

The Strength of Assertion

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Abstract

This essay attempts to cast light on the recent debate over whether the norm of assertion is ‘weak’ or ‘strong’. I proceed somewhat indirectly, first arguing for a distinction between two classes of utterances of declarative sentences, classes that can be empirically distinguished along a number of dimensions. For example, these two kinds of utterances differ from each other in what they add to the common ground, how they are elicited, and what sorts of attitude reports they license. I suggest that whether this should be understood as showing that ‘the norm of assertion’ is weak or strong or context-sensitive appears to be largely a terminological question about which utterances of declaratives ought to be called “assertions”. But however the terminological issue is resolved, there remain interesting questions concerning what role each type of utterance plays in our epistemic and communicative practices, and I close with some remarks bearing on this issue.

Keywords: norm of assertion, knowledge, belief, common ground, pre-supposition, speech acts

1 Introduction

A number of authors have recently argued that belief is weak.¹ This thesis has been interpreted in a number of different ways, but it is sometimes taken to mean that it is rationally permissible to believe p even if one’s rational credence in p is relatively low, certainly less than 1, perhaps even less than 0.5. One type of argument for this claim concerns examples like the following (Mandelkern and Dorst, 2022, 3). Imagine a lottery with 2,000 tickets. Claire has 500 of the tickets, while 1,500 other people have one ticket each. If you’re asked who you think will win the lottery, it seems rationally permissible (though not mandatory) for you to say that you believe that Claire will win. But here it also seems like your credence in Claire winning ought to be 0.25.

¹Hawthorne et al. (2016), Rothschild (2020), Holguín (2022), and Mandelkern and Dorst (2022). For an alternative view, see Williamson (Forthcoming).

A related debate concerns whether *assertion* is weak. For example, Mandelkern and Dorst (2022) argue that, in many contexts, weak belief suffices for epistemically permissible assertion.² Thus, there may be contexts in which one is epistemically permitted to assert p (because one weakly believes it) even though one does not know p . This view thus contrasts with the well-known view that knowledge is a norm of assertion (Williamson, 1996, 2000). For the knowledge norm is often taken to imply that one is epistemically permitted to assert p only if one knows p . The view that assertion is weak also contrasts with the view that one is epistemically permitted to assert p only if one is justified in believing p , at least as that view is usually understood. For advocates of that view typically invoke a strong notion of justified belief, according to which one would *not* be justified in believing that Claire will win the lottery in the scenario described above (Douven, 2006; Kvanvig, 2009; Smith, 2022).

In what follows, I hope to cast light on the question of whether the norm of assertion is strong or weak. But my initial approach will be somewhat indirect. What I shall do in the first instance is to argue for a distinction between two classes of utterances of declarative sentences, classes which can be empirically distinguished along a number of dimensions. For example, these two kinds of utterances differ from each other in what they add to the common ground, how they are elicited, and what sorts of attitude reports they license. One class of utterances are those produced in what I shall call *guessing contexts*. In a guessing context, it is common ground that the speaker only has rather indirect evidence that bears on the question under discussion, and yet the speaker is invited to hazard a guess or prediction in response to that question anyway. The other class of utterances are those produced in what I shall call *information-seeking contexts*. A prototypical information-seeking context is one in which an utterance is produced in response to a question that is asked because the questioner wants to know the answer. For example, suppose I ask you when Presidents' Day is this year because I want to know when to book a flight. If you say, "It's on February 19th," then your utterance is produced in what I am calling an information-seeking context.

As we shall see, there is a case to be made that utterances of declaratives made in guessing contexts are subject only to a weak norm, while utterances made in information-seeking contexts are subject to a stronger norm. If that is correct, it suggests the possibility of a *rapprochement* between those who maintain that assertion is weak and those who maintain that it is strong. For one possibility is that each side may be at least partly correct: advocates of a strong norm are arguably correct when their claims are restricted to utterances made in information-seeking contexts, while advocates of a weak norm might well be correct when their claims are restricted to utterances made in guessing contexts. Whether this should be understood as showing that 'the norm of assertion' is weak or strong or context-sensitive appears to be in part a terminological question about which utterances of declaratives ought to be called *assertions*. But however the terminological issue is resolved, there remain interesting ques-

²See also Oppy (2007).

tions concerning what role each type of utterance plays in our epistemic and communicative practices.

We will proceed by looking at the different linguistic phenomena that each side of the ‘strong vs. weak’ debate uses to motivate their respective positions. One thing that emerges from our discussion is that while the phenomena motivating each side are real, they tend to concern only one of our two classes of utterances. For example, many of Mandelkern and Dorst’s observations in favor of a weak norm concern utterances made in guessing contexts and tend not to generalize to utterances made in information-seeking contexts. Conversely, at least some of the phenomena taken to support a strong norm of assertion concern information-seeking contexts and tend not to generalize to guessing contexts.

