

NON-SENTENTIAL ASSERTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

It is not the case -- as is widely assumed -- that only sentences can be used to make assertions: speakers can also make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation. That is the central claim of this dissertation.

This claim is in conflict with certain familiar philosophical doctrines. In particular, we consider: (a) Dummett's view that to assert just is to say an assertoric sentence under conventionally specified conditions; (b) Gareth Evans' idea that, to say that P, it is at least required that the words used express the thought that P (in the circumstances of use); (c) Frege's so-called context principle, according to which words have meaning only in the context of a sentence; (d) Russell's theory of definite descriptions.

Having argued that the assertoric use of words and phrases is in conflict with these philosophical doctrines, we consider a defense of these views, to the effect that every assertoric utterance of an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation is actually an utterance of an elliptical sentence. In Chapter Three, we consider the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, according to which the utterances in question have sentential Syntactic Structures. In Chapter Four, we consider the semantic ellipsis hypothesis: the hypothesis that the expressions produced are not syntactic sentences, but nevertheless have illocutionary force and express propositions. We argue that neither of these ellipsis hypotheses offers a satisfactory account of the way speakers can and do use (apparent) words and phrases in isolation. We conclude, therefore, that the defense fails and that speakers can make assertions using words and phrases in isolation.

Thesis Supervisor: Sylvain Bromberger
Title: Professor of Philosophy

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This thesis is lovingly dedicated to

Hamila Cuna-Stainton
(September 28, 1963 - October 26, 1992)

and

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CHAPTER ONE: WORDS, PHRASES AND PHILOSOPHY

A sentence is, as we have said, the smallest unit of language with which a linguistic act can be accomplished, with which 'a move can be made in the language game': so you cannot do anything with a word -- cannot effect any conventional (linguistic) act by uttering it -- save by uttering some sentence containing that word... (Dummett 1973: 194)

1 Introduction

1.1 The Thesis and The Counter Thesis

The central claim of this dissertation is given in (1). Having no better name for it, we label it the Thesis.

(1) The Thesis: Speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.¹

The Thesis is to be contrasted with the following Counter Thesis:

¹ We believe that words and phrases in isolation can also be used to ask questions, issue orders, and so on. Indeed, a great variety of speech acts can be performed by uttering a word or phrase in isolation. However, because of the particular philosophical implications we wish to draw, we focus exclusively on assertion.

(2) The Counter Thesis: Speakers can make assertions only by uttering sentences.

Ordinary words and phrases are not sentences.² Hence if the Counter Thesis is true, speakers cannot make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases. If the Thesis is true, on the other hand, then speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases -- hence sentences are not the only expressions which can be used to make assertions. In brief: the Thesis and the Counter Thesis are incompatible.

As we shall shortly see, the Thesis is *prima facie* in conflict with certain familiar philosophical doctrines. It is therefore important to establish conclusively whether it is the Thesis or the Counter Thesis that is correct.

1.2 Two Arguments for the Thesis

Broadly speaking we will present -- in the chapters that follow -- two arguments for the Thesis.

² As we shall see in Chapter Two, sentences are now commonly treated as Inflectional Phrases. For ease of exposition, however, we will use the expression "phrase" in the more traditional manner. In our usage, "phrase" refers to (what are now called) lexical phrases. Hence, given this terminology, sentences are not phrases.

One argument runs as follows. As a matter of empirical fact, speakers actually do make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation. That speakers actually do make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation entails that speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

In the second argument we demonstrate that a typical speaker is able to use the ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation to make an assertion -- regardless of whether he does so use this phrase. The same demonstration could be given, *mutatis mutandis*, for a multitude of ordinary words and phrases. Hence speakers are able to use any number of ordinary words and phrases in isolation to make assertions. (This argument appears in Chapter Five.)

1.2.1 A Reply to Argument One: The Ellipsis Hypothesis

In Chapters Three and Four we consider a reply to the first argument; a reply to the effect that speakers do not, in fact, make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation. According to this reply, it is true that:

(3) The Data: It appears that speakers make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

But one should not draw the conclusion that:

(4) The Premise: Speakers actually do make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

That is because the ellipsis hypothesis is true:

(5) The Ellipsis Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence.

According to the ellipsis hypothesis, speakers merely appear to make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation. And, to establish the Thesis, mere appearances are not enough. In a word: the proponent of the ellipsis hypothesis grants that (3) is true -- but (3) does not entail the Thesis. The proponent of the ellipsis hypothesis also grants that (4) entails the Thesis; but he denies that (4) is true.

For our first argument -- i.e. the argument from the actual assertoric use of words and phrases -- to

succeed then, the ellipsis hypothesis must be shown to be false.

1.2.2 Several Examples

Examples (6) through (9) illustrate the dispute between proponents of the Thesis and proponents of the ellipsis hypothesis. In each of the described situations, a word or phrase at least appears to be used in isolation to make an assertion. This much is common ground. The question is: is this mere appearance or not?

(6) [Two people are talking at a party. Mary points to a man near the door and says]

John's father

(7) [A student is receiving instruction in painting. Her teacher Mary looks at the current canvas and says]

Nice work

(8) [A boat speeds by. Mary, a spectator, says]

Very fast

(9) [A letter arrives. Mary looks at the envelope, and says]

From Spain

According to proponents of the Thesis, in each of the above situations Mary produced an ordinary phrase in isolation. That is, Mary uttered an expression which also appears as an intermediate constituent in simple sentences.³ Therefore, in each of these situations Mary did not produce a sentence -- not even an elliptical sentence -- but Mary did make an assertion.

According to proponents of the ellipsis hypothesis, on the other hand, these are not cases of making an assertion by uttering ordinary phrases. It is true that, in each of the described situations, Mary appears to produce a phrase in isolation; but what she really utters in each case is some elliptical sentence.

Importantly, when a proponent of the ellipsis hypothesis says, e.g. that Mary really produced an elliptical sentence, he does not mean merely that the proposition which Mary asserts outstrips the meaning of the word or phrase Mary (appears to) utter. On this point, proponents of the Thesis and the ellipsis

³ A more precise definition of the word "phrase" is provided in Chapter Two.

hypothesis are in agreement. Both acknowledge, for example, that in uttering (9) Mary asserts that the letter is from Spain, while (appearing to) say an ordinary phrase (i.e. "from Spain") that does not express this proposition.

Proponents of the Thesis and the ellipsis hypothesis differ with respect to the structure and meaning of the expressions uttered. According to proponents of the Thesis, speakers really produce ordinary words and phrases, with the meaning and structure of ordinary words and phrases. In (9), for example, Mary produced the Prepositional Phrase "from Spain" whose meaning is that property had by objects from Spain.

According to the proponents of the ellipsis hypothesis, on the other hand, in (9) the speaker produced not the phrase "from Spain", but rather some elliptical sentence that sounds exactly like this phrase -- but is semantically and syntactically distinct from it. (This characterization of "elliptical sentence" is rough and ready. It will be refined and spelled out in detail in Chapters Three and Four.)

1.2.3 Summary of the First Argument

To sum up the first argument for the Thesis. We can safely infer the Premise from the Data -- unless the ellipsis hypothesis is true.

(3) The Data: It appears that speakers make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

(4) The Premise: Speakers actually do make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

But, as a matter of fact, the ellipsis hypothesis is not true. (We argue for this in Chapters Three and Four.) So, we conclude that the Premise is true. Now: that speakers actually do assertorically utter ordinary words and phrases entails that speakers can assertorically utter ordinary words and phrases. Therefore, the Thesis is true.

(1) The Thesis: Speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

2 Words, Phrases and Philosophy

In what follows, we introduce a number of philosophical doctrines which are incompatible with the Thesis. We will not argue that these doctrines can in no way be rendered compatible with the assertoric use of words and phrases; whether the views can be repaired, and made compatible with the Thesis, will be left as an open question. What will surface, however, is that the use of words and phrases to make statements raises important problems for these soon-to-be discussed views.

By discussing only these four doctrines, we do not mean to suggest that these are the only philosophical theses which are incompatible with the assertoric use of words and phrases. They are merely a sampling. We present them in alphabetical order, by author.

2.1 Dummett on Assertion

In his landmark Frege: Philosophy of Language, Michael Dummett rejects the Grice-inspired analysis of assertion, according to which assertion is an exterior

manifestation of certain complex intentions.⁴ Dummett believes, instead, that assertion should be viewed as a conventional action, on par with promising, bringing down a verdict, or doubling in bridge. We call this Dummett's general claim about assertion.

(10) Dummett's General Claim: Assertion should not be analyzed as the exterior manifestation of certain complex intentions. Rather, assertion should be viewed as a conventional action.

Dummett also introduces a specific analysis of assertion -- an analysis which is convention based. According to Dummett's specific analysis, assertion consists in the saying of assertoric sentences under conventionally specified conditions. We call this Dummett's specific claim about assertion.

(11) Dummett's Specific Claim: Assertion just is the saying of assertoric sentences under conventionally specified conditions.

⁴ We say "Grice-inspired" because Grice himself does not fit comfortably in either camp. With Dummett, Grice (1975) believed that what is said is determined by convention; but Grice (1957) further believed that the conventional meaning of words and sentences rests upon intentions. Here he parts ways with Dummett.

In the discussion that follows, we will focus on Dummett's specific claim. Our conclusion will be that it is prima facie incompatible with the Thesis. In this short space, we evidently will not be able to say much about Dummett's general claim. The dispute between intention based approaches (e.g. Donnellan (1968), Davidson (1979, 1982, 1986)) on the one hand, and convention based approaches (e.g. Dummett (1973)) on the other needs to be decided; but it will not be decided here.

Before we present Dummett's (1973) views about assertion in detail, some cursory remarks are in order about Dummett's larger philosophical projects, and the place that assertion plays in them.

Truth, according to Dummett, just is correct assertion. This extremely intimate link between truth and assertion is pivotal for Dummett because, according to him, there are many sentences which realists have held to be true, but which cannot be correctly asserted.

Many sentences about the past simply cannot be verified; similarly, one cannot verify sentences like, "Beyond allowing scientists to make predictions, there

really are black holes and anti-matter"; also unverifiable are sentences which state that there are physical objects which exist independently of our perception of them. Such sentences, according to Dummett, cannot be correctly asserted and hence are not true.

The same reasoning applies to mathematics: Dummett maintains that mathematical sentences which cannot be proven cannot be correctly asserted. Hence, if Dummett is right to identify truth with correct assertion, then unprovable mathematical statements are not true. In a word: Dummett's view that truth is correct assertion leads him to anti-realism in many different domains.

Dummett also thinks that these unverifiable sentences cannot be correctly denied either. Therefore, they are not false. So, if we grant Dummett his analysis of truth as correct assertion, then there are some sentences which are neither true nor false. Exit the principle of bi-valence. And with it, the law of the excluded middle -- and classical logic.

Dummett also uses assertion to characterize mental states, such as believing that P or intending that P. Like Wittgenstein (1953), Dummett wants to banish

occult interior states by appealing to public practices; e.g. the practice of asserting. Or, to put it in a less misleading way: it is not so much that Dummett wishes to do away with notions like "believes that" and "intends that". But he does want to ground them in a public phenomenon.

For example: to say that a subject believes some proposition P is, for Dummett, to say that the subject has the disposition to sincerely assert that P. Assertion, for Dummett, is a public phenomenon. Hence beliefs (and other mental states) need not be characterized as private interior states at all, but rather as public (dispositional) ones.

