 554–7 and Dinges 2022: 585–6.

[19] One could chalk these problems up to a context-shift, suggesting that standards for "certainty" somehow rise automatically when the issue of *absolute* certainty comes up, but Mandelkern & Dorst (2022: 14–5) argue I think compellingly that the standards for "certainty" aren't that volatile.

53–8, 2019: 260).[20] If we add that speakers assert this semantic value when they utter "It is raining," we can explain the oddity of Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty. Suppose assertions are governed by e.g. a belief norm.

Belief Norm It is permissible to assert p only if you believe p.

Then a proper assertion of "It is raining" requires that you believe in a probabilistic content that assigns probability 1 to rain and, according to e.g. Moss (2019: 259), this belief amounts to a credence of 1 in rain. Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty could thus be odd because, with the second conjunct, the speaker asserts that they lack credence 1 while the first conjunct requires that they have credence 1. Unfortunately, the indicated assumptions also reduce the Belief Norm to a maximally strong version of the Subjective Certainty Norm at least in the case of assertions of non-probabilistic sentences like "It is raining," and we have seen already that this norm fails to explain the residual data in our puzzle.

In a similar vein, Moss (2019: 260) herself rejects the assumption that speakers assert the semantic value of "It is raining" because she agrees that this would make these assertions "much too strong." Instead, she suggests that we speak loosely when we utter "It is raining" and thus we assert a probabilistic content that merely assign a probability *close to* 1 to rain (see e.g. Lasersohn 1999 for seminal discussion of loose talk). This might help to explain the residual data in our puzzle, but now it becomes difficult again to see why Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty are odd.

Indeed, Moss's view not only fails to explain why they are odd, it even predicts (falsely) that they are fine. One key feature of loose talk is that it comes with so-called "slack regulators" that force a stricter reading of the target expression. In the following sentences, "exactly," "precisely" and "on the dot," for instance, feature as slack regulators, forcing a stricter reading of "3pm."

(23) It is exactly 3pm.
(24) It is precisely 3pm.

[20] Formally, a probabilistic content is a set of probability spaces and a probability space is a triple comprising a set of possible worlds, an algebra of subsets over this set of worlds (the "propositions") and a probability measure that assigns probabilities to these subsets.

(25) It is 3pm on the dot.

If utterances of "It is raining" were instances of loose talk, we should find similar slack regulators, and Moss (2019: 262–3) suggests that, indeed, we do. The expressions "absolutely," "totally" and "It's certain that" are slack regulators on her view.

(26) It is absolutely raining.
(27) It is totally raining.
(28) It's certain that it is raining.

Problematically, though, one central feature of slack regulators is that they can be used felicitously in conjunctions of the following kind (e.g. Carter 2019: 174–5).

(29) It is 3pm, but it is not *exactly* 3pm.
(30) It is 3pm, but it is not *precisely* 3pm.
(31) It is 3pm, but it is not 3pm *on the dot*.

If Moss were right, then, and "It is certain that" were a slack regulator, it should be fine to say "It is raining, but it is not certain that it is raining," contrary to our initial data.

In response, Moss could abandon the idea that "it is certain that" is a slack regulator. But this would leave her with only "totally" and "absolutely" as supposed slack regulators, and this seems problematic. First, it is normally fine to embed slack regulators in e.g. the antecedent of a conditional, as in the following sentence.

(32) If it's exactly 3pm, then we can open the hatch.

Meanwhile, the relevant uses of "totally" and "absolutely" don't embed felicitously (echoic uses aside).

(33) # If it's totally/absolutely raining, then I'll take an umbrella.

Second, the use of normal slack regulators like "exactly" is not restricted to any specific register while the specific uses of "totally" and "absolutely" in (26) and (27) seem restricted to

informal conversation. Loosely used expression, then, come with at least some general-purpose slack regulators that embed, and Moss fails to provide these if she abandons the idea that "it is certain that" is a slack regulator.[21]

A final approach to our puzzle draws on the following norm of assertion due to Mandelkern (2021: 58) and Mandelkern & Dorst (2022).

Epistemic Posturing It is permissible to assert p only if you act as if you are absolutely certain that p.