For the sake of simplicity, we will set aside the (strong) justified belief view here, and identify the claim that the norm of assertion is strong with the claim that one is epistemically permitted to assert p iff one knows p . The view that assertion is weak will be identified with the claim that, in many everyday contexts, one is epistemically permitted to assert p iff one weakly believes p .

2 Common ground

One of the principal arguments for the claim that the norm of assertion is weak involves examples in which someone permissibly asserts something despite only weakly believing and not knowing what they assert. The following example is similar to many of the cases Mandelkern and Dorst discuss (e.g. Mandelkern and Dorst, 2022, 5, 7, 10):³

- (1) There’s a primary election with five viable candidates. Marta is a close watcher of politics, but she doesn’t know what will happen—no one does.
 - (a) [Latif:] What do you think will happen in the race?
 - (b) [Marta:] I have no idea.
 - (c) [Latif:] Just take a guess.
 - (d) [Marta:] [shrugging her shoulders] Joe will win.

Observe that Marta’s utterance of (1d) is felicitous even though Marta doesn’t know, and doesn’t take herself to know, that Joe will win. Thus, this is at least *prima facie* evidence for Mandelkern and Dorst’s claim that this utterance is not subject to a strong norm.

This is a clear example of what I mean by a guessing context.⁴ It is common ground that Marta only has indirect evidence that bears on the question of

³As Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 5) observe, some of their examples do not clearly challenge the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion, even if they suggest that assertion is in some sense weak. I set those cases aside here, since I am interested in a form of the weak assertion view that conflicts with the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion.

⁴Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 12) use this term as well.

who is going to win the election, and yet she is invited to hazard a guess or a prediction anyway. Contrast that context with a rather different one:

- (2) There were a number of local elections last night. Maria and Laxman are writing a story for the local paper covering the results. In the course of working on their story, they have the following exchange:
 - (a) [Laxman:] Do you know who won in Middlesex County?
 - (b) [Maria:] Jones won that race.

This is a standard example of an information-seeking context. Laxman asks Maria who won because he wants to know who won. And here it is less clear that Maria's utterance is felicitous if Maria doesn't take herself to know that Jones won.

As I said, I think that utterances that occur in these two types of contexts differ along a number of dimensions. The first dimension I want to highlight concerns how these utterances change the *common ground* of the conversations they take place in.

The common ground of a conversation is the public information shared by the people participating in the conversation (Stalnaker, 2002).⁵ If you ask me when my birthday is, and I say that is in on June 7th, the proposition that my birthday is on June 7th would ordinarily now be part of the common ground of our conversation. Although a standard way of adding propositions to the common ground is by uttering declarative sentences, other kinds of events can also add information to the common ground. If we are sitting in my living room in the evening and the lights go out, the fact that the lights are now out would ordinarily become part of the common ground. Note that something can be believed or known by both of us without being part of the common ground. I just realized that I spilled aioli on my lap, but thinking you didn't notice, I don't mention the matter and carry on as before. You did notice, but not wanting to cause me embarrassment, act as if you didn't. We both know that I spilled aioli on my lap, but this proposition is not part of the common ground, not part of the public information we are both taking for granted.⁶

It is worth maintaining a conceptual distinction between the intuitive notion of the common ground ('public information') and various attempts to analyze that notion (Lederman, 2017). The intuitive notion is brought out by considering examples like the ones above. This notion is often then *analyzed* in terms of common belief: p is common ground iff all believe p , all believe that all believe p , all believe that all believe that all believe p , etc.. Alternatively, the notion of common ground might be analyzed in terms of common knowledge, or in terms of some combination of belief and acceptance (Stalnaker, 2002). Here we need only operate with the intuitive notion, and needn't rely on any particular analysis of that notion.⁷

⁵See also Stalnaker (1970, 1974).

⁶This example is based on one in Heal (1978).

⁷For discussions of how (and whether) to analyze the notion of common ground, see Stalnaker (2002), Yalcin (2007, 2023), and Lederman (2017).

Stalnaker's view is that in asserting a proposition p , one is proposing to add p to the common ground, to treat p as part of the publicly available information that we, the parties to the conversation, can all take for granted. Thus, as our conversation proceeds, the common ground grows, as more and more information is added to it. Stalnaker's model was originally introduced in part to theorize about the notion of a *presupposition*; this connection will be pursued below, along with another claim about how the common ground interacts with a particular linguistic expression (epistemic "might").