Parts of Dummett's program are very attractive. It would be wonderful to explicate mental vocabulary in terms of outward behaviors and community practices. We should also welcome a persuasive and substantive theory of truth. Dummett's anti-realist conclusions and his rejection of classical logic, on the other hand, may seem rather unpalatable. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that establishing such conclusions would be an important philosophical achievement.

For these philosophical projects to succeed,

however, it is critical that Dummett provide an adequate account of assertion. It is not enough to make the general point that assertion is a conventional action -- a specific proposal must be given, and it must be satisfactory. The analysis Dummett actually presents, though, cannot be right -- if the Thesis is true.

Let us now turn to Dummett's specific views on assertion.

2.1.1 Against Intention Based Approaches

Dummett presents, and then criticizes, the following intention based analysis of assertion:

(12) Intention Based Analysis of Assertion: A speaker S asserts that P if and only if:

- (a) S utters an expression whose sense is P
- (b) S at least pretends to have the intention of saying something true
- (c) The intention to pretend to say something true is her primary intention in speaking
- (d) S intends that, if P is not true, she must either retract her assertion or make it the case that P

Condition (a) guarantees that a thought has been expressed. But merely to express a thought is not yet to assert it. According to Dummett,

Judgment is to grasping a thought as
assertion is to the expression of a thought.
Merely to have a thought -- in the sense of
grasping it and fixing one's attention on it
-- is different from judging *that* that
thought is true -- from doing what Frege
calls 'advancing from the thought to the
truth-value'. This difference is the same
difference as that between merely expressing
the thought, without intending to be
understood as claiming that it is true, and
asserting it. (Dummett 1973: 298)

To be asserting, it might be thought, a speaker must be trying to say something true. But, in fact, intending to say something true is not a necessary condition for asserting. As Dummett rightly observes, a speaker may intend to say something false; or she may intend to say something about whose truth or falsity she has no opinion. But, says Dummett, "In none of these cases does the fact that [the speaker] does not have the intention to say something true make it false to say that he has made an assertion". (Dummett 1973:

According to the intention based analysis of assertion that Dummett criticizes, then, for a speaker to make an assertion it is not necessary that she intend to say something true; but the speaker must at least pretend that she has the intention of saying something true. This is condition (b).

But this still does not yield sufficient conditions for assertion. According to Dummett, for someone to be asserting it is necessary that her primary intention in speaking be to say something true. He supposes, for example, that a man who recited a line of poetry both because it was pleasant sounding and because he thought it true would be asserting only if his primary intention was to say something true. If, for example, the man would have uttered the line regardless of its truth, then his primary intention would not be to say something true and hence, according to Dummett, he would not be asserting. Dummett therefore adds condition (c): to assert, it is necessary that pretending to say something true be the speaker's primary intention.

Dummett further observes that when a person

asserts something, that speaker intends to enter a special deontic state: viz. she intends that, should it turn out that what she asserts is untrue, she must either withdraw her assertion or change the world to make her assertion true. If a speaker continues to say that P even when P is clearly untrue, and does nothing to make it the case that P, then she is not asserting. This consideration leads Dummett to add yet another necessary condition: (d) S intends that, if P is not true, she must either retract her assertion or make it the case that P.

Putting all of these together, we arrive at the proposal in (12). After arguing for each necessary condition, Dummett draws a rather surprising conclusion. He says that assertion simply should not be analyzed in terms of intentions. Analyzing assertion by appeal to intentions leads one to make some "extremely subtle distinctions". (Dummett 1973: 300) And, "it is doubtful whether the notion of intention will, by itself, bear the weight of these distinctions". (Dummett 1973: 300)

2.1.2 Dummett's Positive View

So much for Dummett's negative remarks about intention based accounts of assertion. Let us now consider his positive, convention based, account.

Dummett says,

...assertion consists in the (deliberate) utterance of a sentence which, by its form and context, is recognized as being used according to a certain general convention.

(Dummett 1973: 311)

About imperatives, he writes,

...the utterance of a sentence of a certain form, unless special circumstances divest this act of its usual significance, in itself constitutes the giving of a command. (Dummett 1973: 301-302)

Assertion and other speech acts "consist in" uttering expressions of the right form; uttering the appropriate kind of expression "in itself constitutes" the corresponding speech act. This talk of "consisting in" and "constituting" suggests that, according to

Dummett, the uttering of a certain kind of expression is identical to the performance of the corresponding speech act. Applied to assertion, the following identity would hold for every possible utterance x:

(13) {x: x is an act of asserting} = {y: y is an act of uttering an assertoric sentence}

Notice, however, that Dummett includes an important hedge to this identity claim. He says that the context must be right; circumstances must be such that the saying of the sentence does not lose its ordinary significance. Dummett introduces this qualification because speakers sometimes utter assertoric sentences without making assertions: for instance, actors practicing their lines do not make assertions when they produce assertoric sentences. Dummett therefore restricts the identity to cases in which conventionally specified conditions obtain. The result is the following convention based account of assertion:

(14) Convention Based Analysis of Assertion: A speaker S makes an assertion that P if and only if:

- (a) S utters an assertoric sentence whose sense is P
- (b) The conventionally specified conditions C for

making an assertion obtain

Notice that Dummett's account of assertion is an instance of a general schema, one often applied to such conventional acts as doubling in bridge, bringing down a verdict, or promising. These and similar acts are thought by some philosophers -- Austin (1962) for example -- to be identical to the acts of saying "double", "guilty" and "I promise" respectively -- under conventionally specified circumstances.

The general schema, which supposedly applies to all such speech acts, is given in (15):

(15) The General Schema: A speaker *S* performs a speech act *A* if and only if:

- (a) *S* utters a linguistic expression of type *E*
- (b) The conventionally specified conditions *C* for performing a speech act *A* obtain

Consider an example. If this general schema does indeed yield satisfactory analyses of conventional actions, one could give an analysis of bidding in bridge by stating:

- (a) The linguistic expressions *E* used to make bids

(b) The conditions C, specified in the rules of bridge, under which each different bid can be made

An extremely simplified and incomplete specification of E and C for bidding in bridge might run as follows: E is the class of noun phrases consisting of a numeral from one to six, followed by one of "clubs", "diamonds", "hearts" or "spades"; C includes, among many other conditions, that it must be the bidder's turn; that her bid must exceed all previous bids; that the last suit bid becomes trump; and, that the last couple to bid must take the number of tricks bid, plus six.

Dummett's great insight was to assimilate assertion to more clearly conventional speech acts, like bidding in bridge; conventional actions which, it may be thought, are fairly well understood. Evidently, this assimilation makes Dummett's analysis rather less radical and, we think, rather more plausible than it would otherwise be.

Dummett achieves the assimilation by specifying (what he takes to be) the appropriate substitutions for the schematic letters in the general schema. What are the appropriate substitutions, according to Dummett?

Well, obviously enough, "makes an assertion that P" should be substituted for the schematic expression *performs a speech act A*.

As for the schematic letter *C*, Dummett does not say what should be substituted for it: he never enumerates the conventionally specified conditions for performing an assertion. (Presumably, Dummett considers the correct substitution for *C* a mere detail, that may be attended to later.)

Whatever one substitutes for *C*, however, the substitution which Dummett proposes for a *linguistic expression of type E* is too restrictive. This schematic expression should, according to Dummett, be replaced by "an assertoric sentence whose sense is P". About this, he is surely mistaken -- assuming the Thesis is correct. The argument runs as follows:

Premise 1: If a speaker S makes an assertion if and only if S utters an assertoric sentence and the conventionally specified conditions C for making an assertion obtain then the class of assertings is co-extensional with the class of assertoric sentence utterings under conventionally specified conditions

Premise 2: The class of assertings is not co-extensional with the class of assertoric sentence utterings under conventionally specified conditions

Therefore,

Conclusion: It is not the case that a speaker S makes an assertion if and only if S utters an assertoric sentence and the conventionally specified conditions C for making an assertion obtain

Premise 2 -- which does all the work here -- derives from the Thesis. If the Thesis is correct, speakers can make assertions by uttering words or phrases in isolation. Such utterances belong in the class of assertings. But assertoric utterings of words and phrases do not belong in the class of utterings of assertoric sentences, because words and phrases are not assertoric sentences: words and phrases neither express thoughts nor have assertoric force. A fortiori, assertoric utterings of words and phrases are not utterings of assertoric sentences under conventionally specified conditions. (This restricted class is contained in the class of utterings of assertoric sentences; hence it cannot contain anything which the class of utterings of assertoric sentences does not

contain.) In a word: Dummett's proposal is too restrictive.

The natural and obvious reaction to this objection is to appeal to the ellipsis hypothesis. It is tempting to suppose that when a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really produces is some elliptical sentence; as Dummett might have it, an elliptical assertoric sentence.

In fact, Dummett considers a case in which someone says "The highest mountain in the world" in isolation. (Dummett 1973: 297-298) He concedes that, given an appropriate context, one can utter these words and thereby make an assertion. But, Dummett says, what the speaker really produces in such cases is "an abbreviated form of utterance of a sentence". (Dummett 1973: 298)

If this were true, Dummett's analysis would straightforwardly apply: a speaker makes an assertion if and only if he produces an assertoric sentence (abbreviated or otherwise) under conventionally specified conditions. The class of assertions would remain co-extensional with the class of utterings of

assertoric sentences under conventionally specified conditions, because the latter would include utterings of abbreviated assertoric sentences.

Given the pivotal role which the notion of assertion plays in Dummett's philosophy, it is crucial to discover whether the ellipsis hypothesis is true. If the ellipsis hypothesis is correct, Dummett's specific claim can be easily salvaged; if, on the other hand, the Thesis is true, then Dummett's specific claim is false.

2.1.3 Afterthoughts and Clarifications

In fairness to Dummett, we should note several important points.

First: the interpretation we have presented of Dummett (1973) is not, we think, implausible. Indeed, Donald Davidson (1979) reads Frege: Philosophy of Language in roughly the same way. He attributes to Dummett (1973) the view that, "an assertion is an indicative uttered under conditions specified by convention..." (Davidson 1979: 111) Nevertheless, we are not completely confident that the specific analysis of assertion that we have just presented is the one

endorsed in Frege: Philosophy of Language. Dummett's remarks there are sometimes equivocal.

Second: we have not argued against every possible variant of Dummett's specific claim. We suspect that Dummett cannot rework his view to accommodate the assertoric use of words and phrases; but we have not here given any arguments to that effect. Our purpose, it will be recalled, was to establish the incompatibility of the Thesis with Dummett's specific claim as it stands.

Finally: the specific account of assertion discussed above seems to have been abandoned in Dummett's recent work. (See, for example, Dummett (1979, 1991).) Dummett now appears to concede that no analysis of assertion can be given; in fact, he now seems rather pessimistic about "Whether or not there is a non-circular account of what it is to assert..." (Dummett 1979: 140) It may well be, then, that Dummett has forsaken his project -- launched in Frege: Philosophy of Language -- of giving a convention based analysis of assertion.⁵

⁵ If Dummett has indeed abandoned this enterprise, he has made a step in the right direction. For, as will become clear in what follows, assertion should be analyzed, at least in part, as an exterior manifestation of intentions. But if Dummett has abandoned his project, and now takes assertion as a primitive, he

2.2 Evans on Assertion

Gareth Evans, in his remarkable Varieties of Reference, argues against an intention based analysis of assertion -- an analysis which he attributes to Russell. According to Evans,

[Russell] was accustomed to go straight from remarks about 'the thought in the mind of the man who utters a certain sentence'⁶ to remarks about the nature of the statement he was making, the proposition he was putting forward, and so on.