This norm is very similar to the principles I have suggested, and if it holds, it also explains the data that make up our puzzle about assertion. Epistemic Posturing explains the oddity of Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty as follows. When you assert that it is raining, you must act as if you are absolutely certain that this is so. But by saying "I am not absolutely certain that it is raining," you arguably fail to act in this way, as indicated. Epistemic Posturing explains the residual data as follows. You cannot normally assert that you are absolutely certain after making a proper assertion because you normally aren't, you are just pretending and thus you would be saying something knowingly false (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 15n20). Similarly, you cannot sensibly ask about a presumed state of absolutely certainty after an assertion because no such state need exist (see Mandelkern & Dorst 2022: 15). To explain why it is sometimes fine to admit uncertainty after an interlocutor intervenes, as in dialogue (11), Mandelkern & Dorst (2022: 15) stipulate that Epistemic Posturing "only applies within single speech acts" and that there is hence "no need to maintain a pretense of absolute certainty before or after an assertion".[22]

This brings us to a first concern. In other dialogues, such as (13), it seems problematic to

[21] An alternative way to develop probabilism would be to replace the Belief Norm with a norm that requires only that the speaker believes something close enough to what they assert. On the added assumption that assertions are still proposals to act as if all believe what is asserted, probabilists could explain the data. The resulting view, however, would be just my view couched in a probabilistic framework.

[22] This account goes through only if "I stand by that" does not re-assert what has been asserted before. For otherwise Epistemic Posturing would apply, making B's last utterance in (11) problematic. One alternative would be to treat "I stand by that" as a distinct second-order speech act of endorsing one's previous assertion. I will not go into this, but see e.g. MacFarlane 2014: 108 on retraction, which he likewise describes as a second-order speech act with its own associated norms.

admit uncertainty even though one's initial speech act has passed, and Epistemic Posturing fails to explain this due to its indicated local character. Fans of Epistemic Posturing might offer supplementary explanations of these data, but I do not see what these alternative explanations would be. On my account, the permissibility of avowals of uncertainty depends on whether one's interlocutors have thwarted one's proposal to act as if all are absolutely certain. Since proposals play no role in Epistemic Posturing, fans of this norm cannot copy this account. Alternatively, they might suggest e.g. that "C bought snacks already" in (13) conversationally implicates, say, that we should rely on this, while "I am not certain that C bought snacks already" implicates that we should not. They could now suggest that the above dialogue is odd because of these conflicting implicatures. But, first, the indicated conversational implicatures should presumably be *generalized*—i.e., they should arise more or less independently of the specific context at hand (e.g. Grice 1989: 37)—because the above patterns can easily be generalized. But then they make Epistemic Posturing redundant. After all, they should already be present in Moorean sentences involving absolute certainty, and the supposed conflict should arise here too. Second, it is unclear why the conflict between the above implicatures should result in oddity rather just their cancelation. Normally, an implicature is cancelled when you contradict it later on (e.g. Grice 1989: 44).

The following two further concerns are due to van Elswyk & Benton (2022). First, van Elswyk & Benton (2022: 10) worry that a norm of assertion "performs a social role regulating the quality of information that is shared in conversation", for instance, by prohibiting speakers from asserting things they don't know. Epistemic Posturing, however, cannot perform this function because you can act as if you are certain of something entirely independently of your actual epistemic position.[23] Second, van Elswyk & Benton (2022: 10–1) worry that it is generally fine to perform a speech act and then to explicitly state that one is complying with the respective norm, as in the following sentence.

(34) The garage door is closed—I'm telling you the truth.

Meanwhile, the following sentence is odd.

(35) ? The garage door is closed, and I'm pretending to be certain of that.

[23] Mandelkern & Dorst (2022: 17) themselves grant, similarly, that it is "deeply puzzling" why a norm like Epistemic Posturing should hold.

While these concerns put further pressure on Epistemic Posturing, neither of them applies to my account. As indicated, my account doesn't entail any particular norm of assertion. The functional role of norms of assertion is thus irrelevant and so is the observation about explicit statements of norm compliance.

6 Conclusion

We started out with a puzzle. Assertions seem to require absolute certainty but then again, they don't. I have offered a way to resolve this puzzle. Assertion does not require absolute certainty, but when you make an assertion, you propose that everybody act as if they are absolutely certain to simplify the conversation. Admissions of tiny amounts of uncertainty are problematic not because there is no uncertainty, but because they thwart your proposal to act as if this was so. While this view may face residual concerns, I have shown that it is superior to alternative positions in various respects.

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