Utterances in guessing contexts appear to differ from utterances in information-seeking contexts with respect how they change the common ground of the conversation in which they occur. Given a declarative sentence ϕ and a context c , let $[\phi]^c$ be the proposition expressed by ϕ in c . Then we can say that while an utterance of sentence ϕ made in an information-seeking context c is (normally) a proposal to add $[\phi]^c$ to the common ground, this does not appear to be the case with utterances made in guessing contexts. For example, Marta's utterance of (1d) does not seem to be a proposal to add the proposition that Joe will win to the common ground of her conversation. Three considerations support this.

First, given the context in which Marta's utterance of "Joe will win" takes place, it seems fairly obvious that she is not proposing to add the information that Joe will win to the common ground. The information in the common ground is supposed to be the information that all parties to the conversation are taking for granted. But not even Marta herself seems to be taking it for granted that Joe will win, as her earlier utterance of "I have no idea" seems to indicate.

A second consideration relies on the following plausible claim about the relationship between the common ground and the epistemic modal "might". The idea, due originally to Stalnaker (1970, 45), is this:

POSSIBILITY PRINCIPLE

If an utterance of "It might be that ϕ " is made and accepted in context c , then $[\neg\phi]^c$ is not common ground after that utterance is accepted in c .⁸

If I say, "It might rain on Friday," and my claim is accepted, then the resulting common ground does not contain the information that it will *not* rain on Friday; the post-utterance common ground leaves 'rain on Friday' as an open possibility.

Notice now that the conversation in (1) might continue with Marta adding a final remark:

- (1) (a) [Latif:] What do you think will happen in the race?
- (b) [Marta:] I have no idea.
- (c) [Latif:] Just take a guess.
- (d) [Marta:] [shrugging her shoulders] Joe will win.

⁸See also Yalcin (2007, 1010) and Mandelkern (2019).

- (e) [Marta:] But as I said, I really don't know what's going to happen.
Sue might win instead.

Assume this last utterance is accepted. And assume that it is common ground that the election will have exactly one winner and that Sue is not Joe. So by the POSSIBILITY PRINCIPLE, after Marta's utterance of (1e) is accepted, it is not common ground that Joe will win. Otherwise, it would be common ground that Sue will not win, which, given our other assumptions, would contradict the POSSIBILITY PRINCIPLE.

But—and here is the crucial point—in following (1d) with (1e), Marta would not appear to be doing anything that imposes incompatible demands on the common ground. After following (1d) with (1e), the common ground would not be in a defective state, a state that required some sort of 'repair'. Nor does it seem that Marta must be understood as 'taking something back' if she follows (1d) with (1e). If that is right, then that means that, just prior to Marta's uttering (1e), it was not common ground that Joe would win. Since 'just prior' to Marta's uttering (1e) was just after Marta's uttering (1d), the latter utterance must not have made the proposition that Joe will win common ground.

Compare this situation with the following:

- (3) (a) [A :] Where's Bob?
(b) [B :] He's in his office.
(c) [B :] ? But he sometimes leaves early on Fridays, so he might be at home by now.

There is something odd here about *B*'s pair of utterances, especially if they are produced with a flat intonation. Of course, if *B* indicates via intonation or in some other way that she is revising her initial claim, the oddity might dissipate. But that the second utterance would only be acceptable if she were understood to be changing her mind indicates that there is a felt tension between (3b) and (3c). The POSSIBILITY PRINCIPLE helps explain this. Suppose the common ground was updated after *B*'s utterance in (3b) to include the proposition that Bob is in his office. If *B* then goes on to utter (3c), the POSSIBILITY PRINCIPLE demands that the common ground not include the proposition that Bob is not at home. If we assume that it is common ground that if Bob is in his office, he is not at home, then the common ground has been subject to incompatible demands. This explains the felt tension between *B*'s two utterances: *B* initially appears to be proposing to rule out all possibilities in which Bob is not in his office, but then seems to be acting to ensure that some 'not-office' possibilities are left open (some 'home' possibilities in particular). It seems, then, that one cannot accept both of these utterances. In contrast, there is no parallel tension between Marta's uttering (1d) and then subsequently uttering (1e).

A third consideration in support of the claim that Marta's utterance is not a proposal to add the proposition that Joe will win to the common ground exploits the connections between the common ground, the notion of a presupposition, and the conditions under which a question may felicitously be asked.

A familiar idea is that the principal epistemic norm on the speech act of asking a question is *ignorance*: one may ask a question Q only if one does not know the answer to Q (Hawthorne, 2004, 24). Another familiar idea is that one may utter a sentence ϕ that presupposes a proposition p in context c only if the common ground of c contains p —indeed, this was one of the original applications for which the notion of common ground was developed (Stalnaker, 2002). Note also that just as a declarative sentence may presuppose a proposition, a question may also carry presuppositions. For example, just as “Sue stopped smoking recently” presupposes that Sue smoked in the past, the question “Did Sue stop smoking recently?” also presupposes this.⁹

Putting these two points together suggests the following principle governing felicitous questioning:

QUESTION PRINCIPLE

If question Q presupposes proposition p , then one may ask Q in context c only if (i) the common ground in c contains p , and (ii) one does not know the answer to Q .