(Evans 1982: 67)

Russell was willing to glide back and forth between the thought which a speaker intends to express, and the statement that he makes, because he purportedly endorsed something like the following analysis of assertion:

may be left with a nagging problem. As we said at the beginning of this section, Dummett may well need an adequate analysis of assertion if his larger philosophical projects are to succeed. For example: if assertion is taken as a primitive, the reasons for analyzing truth as correct assertion become rather unclear. Surely, rather than take assertion as primitive, we might better take truth as a primitive -- and expunge all mention of assertion. The concession that no analysis of assertion can be forthcoming appears, therefore, to be problematic for Dummett.

⁶ Evans is here quoting Russell (1912: 54).

(16) Russell's Analysis of Assertion: A speaker S asserts that P if and only if S utters certain words with the intention of expressing the thought that P.

Regardless of whether Russell ever subscribed to this analysis, there can be little doubt that -- as Evans points out -- having such intentions is not sufficient for asserting.⁷

2.2.1 Evans on Russell

Evans notes that someone could utter certain words with the intention of expressing the thought that P, but nevertheless fail to assert that P. This occurs, for example, when the words which a speaker uses do not, in the circumstances of use, express the thought which the speaker intends to express. What is said -- i.e. the thought asserted -- in such cases is determined by the meaning of the words which the speaker utters, not by the speaker's intentions. Or so Evans maintains.

⁷ Evans tends to use "says that", or "states that" as opposed to "asserts that". The context makes clear, however, that he uses "say" and "state" in the same way that we use "assert". Also: Evans (1982) argues that the implication in (16) does not hold in either direction. For our purposes, however, the crucial claim is that intending to express P is not sufficient for asserting P.

Consider an example. Suppose S intends to express the thought that John is dead. Suppose further that S "selects words unsuitable to his thoughts" (Evans 1982: 68); that is, suppose that the words which S selects do not, in these circumstances, express the thought that John is dead. Imagine, for example, that S utters the sentence (17), while intending to express the thought that John is dead.

(17) Phil is dead

Let us agree that, in the context, sentence (17) expresses the thought that Phil is dead, not the thought that John is dead. Hence, says Evans, regardless of S's intentions, what S asserts is that Phil is dead. Here we have an example in which saying certain words with the intention of expressing the thought that P is not a sufficient condition for asserting that P.⁸

⁸ Evans would admit, we gather, that a speaker could communicate that John is dead by saying a sentence which means, in the circumstances, that Phil is dead. But, if Evans is right, one cannot assert that John is dead by uttering such a sentence.

2.2.2 Evans' Alternative

According to Evans, the problem with Russell's analysis is that it ignores an important fact: the fact that what a speaker asserts depends essentially upon the meaning (in the circumstances of use) of the words which that speaker utters. To assert that P, according to Evans, a speaker must use an expression which is "suitable" for expressing P. (See Evans 1982: 68) Evans is surely right about this.

Evans errs, however, in his specification of what makes an expression "suitable" for expressing P -- if the Thesis is true. On Evans' view:

For a person to say that P, it is at least required that the thought that P is one of the things which the words he utters may, in the circumstances of use, be conventionally used to express. (Evans 1982: 67)

We may paraphrase Evans' view as follows:

(18) Evans' Principle: An expression E is suitable for asserting that P only if, in the circumstances of use, E expresses the thought that P.

However initially intuitive Evans' principle may be, it is prima facie incompatible with the Thesis. For if Evans' principle were correct, to say or assert that P it would be necessary to use a linguistic expression that expresses P in the circumstances of use. This entails, by existential generalization, that to say or assert that P one must use a linguistic expression that expresses some proposition or other in the circumstances of use.

But notice: one can say -- that is, one can assert -- propositions by using words and phrases in isolation. And what a word or phrase expresses in isolation in C should be precisely what it expresses within sentences in C. But, for any circumstances C, what words and phrases within sentences express is non-propositional. (Words and phrases within sentences, we will see in Chapter Two, express individual concepts, properties and generalized quantifiers.) Hence words and phrases in isolation do not express propositions -- again, no matter what the context. Yet they can be used in isolation to assert. This refutes Evans' principle.

Let us illustrate with an example. Suppose Mary and Alex have made a bet about what John will wear to a

party. Mary bets that John will wear a blue shirt; Alex maintains that he will wear a red shirt. John arrives at the party, Alex sees him, and says the word "red". In these circumstances, Alex asserts that John's shirt is red by saying the word "red". But the thought that John's shirt is red is not one of the thoughts which the word "red" expresses in these circumstances. The word "red" in these circumstances expresses a property, not a proposition: the same property that an occurrence of "red" within a sentence would express in these circumstances. (That is to say, the property red.)

To sum up: Evans has taken an important step in the right direction by (a) showing that to say certain words while intending to express the thought that P is not sufficient for asserting that P; and by (b) highlighting the fact that, to assert that P, a speaker must use an expression which is "suitable" for asserting P. However, Evans' principle regarding which sorts of expressions are "suitable" is inadequate -- if the Thesis is correct. For, according to Evans' principle, only expressions which express propositions are suitable for making assertions. This excludes ordinary words and phrases -- because words and phrases do not express propositions. But, if the Thesis is

correct, words and phrases can be used to make assertions.

2.3 Frege's Context Principle

Frege's so-called context principle -- proposed in Frege (1978) -- can be paraphrased as follows:

(19) The Context Principle: "It is only in the context of a sentence that a word has a meaning". (Dummett 1981: 360)

This sentence can be understood as expressing at least four different doctrines. It is not obvious which, if any, was intended by Frege. What is clear is that two of them are prima facie incompatible with the following Corollary to the Thesis.

(20) The Corollary: Words and phrases have a meaning in isolation.

2.3.1 The Corollary

As we shall see in Chapter Five, an utterance *u* is an assertion that *P* only if either (a) *P* is the explicit content of *u* or (b) *P* results from combining

the explicit content of u with some "missing element" which is salient in the context. (This is a rough formulation, but it will do for our present purposes.) A fortiori, u is an assertion only if u has at least some explicit content.

Now: if the Thesis is true then there are (possible) utterances of words and phrases in isolation which are assertions. Hence there must be (possible) utterances of words and phrases in isolation which have at least some explicit content. But an utterance of a meaningless expression could not have explicit content. Hence if utterances of words and phrases in isolation can have explicit content then the expressions uttered -- i.e. the words and phrases in isolation -- must be contentful.

In a word: the Corollary follows from the Thesis, together with certain very reasonable views about assertoric utterances (e.g. the view that assertoric utterances must have at least some explicit content).

Notice too: hearers can assign a meaning to utterances of words and phrases in isolation. The assignment of meaning to these utterances is possible because, (a) hearers can recognize the word or phrase

tokened and (b) hearers know the meaning of the word or phrase as it appears in isolation. If this is right, then hearers know the meaning of ordinary words and phrases when they appears in isolation. But, for any expression E, if anyone knows the meaning of E when it appears in isolation, then E has a meaning in isolation. Therefore, words and phrases have a meaning in isolation.

It is worth stressing the central difference between the Thesis and its Corollary. The Thesis says that words and phrases can be used to make assertions in isolation; the Corollary says that words and phrases are meaningful in isolation. Dummett's account of assertion and Evans' principle concern the class of expressions which speakers can use to make assertions. Their views conflict with the Thesis because those views imply that words and phrases cannot be so used. Frege's context principle concerns the class of linguistic expressions which are meaningful in isolation. It is therefore in conflict with the Corollary because it entails that words and phrases are not meaningful in isolation.

2.3.2 Three Construals of The Context Principle

In what follows, we will attempt to disentangle four interpretations of Frege's context principle. Afterwards, we will explain why two of them are incompatible with the Corollary to the Thesis.

Three interpretations of the context principle arise because the word "sentence" is at least three ways ambiguous. The word "sentence" may be defined by appealing to standard use, to meaning or to syntactic form.

(21) Syntactic Definition: A sentence is any formative which has a subject and inflected verb.⁹

(22) Semantic Definition: A sentence is any formative which is capable of expressing a proposition, in some context.¹⁰

⁹ On current views, a sentence is an instance of the X-bar schema which is headed by an inflectional element. See Chapter Two for discussion. For the moment, we merely wish to stress that the syntactic definition of "sentence" refers to formal features, and not to usage or meaning.

¹⁰ We make the simplifying assumption that interrogatives and imperatives express propositions. By this we mean only that such sentences either succeed or fail to correspond to the facts -- in some sense of "corresponding to the facts" that will not be explained here.

(23) Pragmatic Definition: A sentence is any formative which can be used to make a move in a language game.

Let us introduce some terminology. Any formative which meets the syntactic definition of "sentence" will be called a SYNTACTIC SENTENCE. Any formative which satisfies the semantic definition will be labelled a SEMANTIC SENTENCE. Finally, any formative which meets the pragmatic definition will be termed a PRAGMATIC SENTENCE.

It is standardly assumed that the class of pragmatic sentences is extensionally equivalent to the class of semantic sentences, which in turn is extensionally equivalent to the class of syntactic sentences. If the Thesis is correct, however, none of these equivalences hold.

If the Thesis is correct, speakers can use ordinary words and phrases to make assertions. But ordinary words and phrases are not syntactic sentences. So: the set of pragmatic sentences is not identical to the set of syntactic sentences because the former, but not the latter, includes words and phrases.

Furthermore, ordinary words and phrases do not

express propositions, even given a context. Hence they are not semantic sentences. But, if the Thesis is true, words and phrases are pragmatic sentences. Therefore, if the Thesis is correct, the class of pragmatic sentences is not identical to the class of semantic sentences: again, because the former, but not the latter, includes words and phrases.

In short, if the Thesis is true, the following equivalences do not hold:

(24) {x: x is a syntactic sentence} = {y: y is a pragmatic sentence}

(25) {x: x is a semantic sentence} = {y: y is a pragmatic sentence}

Nor is it clear that,

(26) {x: is a syntactic sentence} = {y: y is a semantic sentence}

There are some expressions which are not *prima facie* syntactic sentences,¹¹ but which nevertheless are

¹¹ We say "*prima facie*" because it might be that (what we call) Predicative Phrases are actually Inflectional Phrases with phonologically null inflectional elements. Alternatively, the correct definition of "sentence" might not equate sentences with Inflectional Phrases, and hence might include Predicative

capable of expressing propositions in context. Here are some examples:

(27)

(a) You no good lying bastard (McCawley 1988: 764)

(b) Good idea that

(c) A good talker your friend Steve

It seems to us that these formatives -- which we label PREDICATIVE PHRASES -- express predications. They are divided into subject and predicate in roughly the following way:

(28)

(a) [_{SUB} You] [_{PRED} no good lying bastard]

(b) [_{PRED} Good idea] [_{SUB} that]

(c) [_{PRED} A good talker] [_{SUB} your friend Steve]

Because they have both a subject and a predicate, Predicative Phrases are capable of expressing propositions. Yet they exhibit no overt inflectional element. Hence, at least at first glance, Predicative Phrases are not sentences in the syntactic sense, though they are capable of expressing propositions.

Phrases. We will not explore these possibilities here.

This is not merely to say that Predicative Phrases can be used to assert propositions; for, if the Thesis is correct, ordinary words and phrases can be so used as well. Rather, we wish to claim that the semantic value of these expressions is fully propositional -- in context, of course.

Given these three senses of "sentence", we can now state three different interpretations of Frege's context principle. Whatever the truth of the three following principles, it is surely worth distinguishing them.

(29) The Syntactic Construal: It is only in the context of an expression that has a subject and inflected verb that a word has a meaning.

(30) The Semantic Construal: It is only in the context of a formative capable of expressing a proposition that a word has a meaning.