That clause (i) is a necessary condition on felicitous questioning can be directly motivated by the following sort of case:

- (4) (a) [A :] Was Gavriil ever a smoker?
 (b) [B :] I’m not sure.
 (c) [C :] Has he quit smoking yet?

C ’s final utterance here is slightly odd. The natural explanation is that C ’s question presupposes that Gavriil smoked in the past, but the common ground of the context does not contain this information. Moreover, that information cannot be easily accommodated, since the prior discourse suggests that none of the conversational participants knows whether Gavriil smoked in the past—if C did know this, they should have first provided that information before asking their question.

The QUESTION PRINCIPLE can be used to argue that after Marta’s utterance of “Joe will win”, the proposition that Joe will win is not common ground. For imagine the conversation in (1) continuing this way:

- (1) (a) [Latif:] What do you think will happen in the race?
 (b) [Marta:] I have no idea.
 (c) [Latif:] Just take a guess.
 (d) [Marta:] [shrugging her shoulders] Joe will win.
 (e’) [Noah:] Oh, interesting. Oscar is placing a bet on the election. Does he know that Joe will win? We should call him.

⁹See Beaver et al. (2021) for an introduction to the relevant notion of presupposition.

Noah's question is odd. Why? Assume that (i) Noah's question presupposes that Joe will win, and (ii) that Noah does not know whether Oscar knows that Joe will win.¹⁰ Then, given the QUESTION PRINCIPLE, the natural conclusion to draw is that what explains the oddity of Noah's question is the fact that the proposition that Joe will win is not common ground.

Here is another example:

- (5) (a) [A :] Was Gavriil ever a smoker?
 (b) [B :] I have no idea.
 (c) [A :] Just take a guess.
 (d) [B :] Okay—yes, Gavriil smoked in the past.
 (e) [C :] Oh, interesting. Has he quit smoking yet? Let's call him and ask.

Unless C's utterance is interpreted as a request for B to continue guessing about Gavriil's habits, that utterance is again slightly odd. The natural explanation for this is that his question presupposes something—that Gavriil smoked in the past—that is not common ground. That suggests that B's weak utterance fails to make the proposition that Gavriil smoked in the past part of the common ground.

Now the fact that a proposition $[\phi]^c$ is not common ground after an utterance of ϕ is made in c does not by itself show that the utterance in question is not a *proposal* to add $[\phi]^c$ to the common ground. Perhaps Marta proposed to add the proposition that Joe will win to common ground but her proposal was rejected. But there is nothing in the above discussion of (1) to suggest that this need be the case. Marta's utterance might well have been accepted by her conversational participants; accepted, that is, for what it was—her best guess in answer to the question under discussion.

Thus, it seems that in uttering "Joe will win", Marta is not proposing to add the proposition that Joe will win to the common ground. Now if one adopted the Stalnakerian view that to assert p is to propose to add p to the common ground, it would follow that Marta's utterance is not an assertion of the proposition that Joe will win. If one took this view, then the Marta example would not be a good argument for the claim that the norm of assertion is weak, since Marta's utterance would not even count as an assertion. We'll return to this issue later, but for now I simply want to record this difference between information-seeking contexts and guessing contexts:

Dimension #1: common ground

An utterance of a declarative sentence ϕ in an information-seeking context c typically constitutes a proposal to add $[\phi]^c$ to the common ground.

¹⁰If ϕ presupposes p , then according to standard views of presupposition projection, "Does x know that ϕ ?" also presupposes p . This appears to be borne out: "Omar stopped smoking last week" presupposes that Omar smoked in the past, as does "Does Katia know that Omar stopped smoking last week?".

An utterance of a declarative sentence ϕ in a guessing context c does *not* typically constitute a proposal to add $[\phi]^c$ to the common ground.

What does an utterance of ϕ in a guessing context c propose to add to the common ground? It's not completely clear, but it is plausible that such utterances are proposals to add to the common ground the proposition that *the speaker believes* $[\phi]^c$. This might help to explain the temptation to think that, for example, in saying, "Joe will win" Marta is really just saying that *she thinks* that Joe will win (Mandelkern and Dorst, 2022, 7-8). It could be that pragmatic features of the utterance context conspire to make this the proposition added to the common ground even though the sentence uttered does not contain any relevant unpronounced material.

3 Elicitation and responses

Another dimension along which these two types of utterances differ concerns how they are typically prompted or elicited. As Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 7) point out, we sometimes elicit utterances of declaratives by asking what someone *thinks* about something:

- (6) (a) [Latif:] What do you think will happen in the race?
(b) [Marta:] Joe will win.