(31) The Pragmatic Construal: It is only in the context of a formative which can be used in isolation to make moves in a language game that a word has meaning.

2.3.3 The Fourth Construal: Dummett on Frege

The fourth and final reading of the context principle is presented in Dummett (1973: 192-196) and Dummett (1981: 360ff). Let us therefore call it "Dummett's construal".

Dummett (1981: 369) writes,

As a principle concerning sense, the context principle singles out sentences as having a unique role in any account of the senses of expressions. The sense of any expression is its contribution to determining the condition for the truth of any sentence in which it occurs.

In short,

(32) Dummett's Construal: "the true account of the sense of a word is in terms of its contribution to the senses of sentences containing it..." (Dummett 1981: 373)

On this interpretation of Frege's context principle, sentences have a certain primacy over other linguistic formatives since, to give the meaning of any non-sentential formative, we must make reference to the

sentences in which it occurs.¹²

Dummett's construal of the context principle can be illustrated with the following example. On Dummett's construal, to give the meaning of the phrase "is blond" we must appeal to the contribution of this phrase to sentences in which the phrase "is blond" occurs. A partial account of the meaning of "is blond", for example, would be the following: the phrase "is blond" combines with the name "John" to yield the sentence "John is blond", whose sense is the thought that John is blond.¹³ Notice: reference to a sentence, and to the thought which it expresses, is essential.

Regardless of which of these interpretations of the context principle Frege intended, Dummett (1981) has convincingly argued that all Frege needed for his purposes is this fourth construal. As Dummett rightly points out, part of Frege's project in the Foundations of Arithmetic was to answer the question, "What are the

¹² Dummett gives another paraphrase which seems to us rather different. He writes that, "we cannot give an account of the sense of a word taken in isolation..." (Dummett 1981: 373) In this passage, Dummett appears to make the stronger claim that we cannot state the meaning of a word in isolation, even by referring to the contribution of that word to sentences. This is presumably because, taken in isolation, words have no meaning. This claim surely is incompatible with the Corollary to the Thesis.

¹³ For further related discussion, see Dummett (1989: 304).

natural numbers?"

If we take this as a linguistic inquiry -- e.g. a question about the meaning of expressions like "The number one", "The number two", etc. -- then we are not immediately tempted to identify numbers with some idea or mental image. (This being, of course, the kind of answer which Frege (1978) wanted to discourage.) But, says Dummett, even understood as an inquiry about phrases like "The number one", taken in isolation, the inappropriate answer may still be forthcoming.

It might be said, for example, that the number one is some mental image which we associate with the phrase "the number one". As Dummett explains,

If we commit the mistake of doing what Frege calls 'asking after the reference of the word in isolation', that is, of asking what it stands for in neglect of the fact that the answer can only be, and need only be, whatever is required to give, in combination with rules governing other words, a correct means of determining the truth values of sentences containing the word, then, in problematic cases, we are likely to come up with an entirely inappropriate answer, such

as the image which the utterance of the word
has the propensity to call up in our minds.
(Dummett 1973: 195)

Armed with Dummett's construal of the context principle, however, the tendency to think of numbers as mental images is wholly overcome. We are to ask what phrases like "The number one" contribute to the sense of sentences in which they occur. This task obviously involves only the meaning of certain linguistic items - the meaning which they contribute to sentences. It does not invite mention of ideas, mental images, or any other psychological creatures.

2.3.4 Two Construals Are Incompatible With The Corollary

Dummett's construal of the context principle is not, so far as we can see, in conflict with the Thesis or the Corollary. And the pragmatic construal -- the idea that words are meaningful only in the context of normatives that can be used to make moves in a language game -- also appears to be compatible with both.

But the other two construals are incompatible with the Corollary. The principle that words have meaning

only in the context of expressions that have subjects and inflected verbs (i.e. the syntactic construal) is false -- and on empirical grounds -- if ordinary words and phrases are meaningful in isolation.¹⁴

It is also incorrect to say that words have meaning only within semantic sentences, again because words and phrases -- which are not semantic sentences - - are meaningful in isolation.

In sum: paying attention to the use of words and phrases in isolation, we discover that there are at least four ways of interpreting Frege's context principle. On two of these interpretations (i.e. the syntactic and semantic construal), the context principle is inconsistent with the Corollary to the Thesis.

2.4 Russell on Descriptions

¹⁴ In fact, the syntactic construal of the context principle may well be falsified on independent grounds. If the correct syntactic characterization of the notion "sentence" is the one we give in Chapter Two (i.e. a sentence is the maximal projection of an inflectional element), then there is another non-sentential construction within which words are meaningful, namely Predicative Phrases. Prima facie anyway, Predicative Phrases are not syntactic sentences because they do not have inflected verbs. Yet it is surely true that words are meaningful in the context of Predicative Phrases.

Bertrand Russell, in Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, presents his celebrated theory of descriptions. That theory, when combined with the principle of significance -- which Russell also espoused -- is incompatible with the Corollary to the Thesis.

(33) Russell's Principle of Significance: If a symbol or group of symbols is not a constituent in some proposition, then it has no significance.

In what follows, we will introduce Russell's theory of descriptions and consider his motivations for embracing it. We will then show that this theory, when combined with the principle of significance, is in conflict with the Corollary. Hence if the Corollary is true, Russell is mistaken about either the theory of descriptions, or the principle of significance, or both.

2.4.1 Sentences and Propositions

Before proceeding, however, a few remarks are in order about sentences and propositions. Russell, at least in Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, purposely blurs the distinction between (what we would

call) propositions on the one hand and symbols that express propositions on the other. At this stage of his writing, propositions are "a form of words which expresses what is either true or false". (Russell 1919: 155. Our emphasis.) He writes,

I think the word "proposition" should be limited to what may, in some sense, be called "symbols", and further to such symbols as give expression to truth and falsehood. Thus "two and two are four" and "two and two are five" will be propositions, and so will "Socrates is a man" and "Socrates is not a man". (Russell 1919: 155)

(Notice that even the examples he gives are what we would call quoted sentences.) In what follows, we have tried to be faithful to Russell's terminology, even though we ourselves distinguish symbols from the things they express.

2.4.2 The Theory of Descriptions

The central tenet of Russell's theory of descriptions is that descriptions, both definite and indefinite, are not logical subjects. That is: according to Russell, the surface grammar of natural languages (like English) is misleading as to the

logical form of sentences containing descriptions. Sentences containing descriptions look rather like subject-predicate sentences, where the description occupies the place of the subject. But appearances are misleading.

Consider an example. The description "The Queen of England" looks like the subject of sentence (34). And, indeed, it is the surface subject.

(34) The Queen of England just arrived

But, on Russell's view, sentence (34) does not have a logical subject at all. Lemmon puts the point nicely: "When submitted to a proper logical analysis, [sentence (34)] turns out to be... a complex existential claim; the subject-predicate facade disappears". (Lemmon 1966: 234) According to Russell, the true logical form of (34) is displayed by the sentence in (35). (Roughly speaking, what (35) says is: there is exactly one Queen of England and she just arrived.)

(35)

(a) "x is Queen of England" is not always false

(b) "if x and y are Queens of England, x and y are identical" is always true

(c) "if x is Queen of England, x just arrived" is always true¹⁵

Russell's idea, in a nutshell, was that propositions containing descriptions have a logical form similar to "Some A are B", "All A are B", and so on. Importantly: in Russell's logical notation, no single part of these existential and universal propositions corresponds to the English quantified noun phrase. Their logical forms are given below:

(36) "x is A and x is B" is sometimes true

(37) "If x is A then x is B" is always true

The same holds, according to Russell, for sentences containing descriptions. The proposition "The Queen of England just arrived", for example, contains no constituent corresponding to the words "The Queen of England".

¹⁵ See Russell (1919: 177). By "always", Russell means in all cases. No suggestion of time is intended.

2.4.3 Russell's Principle of Significance

The theory of descriptions, on its own, is compatible with the Corollary. But Russell further endorsed the Principle of Significance, introduced at the outset.

(33) Russell's Principle of Significance: If a symbol or group of symbols is not a constituent in some proposition, then it has no significance.

It is because Russell adopts the principle of significance that he slides easily between an expression being meaningful and there being some object corresponding to that expression. For instance, consider the following passage, in which Russell suggests that we saddle ourselves with unicorns as soon as we attribute meaning to the words "a unicorn":

Thus if we falsely attribute meaning to these two words, we find ourselves saddled with "a unicorn", and with the problem of how there can be such a thing in a world where there are no unicorns.

(Russell 1919: 170)

He further says:

... in dealing with propositions, we are dealing

in the first instance with symbols, and if we attribute significance to groups of symbols which have no significance, we shall fall into the error of admitting unrealities, in the only sense in which this is possible, namely, as objects described. (Russell 1919: 170)

The principle of significance, when combined with the theory of descriptions, yields the conclusion that descriptions are not meaningful units. The principle of significance states that a unit is meaningful only if it forms a constituent in propositions; and, according to the theory of descriptions, descriptions do not form constituents in propositions. The conclusion, as Russell states it, is as follows: a description, whether definite or indefinite, is not "a subordinate group having a meaning of its own". (Russell 1919: 170) He gives "I met a unicorn" as an example:

In the proposition "I met a unicorn", the whole four words together make a significant proposition, and the word "unicorn" by itself is significant, in just the same way as the word "man". But the two words "a unicorn" do not form a subordinate group having a meaning of its own. (Russell 1919: 170)

Further along, Russell discusses definite descriptions. About "the so-and-so" he says:

One very important point about the definition of "a so-and-so" applies equally to "the so-and-so"; the definition [of "the so-and-so"] to be sought is a definition of propositions in which this phrase occurs, not a definition of the phrase itself in isolation. (Russell 1919: 172)

We should not, according to Russell, seek a definition of the phrase in isolation precisely because none is to be found. The phrase (in isolation) simply has no definition -- no significance.¹⁶

We believe that Russell is simply mistaken about the meaningfulness of descriptions. Descriptions, definite and indefinite, do have meanings in isolation. This is shown by the fact that some (possible) utterances of descriptions in isolation are assertoric. To review the argument: all assertoric utterances -- including assertoric utterances of descriptions in isolation -- have explicit content; but an utterance of a meaningless expression would not have explicit

¹⁶ Similar views are expressed in Russell (1905: 208). He writes: "According to the view which I advocate, a denoting phrase is essentially part of a sentence, and does not, like most single words, have any significance on its own".

content. Hence all assertoric utterances of descriptions in isolation must be utterances of meaningful expressions.

Notice too: hearers can understand utterances of descriptions in isolation. Hearers are able to do this because they recognize the description used, and they know its meaning. But if hearers know the meaning of descriptions then descriptions must have a meaning.

Consider an example. Someone could assert that a man from Spain was at a party by uttering the indefinite description in (38)

(38) A man from Spain

Or, a speaker could equally well assert that some anticipated man from Spain had arrived by saying the definite description (39).

(39) The man from Spain

Upon hearing these descriptions in isolation, an interpreter would apply his knowledge of the meaning of the descriptions in question, and would infer the speaker's meaning. (See Chapter Five for a detailed

discussion.) But if the interpreter knows the meaning of these descriptions, then they must have a meaning.

If Russell's view is to be consistent with the Thesis and its Corollary, he must reject either the theory of descriptions or the principle of significance. Neither horn of this dilemma is attractive.