They also note that it is somewhat odd to elicit an assertion by asking someone what they are *certain* or *sure of*, suggesting that the norm of assertion should be framed in terms of belief rather than certainty.

But if the context we are to imagine that the conversation in (6b) is similar to the situation in (1), then the above utterance takes place in a guessing context. And while it may be that, in guessing contexts, it is natural to elicit an utterance of a declarative by asking about what someone thinks about the question under discussion, when we move to information-seeking contexts, it is perfectly natural to elicit an utterance of a declarative either by asking a first-order question or by asking what one's interlocutor *knows* about a certain situation (Turri, 2010). Suppose I am trying to book a flight and I ask you when Presidents' Day is this year, or whether you know when Presidents' Day is this year. If you reply by saying, "It's on February 19th", then I would ordinarily expect you to know this. I would be surprised (and possibly annoyed) if it turned you were just offering up your best guess but did nothing to indicate that this was what you were doing.

This suggests another dimension along which information-seeking contexts and guessing contexts differ:

Dimension #2: elicitation

In information-seeking contexts, utterances of declaratives are often elicited by asking a first-order question or by asking whether one's interlocutor knows something.

In guessing contexts, utterances of declaratives are often elicited by asking what one's interlocutor *thinks* or *guesses*.

A related difference between our two types of utterances concerns what sorts of questions constitute appropriate responses to them. For example, it's often been observed that the question "How do you know?" makes sense as a response to certain utterances of declaratives, and this is often true of utterances made in information-seeking contexts:

- (7) (a) [Laxman:] Who won in Middlesex County?
(b) [Maria:] Jones won that race.
(c) [Laxman:] How do you know?
(d) [Maria:] I heard from the Precinct Warden while you were out.

Williamson (2000, 252-253) uses this observation in his case for the knowledge norm. For such a response reveals an expectation that the speaker does know, an expectation that is explained by a mutually acknowledged knowledge norm on the utterance in question.

In contrast, it is generally not appropriate to respond to an utterance made in a guessing context by asking how the speaker knows, as Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 10) observe. For example, imagine this continuation of (1):

- (1) (a) [Latif:] What do you think will happen in the race?
(b) [Marta:] I have no idea.
(c) [Latif:] Just take a guess.
(d) [Marta:] [shrugging her shoulders] Joe will win.
(e'') [Latif:] ??? How do you know?

Latif's final response is infelicitous here because it is clear that Marta does not take herself to know that Joe will win—she more or less just admitted this. Compare this with an alternative question Latif might have asked: "Why do you think that?" or "Why do you think it might be Joe instead of Mary?".

These observations give us another point of difference between information-seeking contexts and guessing contexts:

Dimension #3: "How do you know?"

If a speaker utters ϕ in an information-seeking context c , it will generally be appropriate to ask the speaker how they know $[\phi]^c$.

But if a speaker utters ϕ in a guessing context c , it will generally be inappropriate to ask the speaker how they know $[\phi]^c$.

Before proceeding, I should say something about the intended status of these 'dimensions of differences'. What I am intending to do is to characterize two classes of utterances by some rough empirical generalizations. These generalizations will typically hold for the most part, though they will generally

not be exceptionless. For example, as Williamson (2000, 252-253) observes, it is odd to ask, “How do you know?” when it is obvious how the speaker knows, as when someone says, “I have a headache”. Nevertheless, an utterance of “I have a headache” would not usually take place in a guessing context, since one rarely (if ever) has merely indirect evidence that bears on the question of whether one has a headache. Thus, the qualification “generally” in our statement of **Dimension #3**; similar caveats are included in the other dimensions of difference discussed in this essay.

4 Attitude ascriptions

Our two classes of utterances also differ with respect to the sorts of attitude ascriptions they typically license. Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 8-9) argue that utterances of declaratives typically license belief ascriptions. For example, they offer a case in which Ezra overhears Mark speaking to Liam on the phone. Mark says:

(8) What’s John bringing for dinner? [Listens.] Okay, thanks. [Hangs up.]

If Ezra asks Mark what he learned from Liam, Mark might say:

(9) Liam thinks that John will bring Indian food.

In contrast, they suggest that it would be odd for Mark to say:

(10) Liam takes himself to know that John will bring Indian food.

Thus, Liam’s utterance justifies Mark in making a belief ascription, but not in making a ‘takes himself to know’ ascription.

But notice that it would normally be odd for Mark to say (9) if Liam had said to Mark, “John will bring Indian food. I just spoke to him”. So Liam’s utterance was presumably either hedged (e.g. “I think he’ll bring Indian food”) or made in a guessing context. If that’s right, then it might be that Mandelkern and Dorst’s observation does not carry over to utterances of bare declaratives made in information-seeking contexts.