2.4.4 Russell on Ontological Commitment

Part of Russell's stated motivation for adopting the theory of descriptions is ontological. In deference to "a robust sense of reality", Russell insists on banishing so-called "non-existent" objects. We are not to countenance unicorns, sea-monsters or other phantasms:

In obedience to the feeling of reality, we shall insist that, in the analysis of propositions, nothing "unreal" is to be admitted. (Russell 1919: 170)

Nor should we posit "indefinite objects" such as the object corresponding to "a man" -- not any particular man, mind you, but the indefinite man. (Russell 1919: 173) Russell writes:

... when we have enumerated all the men in the world, there is nothing left of which we can say, "This is a man, and not only so, but it is *the* 'a man', the quintessential entity that is just an indefinite man without being anybody in particular." It is of course quite clear that whatever there is in the world is definite: if it is a man it is one definite man and not any other. Thus there cannot be such an entity as "a man" to be found in the world, as opposed to specific men. And accordingly it is natural that we do not define "a man" itself, but only the propositions in which it occurs.

Russell is surely right to reject "unreal" and "indefinite" objects. But it is worth asking why Russell thought there was an ontological problem at all. The reason, apparently, is that he believed that if descriptions like "the round square", "a unicorn" and "a man" were constituents of significant propositions, then our ontology would immediately be burdened with such "unreal" and "indefinite" objects. In a word, Russell held something like the following Principle of Ontological Commitment:

(40) Russell's Principle of Ontological Commitment: If

there exists a significant proposition containing a constituent "a" then there is an object or propositional function corresponding to "a".

Let us consider an example, to illustrate how the principle of ontological commitment can lead to a bloated ontology. Russell (1919: 168) concedes that the proposition "I met a unicorn" is significant, though false. Now let us suppose that "a unicorn" is a constituent in this proposition. Then there exists at least one significant proposition containing "a unicorn" as a constituent. It follows, from the principle of ontological commitment, that there is an object corresponding to "a unicorn". So our ontology must include this object.

Russell avoids ontological commitment to unicorns, the indefinite man, round squares and such by introducing the theory of descriptions. This theory has the advantage that descriptions -- including "a unicorn", "a man", "the present King of France" and so on -- simply are not constituents of propositions. As Russell puts it,

The important point is that, when rightly analyzed, propositions verbally about "a so-and-so" are found to contain no constituent

represented by this phrase. (Russell 1919: 171)

Hence sentences containing descriptions do not carry ontological commitment to the thing described. If Russell abandons the theory of descriptions, however, he must find another means of unburdening his ontology -- unless he rejects the principle of ontological commitment altogether.

Alternatively, Russell could give up the principle of significance, and allow that descriptions are meaningful even though they are not constituents in propositions. But the principle of significance is at the very heart of Russell's theory of meaning. The meaning of an expression, for the Russell of this period, just is the constituent (object or propositional function) which the expression refers to.

In sum: if the Corollary is true, then Russell faces a dilemma. He can maintain the principle of significance, but then he must abandon the theory of descriptions. And, if he does this, then he no longer has a solution to the ontological embroglio. Alternatively, Russell can maintain his theory of descriptions, and the solution it provides to the ontological problem of "non-existent" and "indefinite"

objects. But then he must give up the principle of significance. But as goes the principle of significance, so goes Russell's theory of meaning. Neither option is attractive.

Of course Russell can maintain both the principle of significance and the theory of descriptions, should it turn out that the Corollary, as applied to descriptions, is false. But, as we will shortly argue, the Corollary is true, even as applied to descriptions.

3 Summary

We began this chapter by stating the Thesis:

(1) The Thesis: Speakers can make assertions by uttering words and phrases in isolation

We then considered two philosophical doctrines which appear to be in conflict with this Thesis: Dummett's specific account of assertion and Evans' principle.

We then introduced a Corollary to the Thesis:

(20) The Corollary: Words and phrases have a meaning in isolation.

We pointed out that Frege's context principle, on at least two interpretations of it, is prima facie incompatible with the Corollary. As is Russell's theory of descriptions -- when conjoined with his principle of significance.

We have not argued that if the Thesis and its Corollary are true, then every variant of these doctrines is false. We make the weaker claim that if the Thesis and its Corollary are true, the philosophical doctrines as they stand face objections from the assertoric use of words and phrases in isolation. Whether they can be repaired so as to meet these objections remains an open question. But it now becomes rather important to establish whether the Thesis and its Corollary are true. The remainder of this dissertation will address this question.

CHAPTER TWO: SOME BACKGROUND¹⁷

In this chapter we present material which we take for granted in the remainder of the thesis. First, we review some central ideas about the syntax and semantics of words, phrases and sentences. It will then be clear what we mean by saying that it is not just sentences, but also words and phrases which are used assertorically in isolation: by this, we mean that expressions having the syntactic structure and semantic content of words and phrases are used in isolation to make assertions.

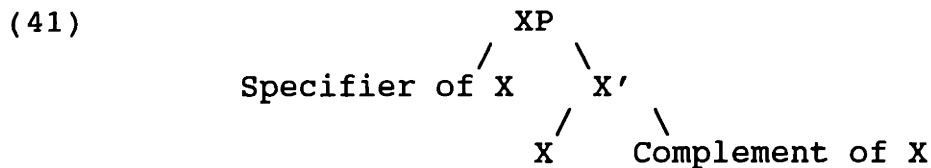
Next, we introduce some of the key notions of relevance theory, an approach to language and communication presented in Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1987).

¹⁷ We would like to here express our thanks to Chris Collins, a friend and colleague, for his very helpful tutorials in syntax. We should also make clear that, in our discussion of syntax -- in this chapter and elsewhere in the dissertation -- wherever simplification does not affect the soundness of our arguments, we omit details.

1 The Syntax and Semantics of Phrases

1.1 The X-bar Schema

We assume that the notion "word" is clear enough for our purposes. But what are phrases? X-bar theory, described in Jackendoff (1977), Chomsky (1981), Haegeman (1991) and references cited there, provides a very general answer to this question. According to X-bar theory, every phrase has the following form, called the X-BAR SCHEMA:



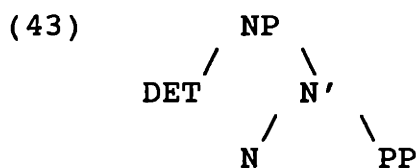
By substituting a LEXICAL CATEGORY VARIABLE for X, a phrasal category results. A list of lexical category variables is given below:

(42) Lexical Category Variables = {Noun, Verb, Preposition, Adjective, Adverb}

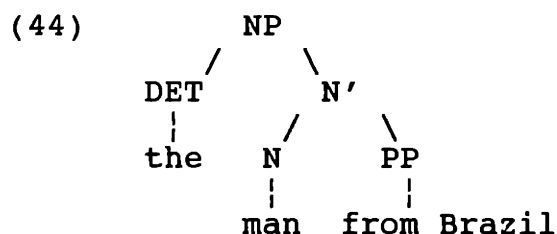
The X-bar schema captures the fact that every phrase of category X is headed by an element of type X. Noun Phrases have nouns as heads; Verb Phrases have verbs as heads; and so on. Substituting a lexical

category variable for X in the X-bar schema yields the general form of phrases of that category.

For example, we may substitute N for X. The result is the general form shared by all Noun Phrases. (Elsewhere in the grammar, it is stated that the specifier of N is DET, and that one possible complement of N is PP.)



Filling in particular words under DET, N and PP we produce a specific Noun Phrase. For instance, taking [the] as the determiner, [man] as the noun and [from Brazil] as the prepositional phrase, the result is:

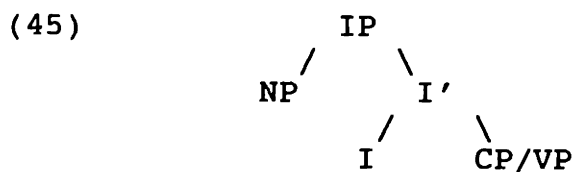


Importantly, there are two types of category variables. On the one hand, there are the lexical categories, which we have just reviewed. These include Noun, Verb, Preposition, Adjective and Adverb. Lexical categories dominate open classes of words; classes to

which new members can be freely added. On the other hand, there are NON-LEXICAL categories. Of particular interest to us is the category INFL.

INFL dominates the inflectional morphology of the verb (i.e. subject-verb agreement), tense markers and the infinitival marker "to". In English, INFL also dominates a closed class of words, consisting of the aspectual auxiliaries ("have" and "be") and the modals ("will", "can", "may", "shall", "must").¹⁸

By substituting INFL for X in the X-bar schema we arrive at (45), the general form that is shared by all sentences. (Again: elsewhere in the grammar it is stated that the specifier of I is NP, and that the complement of I is CP or VP.)



By filling in particular formatives under NP, I and CP/VP we produce a specific sentence (i.e. an Inflectional Phrase). For instance, taking [_{NP} The

¹⁸ In many languages, aspect and modality are indicated by inflectional morphology. In these languages, INFL does not dominate any words.

- (47) Semantic type one: formatives that express individual concepts
- (48) Semantic type two: formatives that express properties
- (49) Semantic type three: formatives that express generalized quantifiers, where a generalized quantifier is a function from properties to propositions.²⁰

Let us consider an example from each of the three semantic types.

The Noun Phrase "Miss America" is of semantic type one: it expresses an individual concept. The specific individual concept it expresses designates the unique person, if any, who happens to be Miss America. (Which person that is depends, of course, on how things stand in the world.)

The word "red" expresses a property. It is,

²⁰ Of course, to give the SEMANTIC VALUE of a word or phrase we need to state not only its semantic type, but also the specific individual concept, property or generalized quantifier expressed. For example: every one-place predicate has the same semantic type as every other one-place predicate; all of them express properties. To give the semantic value of a one-place predicate, therefore, it is not sufficient to give its semantic type; one must also say precisely which property the predicate expresses. Similarly for every phrase in the language, whether of type one, two or three: to give it semantic type is not yet give its semantic value.

therefore, of semantic type two. The specific property it expresses is the property red.

The Noun Phrase "some apples" expresses a generalized quantifier. It is of semantic type three. As we have said, generalized quantifiers are functions from properties to propositions. The particular generalized quantifier expressed by "some apples" is that function which takes any property F as argument and yields as its value the proposition that some apples have the property F. If the property F is had by some apple or other, this proposition is true; if the property F is not had by any apple, then the resulting proposition is false.

To repeat: semantically speaking, words and phrases divide into three semantic types: those which express individual concepts, those which express properties and those which express generalized quantifiers. This will serve as our semantic characterization of words and phrases. The most important thing to notice about this characterization is the following: sentences -- including elliptical sentences -- express none of these three semantic types. Sentences express propositions; words and

phrases do not.²¹

2 Sperber and Wilson

In Chapter Five we show that a typical speaker can make an assertion by uttering the ordinary phrase (6) in isolation.

(6) John's father

To establish this conclusion, we make extensive use of relevance theory. In this section we will therefore introduce relevance theory as it is presented in Sperber and Wilson (1986).

2.1 Two Interpretive Processes

According to Sperber and Wilson, utterance interpretation involves two rather different processes. On the one hand, the interpreter must recover the linguistic representation of the utterance. (This they call the decoding process.) On the other hand, the hearer must discover the speaker's meaning on the basis of this linguistic representation. This is the

²¹ To be more precise: sentences express propositional characters, functions from contexts to propositions. We abstract away from this complication throughout.

inferential process.

2.1.1 The Decoding Process

A complete linguistic representation of an utterance will give at least three different descriptions of the utterance: a phonetic description (the Phonetic Form of the utterance), a syntactic description (the Syntactic Structure of the utterance) and a semantic description (the Logical Form of the utterance).²²

For the most part, Sperber and Wilson treat the recovery of the linguistic representation as a "black box". The hearer uses a discreet body of linguistic knowledge to decode the utterance; the linguistic representation she assigns the utterance then serves as the departure point for the inferential process.

²² One important note: not all linguistic representations are equally grammatical; grammaticality comes in degrees. Some linguistic representations are wholly grammatical, others are slightly ill-formed, others are wholly ill-formed and still others are "word salad". Compare, for example, the linguistic representation of utterances of (i) through (iv). Evidently, these linguistic representations exhibit different degrees of ill-formedness.

- (i) John adores talking to Mary
- (ii) ?John adores Mary to talk to
- (iii) *John adore talking Mary
- (iv) **Talk adore John Mary to

2.1.2 The Inferential Process

In what follows, we will ignore implicated propositions, concentrating instead on asserted propositions. Hence, for our purposes, we may think of the inferential process as the means whereby the hearer goes beyond the utterance's linguistic representation, to arrive at what its speaker asserted in producing it.

To recover the proposition asserted, the hearer may need to perform three sub-tasks. Where the utterance is assigned more than one Logical Form (e.g. an utterance of "Flying planes can be dangerous"), she will need to disambiguate; where the Logical Form of the utterance contains indexical elements (e.g. an utterance of "He bought that in Chicago"), she will need to discover the reference of these indexicals; and where the Logical Form of the utterance contains some vague element (e.g. an utterance of "That is big"), she will need to ENRICH the vague element. (I.e. she will need to choose between, e.g., big for an insect, big for a building, big for a star, etc.) Each of these sub-tasks involves making inferences.

Sperber and Wilson call these three sub-tasks FILLING IN or COMPLETING the Logical Form provided by

decoding. Using information available from memory and from other cognitive systems, a single Logical Form is selected. The resulting Logical Form is the PROPOSITIONAL FORM of the utterance.

2.1.3 Illocutionary Force

The propositional form of an utterances expresses its explicit propositional content. But utterances have more than propositional content. They also have illocutionary force. The hearer must determine, for example, whether the utterance was intended as an assertion, a question or a command. Here again, both decoding and inference will play a part.

Decoding contributes a first hypothesis about what linguistic act is being performed. According to Sperber and Wilson, the hearer recovers the propositional form P of the utterance in question, and embeds it in an assumption schema of the form (50), where X may be replaced by "assert", "command", "ask", "implore" and other speech act verbs:

(50) The speaker is X-ing that/whether P

Different linguistic representations -- for

example, linguistic representations of different grammatical moods -- are correlated, in the language, with different instances of this schema. Imperative sentence, for example, call up the instance of (50) given below.

(51) The speaker is commanding that P

A hearer, upon encountering an utterance of an imperative sentence, automatically substitutes the propositional form of the utterance for P in this assumption schema.

Upon hearing a declarative sentence, on the other hand, a hearer automatically substitutes the propositional form for P in (52):

(52) The speaker is asserting that P

The result of substituting the appropriate speech act verb for X in (50) and filling in the selected propositional form for P is the assumption that provides the hearer's first hypothesis about the force (and propositional content) of the utterance. But sometimes this first hypothesis is incorrect.

Here is an example. Suppose Mary produces an utterance of sentence (53).

(53) John will be home by ten o'clock

Because (53) is a declarative sentence, the hearer first embeds its propositional form in the assumption schema (52), arriving at the first hypothesis: that the speaker is asserting that John will be home by ten o'clock.

But the actual illocutionary force of the utterance may differ from this first hypothesis. The actual illocutionary force of the utterance is determined by what linguistic act the speaker actually intends to perform; whether, for example, he intends to assert, command or inquire. And, to discover the speaker's actual intentions -- rather than merely recovering this first hypothesis -- the hearer must embark on the inferential process, basing her inferences upon the context and her general knowledge of the world.

Returning to our example: the inferential process may result in the rejection of the initial hypothesis - - i.e. that Mary is asserting that John will be home by

ten o'clock. For instance, suppose John is Mary's seven year old son, over whom Mary has custody. And suppose Mary is addressing her ex-husband, who is taking John out for the day. Because Mary has custody over John, while the husband is merely taking him out for a visit, Mary is in a legal position to make demands about what time John will arrive home. Knowing all of this information, John's father -- the hearer in this case -- should construe the utterance of (53) as a command, rather than an assertion.

The essential lesson of this example is that the hearer, in determining the actual force of the utterance, uses information about marital relationships, legal custody and so on to make inferences about what linguistic act Mary intended to perform. So: finding the actual illocutionary force of an utterance inevitably involves making inferences.

One important terminological matter, before we sum up. In what follows, we will have cause to refer to the illocutionary force of expressions, and not just the illocutionary force of utterances. (This way of speaking is not to be found in Sperber and Wilson's work; but the central ideas are theirs.) The illocutionary force of an expression is determined by

the assumption schema which tokens of it automatically occasion.

We will say that an expression E has ASSERTORIC FORCE if and only if hearers, upon encountering utterances of E, automatically embed the utterance's propositional form in the assumption schema (52). (See Sperber and Wilson 1986: 246 for discussion).

(52) The speaker is asserting that P

An expression E has IMPERATIVAL FORCE if and only if, upon first hearing an utterance E, "the hearer, on recovering the propositional form P of [that utterance of E] would integrate it into a description of the form *The speaker is telling the hearer to P*". (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 251) Finally, we will say that an expression E has INTERROGATIVE FORCE if and only if the hearer automatically "recovers [the Logical Form of the utterance of E] and integrates it into a description of the form *The speaker is asking Wh-P*, where *Wh-P* is an indirect question". (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 252)

Importantly, not every expression has illocutionary force. We will say that an expression E has illocutionary force if and only if there is some

assumption schema S(P) such that hearers, upon encountering utterances of E, automatically embed the utterance's propositional form in S(P).

2.1.4 Summary

We can now summarize Sperber and Wilson's views on interpretation. Utterance interpretation, they maintain, involves two kinds of processes: namely decoding and inference. In the decoding process, the utterance is assigned a linguistic representation, including a Phonetic Form, a Syntactic Structure and a Logical Form. In the inferential process, two things happen: first, this Logical Form is "filled in" -- it is disambiguated, enriched and reference is assigned -- yielding the propositional form of the utterance. Second, an illocutionary force is selected for the utterance.

In selecting the illocutionary force of the utterance, decoding and inference also play a part. The decoding process provides the illocutionary force of the expression used, in the form of an assumption schema into which the propositional form is embedded -- assuming the expression used has an illocutionary force. The propositional form of the utterance

replaces the variable in this assumption schema, resulting in an assumption. This assumption furnishes the hearer with a first hypothesis about what linguistic act the speaker intended to perform.

This first hypothesis is checked in the inferential process, and either accepted or rejected. If rejected, the hearer attempts to find the actual set of assumptions communicated -- by making inferences; a process we will not discuss here.²³

2.2 The Principle of Relevance

We have introduced the two processes involved in interpretation. But we have not explained how, according to Sperber and Wilson, the processes are executed. As we said, for the most part Sperber and Wilson treat decoding as a "black box". Its task is to furnish the linguistic representation of the utterance, including its Logical Form. Generally speaking, we can

²³ It is of course true that hearers often recover more than the explicit content of an utterance. They may also recover IMPLICATURES. Recall Grice's (1975: 33) classic example. A professor of philosophy writes a letter of recommendation for his student, Mr. X. The whole content of the letter is: "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc." If a selection committee recovered only the explicature of such an utterance, they would not correctly understand it. The selection committee must understand what the referee meant by these words, in this situation: viz. that Mr. X is not a worthy candidate.

abstract away from how it achieves this task. In what follows, therefore, we focus upon the inferential process.

The hearer develops Logical Forms into propositional forms by applying the PRINCIPLE OF RELEVANCE. As Sperber and Wilson (1986: 184) put it, "the right propositional form is the one that leads to an overall interpretation which is consistent with the principle of relevance".

To understand the principle of relevance, we will need the notions of relevance and manifestness.

2.2.1 Relevance

An ASSUMPTION, for Sperber and Wilson, is one kind of propositional form. A propositional form is an assumption for some individual if and only if that individual treats that propositional form as a possibly accurate representation of the actual world.

Some propositional forms can be entertained by an individual, without being assumptions for that individual. For instance, propositional forms about fictitious characters are not assumptions for

individuals who know that the characters are fictitious; that is because they do not treat such propositional forms as possibly accurate representations of the actual world. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 2)

The set of assumptions which an individual holds to be true or probably true at a given time constitute that person's CONTEXT. Contexts change over time: new assumptions are added, old ones removed. CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS are changes to a context which improve it. Contextual effects arise in three different ways.

1. New information may interact with old information, and introduce new assumptions into the context
2. New information may provide evidence for an assumption already present in the context
3. New information may provide evidence against an assumption, and may result in its removal from the context.

Armed with the notions of context and contextual effect, we can introduce RELEVANCE.

(54) RELEVANCE:

Extent Condition 1: An assumption is RELEVANT in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in that context are large.

Extent Condition 2: An assumption is RELEVANT in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 125)

Thus, for an assumption to be relevant in a context, it must have some contextual effect in that context. And, *ceteris paribus*, the more contextual effects an assumption has in a context, the more relevant it is in that context. Furthermore, the less processing required in achieving the contextual effect in question, the more relevant the assumption.

2.2.2 Manifestness

Sperber and Wilson (1986: 39) say that an assumption is MANIFEST to an individual at a given time if and only if she is capable of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true at that time. Therefore, an assumption A

is manifest to an individual I if (a) I actually holds A true or probably true or (b) I could reasonably hold A true or probably true, at the time and place in question.

There are several ways that an assumption may be manifest to an individual. It may be perceptible in the physical environment; it may be inferable from assumptions which are already manifest; or, it may be retrievable from memory. It is important to stress the modality at work in this definition: to be manifest, an assumption need not have been already perceived, remembered or inferred. Rather, what is required for manifestness is the mere possibility that the assumption be perceived, inferred or remembered.

Manifestness, according to Sperber and Wilson, admits of degrees. Assumptions which are more likely to be held true are more manifest. Consider an example. It may be manifest to Watson that Holmes is holding a pipe, but more manifest to him that Holmes is speaking -- because Watson is more likely to hold this latter assumption true. In all likelihood, it will be less manifest to Dr. Watson that Holmes is not a raven. Not because Watson harbors any doubt; only because he is unlikely to even entertain the possibility that

Holmes is a raven. Nevertheless, Watson is capable of considering this assumption, however absurd. Hence it is manifest to him, albeit very slightly.

Sperber and Wilson define an individual's COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT as the set of assumptions that are manifest to her. Notice that a person's cognitive environment contains her context, since every assumption which is actually held true or probably true in a situation is an assumption which could be held true or probably true in that situation.

Sperber and Wilson stress that an assumption can be manifest to more than one individual. Let us agree that both Holmes and Watson are capable of perceiving a dagger, sitting on a chair. Hence, that the dagger is on the chair is manifest to both of them. Since a cognitive environment is a set of manifest assumptions, and the same assumptions can be manifest to more than one person, a group of people may share a cognitive environment. Sperber and Wilson define a shared cognitive environment of a group G as the assumptions which are manifest to every member of G.

2.2.3 Mutual Manifestness

Some cognitive environments are not only shared; they are MUTUAL. As Sperber and Wilson put it,

Any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it is what we will call a *mutual cognitive environment*. In a mutual cognitive environment, for every manifest assumption, the fact that it is manifest to the people who share this environment is itself manifest. (1986: 41-42)

Given all of this, Sperber and Wilson (1986: 42), define a MUTUALLY MANIFEST assumption: an assumption is mutually manifest if and only if it is an assumption in a mutual cognitive environment.