In fact, utterances of bare declaratives made in information-seeking contexts often *do* license knowledge reports, as van Elswyk and Benton (2023, 44) observe. Suppose you know $[\phi]^c$, and suppose you overhear someone else utter ϕ in information-seeking context c . In such cases, you can often subsequently ascribe knowledge of $[\phi]^c$ to that person.¹¹ For example, suppose Aly knows that her group of friends is going to a restaurant called *Neptune Oyster* tonight. She then overhears the following exchange, which takes place in an information-seeking context:

¹¹van Elswyk and Benton (2023, 44-45) also observe that when you *don’t* know $[\phi]^c$, overhearing someone else uttering ϕ in c often puts you in a position to say that they *think they know* $[\phi]^c$. This construction is often used by journalists who wish to remain neutral on the truth of the embedded sentence.

- (11) (a) [Beth:] Where are we going tonight?
 (b) [Carl:] We're going to *Neptune Oyster*. I think it's in the North End.

Overhearing this exchange puts Aly in a position to later ascribe knowledge to Carl:

- (12) (a) [Dan:] Does Carl know that we're going to *Neptune Oyster*, or should I give him a call?
 (b) [Aly:] No, he knows. I heard him telling Beth.

These observations can be summarized as follows:

Dimension #4: knowledge ascriptions

If x overhears y uttering ϕ in an information-seeking context c , and x knows $[\phi]^c$, then x will often be able to subsequently ascribe knowledge of $[\phi]^c$ to y .

If x overhears y uttering ϕ in a guessing context c , then even if x knows $[\phi]^c$, it will not generally be true that x can subsequently ascribe knowledge of $[\phi]^c$ to y .

A related observation concerns speech reports (indirect discourse):

Dimension #5: speech reports

If x utters ϕ in a guessing context c_1 , it will often be misleading to report them as having said $[\phi]^{c_1}$ in a later information-seeking context c_2 , unless one makes clear that x 's original utterance took place in a guessing context.¹²

If x utters ϕ in an information-seeking context c_1 , it will typically not be misleading to report them as having said $[\phi]^{c_1}$ in a later information-seeking context c_2 , even absent any clarifications concerning the nature of c_1 .

For example, consider the following pair of contexts, with Context 2 occurring shortly after Context 1:

- (13) Context 1:
 (a) [Nardos:] Do you think these mushrooms are poisonous?
 (b) [Omar:] No idea.
 (c) [Nardos:] But what do you *think*? Just take a guess.
 (d) [Omar:] Okay—they're fine, they're not poisonous.

- (14) Context 2:

¹²Reporting them as 'having told you $[\phi]^{c_1}$ ' is even worse.

- (a) [Pilar:] Are these mushrooms safe to eat? They look delicious.
- (b) [Nardos:] ? Omar said/told me that they weren't poisonous.
- (c) [Pilar:] Oh, really? Maybe they're okay then.

Nardos's report in Context 2 is misleading, for it suggests that Omar uttered "The mushrooms are not poisonous" in an information-seeking context, which he did not. In contrast, if Omar *had* originally uttered "They're not poisonous" in an information-seeking context, Nardos's report would likely not have been misleading. For example imagine an alternative version of the first context:

(15) Context 1':

- (a) [Nardos:] Do you think these mushrooms are poisonous?
- (b) [Omar:] No, they're not, they're fine.
- (c) [Nardos:] How do you know?
- (d) [Omar:] I eat them all the time.

If Nardos's report in Context 2 had concerned Omar's utterance in Context 1', her report would not have been misleading.

5 The strength of assertion

Utterances made in guessing contexts differ from those made in information-seeking contexts along a number of dimensions: what they add to the common ground; how they are elicited and how we respond to them; and with respect to the sorts of attitude and speech reports they license. What is the significance of these observations for the question of what the norm of assertion is? I'll start by distinguishing two views about this. The two views differ, *inter alia*, on whether utterances of declaratives in guessing contexts count as genuine assertions or not.

The weak assertion view. This is the view that Mandelkern and Dorst endorse, at least as I understand the matter. They hold that utterances of declaratives in guessing contexts are assertions, and they hold that the norm of assertion is weak. But what they mean by saying that 'the norm of assertion is weak' is a bit subtle, for it also seems to be part of their view that the norm of assertion is context-sensitive.