Recall the dagger on the chair. The following things, among others, are manifest to both Holmes and Watson:

Assumption A: The dagger is on the chair

Assumption B: It is manifest to both Holmes and Watson that it is manifest to both Holmes and Watson that the dagger is on the chair.

It is manifest to Holmes that these two assumptions are shared by Watson and himself. And it is manifest to Watson that these two assumptions are shared by Holmes and himself. That is, it is manifest to both of them that these two assumptions constitute a shared cognitive environment for them. (Not their only shared cognitive environment, to be sure. But one of them.) So every assumption in this cognitive environment (i.e. assumptions A and B) is mutually manifest to Watson and Holmes.

Given the notions of manifestness and relevance, we can now state Sperber and Wilson's (1986: 158) PRINCIPLE OF RELEVANCE.

(55) Presumption of Optimal Relevance:

(a) The set of assumptions {I} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.²⁴

(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {I}.

²⁴ An OSTENSIVE STIMULUS is defined as any stimulus which makes manifest an intention to make something manifest. See Sperber and Wilson (1986: 49) for discussion.

(56) Principle of Relevance:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.

If communication is to succeed, the speaker must communicate the presumption of optimal relevance. That is, he must communicate (a) that he is communicating assumptions which are relevant enough, and (b) that he has chosen the most efficient means for communicating these assumptions. Why is this so, according to Sperber and Wilson?

Let us begin with part (a) of the presumption of optimal relevance. Sperber and Wilson write,

It is manifest that an act of ostensive communication cannot succeed unless the audience pays attention to the ostensive stimulus. It is manifest that people will pay attention to a phenomenon only if it seems relevant to them. It is manifest, then, that a communicator who produces an ostensive stimulus must intend it to seem relevant to her audience: that is, must intend to make it manifest to the audience

that the stimulus is relevant. Adding a layer of mutuality to this account, let us suppose that it is not merely manifest but mutually manifest to communicator and audience that an ostensive stimulus is being produced. Then it is not merely manifest but mutually manifest that the communicator must intend the stimulus to seem relevant to the audience: that is, must intend it to be manifest to the audience that the stimulus is relevant. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 156)

The idea, in less technical language, is the following: if the speaker is to succeed in communicating, he must persuade his audience to interpret his utterance. This requires convincing that audience to expend the necessary interpretive effort. Sperber and Wilson claim that speakers convince the audience by making it mutually manifest that the speaker intends to communicate assumptions which are relevant to the audience.

Sperber and Wilson are aware, of course, that speakers do not always communicate in good faith: a speaker may claim his audience's attention without having anything truly relevant to communicate. But,

they maintain, unless a speaker at least pretends to be aiming for relevance, he will fail to communicate anything.²⁵

2.2.4 Why Optimal Relevance?

So much for part (a) of the presumption of optimal relevance. Let us now consider part (b). According to Sperber and Wilson, if communication is to succeed, a speaker must communicate that his utterance is the most relevant stimulus available for communicating the set of assumptions {I}. Why is this?

According to Sperber and Wilson, the most effective stimulus for communicating some set of assumptions {I} is the stimulus which makes it "as easy as possible for the addressee to understand" {I}.

(Sperber and Wilson 1986: 157) And the stimulus which makes it easy as possible for the addressee to understand {I} is precisely the one which requires the least processing effort. Finally, the stimulus which requires the least processing effort to recover {I} is

²⁵ Sperber and Wilson point out that speakers need not know the principle of relevance. As they say, "It is not the general principle, but the fact that a particular presumption of relevance has been communicated by and about a particular act of communication, that the audience uses in inferential comprehension". (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 162)

the most relevant stimulus capable of making {I} manifest. In a word, the following identities hold:

(57) The most effective stimulus for communicating {I} = the stimulus which makes it as easy as possible for the addressee to understand {I}

(58) The stimulus which makes it as easy as possible for the addressee to understand {I} = the stimulus which requires the least processing effort to recover {I}

(59) The stimulus which requires the least processing effort to recover {I} = the most relevant stimulus for making {I} manifest

By transitivity of identity,

(60) The most effective stimulus for communicating {I} = the most relevant stimulus for making {I} manifest

Now, if the speaker wishes to successfully communicate a set of assumptions {I}, then she will undoubtedly select the most effective stimulus available for communicating {I}. And, as we just showed, the most effective stimulus for communicating

{I} is the most relevant stimulus for making {I} manifest. So, if the speaker wishes to successfully communicate, she will select the most relevant stimulus for making {I} manifest.

This establishes that a speaker must choose the most relevant stimulus available -- if he wishes to communicate successfully. But Sperber and Wilson make a stronger claim. They maintain that speakers inevitably communicate that they are using the most relevant stimulus available. Why this extra step?

Sperber and Wilson (1986: 157) answer as follows:

An addressee who doubts that the communicator has chosen the most relevant stimulus [available] -- a hearer, say, who believes that he is being addressed with deliberate and unnecessary obscurity -- might doubt that genuine communication was intended, and might justifiably refuse to make the processing effort required. All of this is mutually manifest; it is therefore mutually manifest that the communicator intends it to be manifest to the addressee that she has chosen the most relevant stimulus capable of

fulfilling her intentions.

That is, by communicating that she has chosen the most relevant stimulus, the speaker helps to insure that the hearer will interpret her. For, if she fails to communicate this -- if, for example, the hearer takes her to be using a less than optimally relevant stimulus -- the hearer may not make the necessary interpretive effort. So, speakers not only inevitably select the most relevant stimulus available; they inevitably communicate that they have selected the most relevant stimulus available.

By assuming that the promise of optimal relevance was made in good faith, the hearer can eliminate certain hypotheses about what a speaker might have meant. In particular, she can reject any hypothesis which would have the speaker violating the presumption of optimal relevance.

But, it might be thought, this criterion leaves a multitude of possible interpretations, all of which are consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. If many interpretations satisfy this demand, how does the hearer select a single interpretation?

In response to this question, Sperber and Wilson (1986: 167) argue that there is only ever one set of assumptions which is truly consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance: the only set {I} consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance is the first set of assumptions {I} which is relevant enough.

2.2.5 Accessibility

This talk of "the first" presupposes some ordering of sets of assumptions. The ordering is in terms of ACCESSIBILITY. Sperber and Wilson (1986: 77) write that, "A more accessible assumption is one that is easier to recall". They add, "...the more a representation is processed, the more accessible it becomes".

It is not wholly clear what accessibility comes to. But the intuitive idea can be brought out as follows. Some assumptions are more easily brought to consciousness than others; furthermore, some assumptions can be retrieved from long term memory with ease, while others require significant effort. Similarly, some assumptions can easily be introduced into an individual's context; other assumptions could

become part of the individual's context only with a good deal of effort.

Those assumptions which require less effort to become part of an individual's context at a given time are more accessible for that individual at that time.

Sperber and Wilson maintain that hearers begin by testing the most accessible set of assumptions, in this sense of "accessible". If this set of assumptions is not consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance, the hearer goes to the next most accessible set, and tests it. This continues, until a set of assumptions is found which is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. The most accessible set of assumptions which is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance is the only one consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. And it is the set of assumptions being communicated.

2.2.6 Uniqueness

Why, according to Sperber and Wilson, is the most accessible set of assumptions the only set of assumptions consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance? They write,

An addressee... who wants to maximize cognitive efficiency, will test hypotheses in order of accessibility. Suppose he arrives at a hypothesis which is consistent with the principle of relevance. Should he stop there, or go on and test the next hypothesis on the grounds that it might be consistent with the principle of relevance too? It is easy to show that he should stop there. Suppose he does go on, and finds another hypothesis which verifies the first part of the presumption of relevance: the putative set {I} is relevant enough. In these circumstances, the second part of the presumption of relevance is almost invariably falsified. If it was at all possible, the communicator should have used a stimulus which would have saved the addressee the effort of first accessing two hypotheses consistent with the principle of relevance, and then having to choose between them. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 167-168)

This argument goes by rather fast, and it establishes a rather important conclusion. So let us unpack it. Sperber and Wilson want to establish the

conclusion below:

Conclusion: The first interpretation of an utterance U which is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance is the only interpretation consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. Therefore, for any U, there is only one interpretation of U consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance.

To establish this conclusion, let us assume that there is some utterance u which has two interpretations consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. From this assumption we derive a contradiction.

Premise 1: There is at least one utterance u such that u has two interpretations consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance: {I1} and {I2}.

Sperber and Wilson then observe that, "almost inevitably":

Premise 2: There exists some other utterance u' such that {I2} is the first interpretation of u' consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance

Sperber and Wilson include the hedge "almost

invariably" because of situations in which the communicator has at his disposal a very limited range of stimuli with which to communicate. When this happens, there may be no stimulus that has {I2} as its most accessible interpretation. Sperber and Wilson maintain, however, that natural languages are not limited in this way.²⁶

Sperber and Wilson then point out that finding the first interpretation of u consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance (i.e. finding {I1}), rejecting it, and finally finding {I2} involves more processing effort than finding the first interpretation of u' consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance (i.e. finding {I2}). In a word:

Premise 3: Interpreting u as communicating {I2} requires more processing effort than interpreting u' as communicating {I2}

Now, recall extent condition 2 of the definition

²⁶ Sperber and Wilson further claim that when stimuli are restricted -- e.g. when the code used is not a natural language -- communication may simply fail. They maintain, moreover, that when communication succeeds in these situations, the communicated set of assumptions is precisely the first set consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. Since our concern is with natural language, however, we will not rehearse those arguments here.

of relevance: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 125) So, by premise 3, u' is more relevant than u , when both are taken as communicating $\{I2\}$. But then it is not true that $\{I2\}$ is an interpretation of u which meets the presumption of optimal relevance. For there exists a more relevant means of communicating $\{I2\}$, viz. u' . This contradicts premise 1.

This argument establishes that, for any utterance u , there cannot be two interpretations of u consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. There can be only one. And that one is the first interpretation that passes the test.

Consider an example. Suppose Joe wishes to communicate the set of assumptions $\{A\}$ by using the sentence S in circumstances C . Joe realizes that, given his audience's initial context and cognitive environment, $\{A\}$ is not very accessible in C . Indeed, let us assume that, in C , $\{A\}$ is the third most accessible set of assumptions which is relevant enough to warrant processing the utterance. That is, before getting to $\{A\}$, the hearer will recover two other (more accessible) sets of assumptions, both of which are

relevant enough to warrant the effort expended. Sperber and Wilson maintain that if Joe uses S in C to make {A} manifest, he will violate the second part of the presumption of optimal relevance. His utterance will not be the most relevant stimulus for making {A} manifest in C, because, "almost inevitably", there exists some sentence S' such that, given C, {A} would be the first interpretation of an utterance of S' consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. Hence, in C, an utterance of S' is a more relevant stimulus than an utterance of S, because an utterance of S' does not require the hearer to access two prior sets of assumptions that are relevant enough.

2.3 Summary

Let us now sum up. Linguistic interpretation occurs as follows: the hearer assigns a linguistic representation to the utterance. This is the decoding process. Part of the linguistic representation of the utterance is its Logical Form, the departure point for the inferential process. The Logical Form is developed -- that is to say, it is disambiguated, enriched, and reference and force are assigned -- by using the most accessible assumptions. The resulting completed Logical Form is tested to see if it meets the

presumption of optimal relevance. If it does not, then the next most accessible development of the Logical Form is tested. This process continues until a completed Logical Form is found which is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. At this point, the interpreter stops: she has arrived at what the speaker asserted.