One way to formulate the knowledge norm is as follows: for any context *c*, one is epistemically permitted to assert *p* in *c* iff one knows *p* in *c*. This brings out the sense in which the knowledge norm is assumed to govern all contexts. Note that on this view, there is an epistemic relation *R* such that for any context *c*, one is epistemically permitted to assert *p* in *c* iff one bears *R* to *p* in *c*—for the relation of knowing is such an *R*. Advocates of the (strong) justified belief view agree that there is such an *R*, but, in contrast to advocates of the knowledge

norm, they take the relation of justifiedly believing to be the R in question. But a number of philosophers reject this whole way of setting things up. They hold instead that while it is true that for any context c there is an epistemic relation R such that one is epistemically permitted to assert p in c iff one bears R to p in c , they hold that different c 's may call for different R 's. The norm of assertion is 'context-sensitive'.¹³

Mandelkern and Dorst appear to endorse a version of this view, with at least two additional assumptions. First, for any context c and epistemic relation R , if one is epistemically permitted to assert p in c iff one bears R to p in c , then R entails weak belief. In other words, weak belief constitutes a sort of lower bound for epistemically permissible assertion. Second, in many ordinary contexts c , one is epistemically permitted to assert p in c iff one weakly believes p in c . So in many ordinary contexts, weak belief suffices for epistemically permissible assertion. But, according to this view, this is not true of *all* contexts. Mandelkern and Dorst seem to acknowledge that, in some contexts, knowledge is necessary for permissible assertion:

...it is perfectly consistent with the weakness of assertion that in many particular contexts, we do expect people to only say what they know... Obviously, *sometimes* you should only say what you know... (Mandelkern and Dorst, 2022, 11, emphasis in the original)

Mandelkern and Dorst (2022) offer a general picture according to which decisions about what to assert involve a trade-off between *accuracy* and *informativity*, and they suggest that in contexts in which accuracy is more heavily weighted than informativity, the operative norm of assertion will tend to be strong.

The strong-assertion/weak-guess view. The second view I want to consider denies that utterances of declaratives made in guessing contexts constitute genuine assertions. This view builds on a tempting response to examples like (1), the guessing context with which we began. As Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 5-6) note, one natural response to such examples is to say that the utterances in questions are not in fact genuine *assertions*; they are, rather, *guesses* or *predictions*. Indeed, in his book on assertion, Goldberg (2015) uses a case similar to (1) to distinguish the sorts of utterances of declarative sentences in which he is interested (assertions) from those in which he is not (guesses):

ZINZER: What time is it?

WETHERINGTON: I have no idea.

ZINZER: If you had to guess.

WETHERINGTON: Well . . .

ZINZER: [waiting] Yes?

WETHERINGTON: [uttered with a shrug of the shoulders] It's 5 o'clock. (Goldberg, 2015, 5)

¹³See, for example, McKinnon (2015) and especially Goldberg (2015).

Goldberg then remarks that:

Wetherington's last speech act is an utterance of a declarative sentence, but *it is not an assertion*. In particular, it lacks the force of an assertion: *it is presented with the force of a guess*. (Goldberg, 2015, 5, emphasis added)

More generally, we might suppose that Goldberg's view is that utterances of declaratives made in guessing contexts are guesses and not assertions. If this is right, then the phenomena Mandelkern and Dorst point to do not in fact support the claim that assertion is weak, since their examples do not even concern genuine assertions.

Mandelkern and Dorst (2022, 5-6) are aware of this objection. But they point out that this response raises the question of how the distinction between assertions and guesses is to be drawn. Of course, one could say that assertions *just are* those utterances of declaratives that are subject to a strong norm. But then the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion reduces to the rather weak (though not completely content-less) claim that some utterances of declaratives are epistemically permissible iff one knows their content. If the defender of the knowledge norm wants instead to defend a more informative thesis, then they ought to provide some independent criterion for distinguishing assertions from the weaker uses of declaratives. But, Mandelkern and Dorst say, they "know of no such criterion" (Mandelkern and Dorst, 2022, 6).

But the preceding discussion suggests a way of meeting this challenge, and thus a way of defending the view that the norm of assertion is strong. For one might hold that one or more of the dimensions of difference discussed above constitute criteria for distinguishing genuine assertions from weaker speech acts. For example, suppose one adopted the Stalnakerian view that an utterance of ϕ in c constitutes an assertion of $[\phi]^c$ only iff it is a proposal to add $[\phi]^c$ to the common ground. Given the arguments of Section 2, someone who took this line would have a principled reason for denying that an utterance of ϕ made in a guessing context c is an assertion of $[\phi]^c$. This would support Goldberg's contention that such utterances are not assertions. Alternatively (or additionally), one might argue that utterances made in guessing contexts are not assertions on the grounds that it is infelicitous to respond to them by asking, "How do you know?" (Benton and Turri, 2014).

A natural way to develop this picture would be to say that genuine assertions are governed by a strong norm, such as the knowledge norm. Note that this last claim enjoys *prima facie* support from the discussion of Sections 3 and 4, along with the many arguments in favor of the knowledge norm found in the literature. One might additionally hold that *guesses*—utterances of declaratives produced in guessing contexts—are not governed by the knowledge norm, but by a weaker norm like the weak belief norm. All this suggests the following view: utterances of declaratives made in information-seeking contexts are assertions while those made in guessing contexts are not—they are weaker speech acts. And the norm of assertion is strong, while the norm governing

these weaker speech acts is weak.¹⁴

These are not the only two possible views, of course, but I shall set aside other approaches here for the sake of simplicity.¹⁵

At first glance, these two views seem to conflict with each other. The weak assertion view says that, in some contexts, it is epistemically permissible to assert something that one does not know, whereas the second view denies this. But if we step back a bit, it actually becomes difficult to locate any *non-terminological* difference between these views. For the apparent disagreement here seems rooted in a disagreement about which utterances count as genuine assertions. Note, for instance, that advocates of each view might agree about which utterances are epistemically permissible in which contexts. Both parties may agree that it is epistemically permissible to utter ϕ in an information-seeking context c iff one knows $[\phi]^c$ in c , and that it is epistemically permissible to utter ϕ in a guessing context c iff one weakly believes $[\phi]^c$ in c . The only difference is that the weak assertion view holds that all of these utterances count as assertions, whereas the strong-assertion/weak-guess view holds that while the utterances made in information-seeking contexts are assertions, those made in guessing contexts are not. Thus, it looks like the disagreement is over the intension of the word “assertion”, a situation which suggests that there may be less than meets the eye in the debate over the ‘strength of assertion’.

I am not sure how to settle this dispute, nor am I sure whether anything significant hangs on how we settle it. What I think is interesting is the common picture that lies behind both views: that there are two classes of utterances of declaratives, distinguishable along a variety of dimensions, each arguably subject to a different norm. I also think it is worth reflecting on what role each type of utterance plays in our communicative and epistemic lives, and I shall close with some preliminary remarks on that issue.

Utterances of declaratives in information-seeking contexts arguably play a role in the transmission of testimonial knowledge that those made in guessing contexts do not. Suppose you ask me, in an information-seeking context, when Presidents’ Day is this year, and I respond by saying, “It is on February 19th”. If the situation is normal, you can come to know when Presidents’ Day is by believing what I say. More generally, an utterance of a declarative ϕ in an information-seeking context c will often result in a hearer’s coming to know $[\phi]^c$.

In contrast, utterances in guessing contexts do give rise to testimonial knowledge in this way. Recall discourse (1):

- (1) (a) [Latif:] What do you think will happen in the race?

¹⁴See also Oppy (2007) who argues that some of the discussion in Williamson (2000, 259) might be taken to motivate the idea that some weak utterances of declaratives should be not be deemed assertions at all.

¹⁵van Elswyk and Benton (2023) defend a more ambitious version of the strong assertion view that holds that utterances made in guessing contexts *are* assertions and, as such, are subject to a strong norm. This can be maintained by holding but that the relevant violations of the norm are excused by the special nature of guessing contexts.

- (b) [Marta:] I have no idea.
- (c) [Latif:] Just take a guess.
- (d) [Marta:] [shrugging her shoulders] Joe will win.

I take it that Latif cannot come to know that Joe will win simply on the basis of Marta's utterance. Of course, if Latif has special background knowledge—if, for example, he knows that the outcome of the election is rigged so that it will conform to Marta's guess—he can of course come to know that Joe will win on the basis of Marta's utterance together with this background knowledge. But in the ordinary case, an utterance of ϕ in a guessing context c does not, and is not intended to, enable the hearer to come to know $[\phi]^c$. Utterances of declaratives in information-seeking contexts play a role in the transmission of knowledge that utterances in guessing contexts do not.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, advocates of a weak norm of assertion tend to emphasize other aspects of our linguistic practice, such as the use of declaratives in debating and argument. Thus, Oppy (2007) writes that:

...having a practice in which agents put forward their beliefs for comparison with the beliefs of other agents is a plausible mechanism for improving the beliefs of all who engage in the practice. What assertion makes possible is debate, criticism, consideration of alternative perspectives that one would not have otherwise considered, and the like: and it makes this possible because it has the primary norm that one ought not to assert that which one does not believe.

We use declarative sentences to exchange information, to transmit knowledge from one to another. According to advocates of the weak assertion view, we also use declarative sentences when attempting improve our uncertain beliefs: when we debate, criticize, and consider alternative points of view. Given the rather different purposes that motivate these two different uses, it is perhaps not so surprising that such uses differ from each other in interesting and systematic ways, as we saw earlier. And given these different purposes, it should not be so surprising to learn that these two types of utterances are governed by different norms.

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