3 A Note on Empirical Commitments

Obviously, relevance theory may turn out to be incorrect -- particularly about details. Similarly for X-bar theory. These are, after all, empirical theories. And empirical theories are always open to refutation. It is reasonable to inquire, therefore, how much our conclusions rest upon the minutia of these theories.

The details are not, we think, essential. For the sake of explicitness, it is important to adopt a single framework. And we do believe that relevance theory and X-bar theory are the most promising, most specific and most accurate of those available. But, so far as we can see anyway, our conclusions do not stand or fall with the specifics of these particular theories.

Nevertheless, certain tenets of these theories are vital.

3.1 The Syntax and Semantics of Phrases

With respect to the syntax and semantics of phrases, two things are indispensable. First, our conclusions presuppose a distinction between:

- (a) syntactic words and phrases on the one hand, and syntactic sentences on the other
- (b) semantic words and phrases on the one hand, and semantic sentences on the other

If mature linguistic theory rejects these distinctions, then the dispute between the Thesis and the Counter Thesis cannot even be made sense of, for there is nothing to disagree about. It is extremely likely, however, that whatever path syntax and semantics may take, such a distinction will be drawn.

Assuming there is such a distinction, it is exceedingly likely that at least some words and phrases (as characterized by the correct syntactic and semantic theory -- whatever it is) can be used in isolation to make assertions. For example: only a very radical

revision of the notion of phrase would result in (6) through (9) not being phrases.

(6) John's father

(7) Nice work

(8) Very fast

(9) From Spain

But each of (6) through (9) can be used to assert. Or so it appears. Even if just these four and no others are ultimately classified as phrases, it would still be the case that some semantic phrases and some syntactic phrases can be used in isolation to make assertions. Hence the Thesis would be true and the Counter Thesis would be false.

3.2 Relevance Theory

Ordinary words and phrases do not express propositions. Yet, if we are correct, speakers can use ordinary words and phrases to assert propositions. Hence, if we are right, when someone makes an assertion by uttering an ordinary word or phrase there is an important gap between the thought which is asserted and the meaning (in the circumstances of use) of the expression used. The central contribution of relevance

theory is to explain how this gap is bridged.

We take relevance theory to be plausible. Hence we also take our conclusions to be plausible. But notice: our conclusions do not rest on the supposition that the supplementing of non-propositional meanings occurs exactly as relevance theory describes it.

On the other hand: our conclusions do rest on the supposition that "supplementing" or "bridging the gap" can occur somehow or other. This latter supposition, however, is reasonable enough.

Here is why: communicators exhibit powerful inferential abilities; when, e.g., they communicate non-linguistically, or when they communicate by uttering indexical sentences, ambiguous sentences, or sentences that must be enriched. These inferential abilities -- whatever their precise character may be -- are surely sufficient to permit hearers to take the non-propositional meaning of ordinary words and phrases, fill in some missing element, and arrive at the proposition asserted. Regardless of how this process takes place, if -- as seems likely -- it can take place then our conclusions are vindicated.

CHAPTER THREE: THE SYNTACTIC ELLIPSIS HYPOTHESIS

...we obviously cannot correctly talk of the expression "the king of France" being used to express a true or false proposition, since in general only sentences can be used truly or falsely. (Strawson 1956: 224)

1 Introduction

Recall the ellipsis hypothesis, repeated below:

(5) The Ellipsis Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence.

The ellipsis hypothesis can be interpreted in two rather different ways; one syntactic, the other semantic. Using the notions of Syntactic Structure, semantic type, illocutionary force and linguistic representation, we can state the two construals of the ellipsis hypothesis as follows:

(5 a) The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really

utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that the linguistic representation of her utterance has a Syntactic Structure that is headed by INFL.*

(5 b) The Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that (a) the semantic type of the linguistic representation of her utterance is propositional and (b) the linguistic representation of her utterance has illocutionary force.*

These are, so far as we know, the only possible construals of the ellipsis hypothesis. Hence, if both of these are incorrect, then the ellipsis hypothesis is false.

The burden of this chapter will be to argue against the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. We postpone discussion of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis until Chapter Four.

2 Two Syntactic Ellipsis Hypotheses

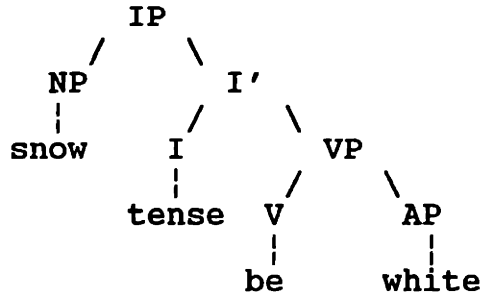
In this section we will introduce two syntactic ellipsis hypotheses. Each spells out the idea that when speakers (appear to) utter words and phrases in isolation, the linguistic representation of their utterance is syntactically sentential. First, however, a word about notational conventions. In what follows, we will represent the Syntactic Structure and Logical Form of utterances by a labelled bracketing (or, equivalently, by a tree).²⁷ For example, suppose John says the sentence,

(61) Snow is white

We use either of the following notations to give the Syntactic Structure and Logical Form of John's utterance:

²⁷ Propositional forms are Logical Forms which express propositions. Being a kind of Logical Form, they too will be represented as tree structures or labelled bracketings.

(62)



(63) [_{IP} [_{NP} snow] [_{I'} [_I tense/agreement] [_{VP} be [_{AP} white]]]]

We use English orthography in italics to give the Phonetic Form of utterances. The Phonetic Form of John's utterance, for example, would be given by *snow is white*.

To give the complete linguistic representation of an utterance, we use an ordered triple consisting of a Logical Form, a Syntactic Structure and a Phonetic Form -- in that order. (Where the Logical Form and Syntactic Structure are the same, we omit the Syntactic Structure.) Here, for example, is the linguistic representation of John's utterance:²⁸

(64) <[_{IP} Snow is white], *snow is white*>

²⁸ Obviously these representations leave out much detail; particularly the representation of the Phonetic Form.

Linguistic representations fall into different classes. In particular, we can classify some as syntactically sentential and others as syntactically lexical or phrasal. A linguistic representation is SYNTACTICALLY SENTENTIAL if and only if its Syntactic Structure tree is headed by an inflectional element, where -- as we saw -- inflection elements include modals, tense and verb-subject agreement. (For further discussion, see Chomsky (1981).)

Paradigm examples of linguistic representations that are syntactically sentential are given in (64) and (65):

(64) <[_{IP} Snow is white], *snow is white*>

(65) <[_{IP} That dog is hungry], *that dog is hungry*>

2.1 Version I: The Deletion Hypothesis

We will say that a linguistic representation *r* is SHORTENED if and only if there exists another linguistic representation *r'* such that *r'* has a longer Phonetic Form than *r*, but *r'* has the same Syntactic Structure as *r*.²⁹

²⁹ We leave open the question of how precisely the notion of length should be explicated, relying in what follows on an intuitive understanding of this notion.

Examples (66) and (67) are paradigmatic of shortened linguistic representations:

(66) <[_{IP} She does not smoke], *She doesn't smoke*>

(67) <[_{IP} John thinks [_{CP} that snow is white], *John thinks snow is white*>

These are shortened because there are other linguistic representations -- e.g. (68) and (69) -- which have the same Syntactic Structure, but a longer Phonetic Form:

(68) <[_{IP} She does not smoke], *She does not smoke*>

(69) <[_{IP} John thinks [_{CP} that snow is white], *John thinks that snow is white*>

The Phonetic Form of (68) is longer than that of (66), in the sense that only the latter exhibits contraction; the Phonetic Form of (69) is longer than that of (67) because the word "that" is not phonetically present in (67). Hence, (66) and (67) are shortened linguistic representations.

Given the notions of syntactically sentential linguistic representations and shortened linguistic representations, we can now state the first version of

the ellipsis hypothesis:

(5 a.i) The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis, Version I: The Deletion Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that the linguistic representation of her utterance is syntactically sentential, but it is shortened.*

It is the "shortening", of course, that explains why the result does not "sound like" an ordinary sentence -- even though the utterance is syntactically sentential.

Let us take an example of an utterance of an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation. Imagine that John (appears to) utter the phrase "An emergency generator shutdown" in isolation. On the deletion hypothesis, John's utterance has the Phonetic Form given in (70) and the Syntactic Structure given in (71):

(70) *An emergency generator shutdown*

(71) [_{IP} There [_I, INFL [_{VP} be an emergency generator shutdown]]]

Notice that there is (at least) one other Phonetic Form that shares this Syntactic Structure. It is given in (72).

(72) *There is an emergency generator shutdown*

The Phonetic Form in (72) is longer than the one in (70). But both share the Syntactic Structure (71). Hence, by the definition of "shortened", the linguistic representation of John's utterance is shortened. Notice, however, that the Syntactic Structure of (71) -- the Syntactic Structure of John's utterance -- is headed by INFL. Hence the linguistic representation of this utterance is syntactically sentential. Therefore, what the speaker really uttered was not a phrase at all; it was an elliptical sentence.

To summarize: the deletion hypothesis holds that the linguistic representation of any actual or possible assertoric utterance of an (apparent) word or phrase is syntactically sentential, but shortened. The utterance is syntactically sentential in the sense that its Syntactic Structure is headed by INFL. And it is shortened in the sense that there exists another linguistic representation with the same Syntactic Structure, but a longer Phonetic Form. Being

shortened, the utterance does not sound like an utterance of a sentence. But, despite appearances, it is an utterance of a sentence.

2.2 Version II: The Empty Element Hypothesis

We now present another construal of the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. We begin by introducing the notion of phonologically null (or "empty") elements. PHONOLOGICALLY NULL ELEMENTS are syntactic items that have no phonetic "spell out"; that is to say, no sound corresponds to them. Hence, though present in the Syntactic Structure, they are never heard.

Recent research has suggested that natural languages exhibit several different kinds of empty elements. Let us consider one paradigm example: the element PRO in English.

One of the places PRO occurs, at least in English, is the subject position of embedded infinitival clauses. For example:

(73) [_{IP} John₁ wants [_{IP} [_{NP} PRO₁] to leave]

The crucial point is the following: though PRO is

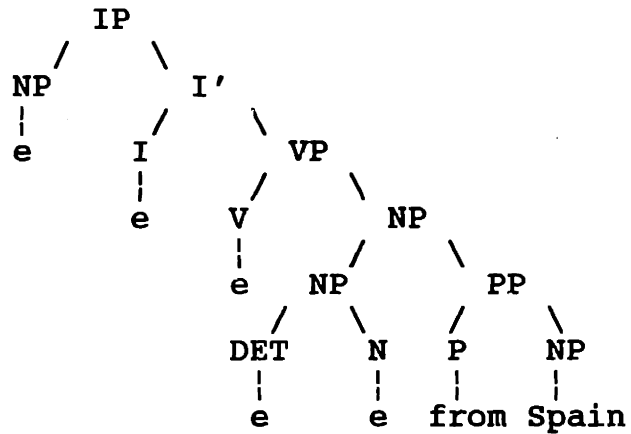
syntactically present, we do not hear it when someone says the sentence "John wants to leave". That is because PRO has no phonetic spell out.

Giving the notion of phonologically null elements, we may now state the second version of the ellipsis hypothesis: the empty element hypothesis.

(5 a.ii) The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis, Version II: The Empty Element Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that the linguistic representation of her utterance is syntactically sentential, but that Syntactic Structure contains a number of phonologically null (i.e. "empty") elements.*

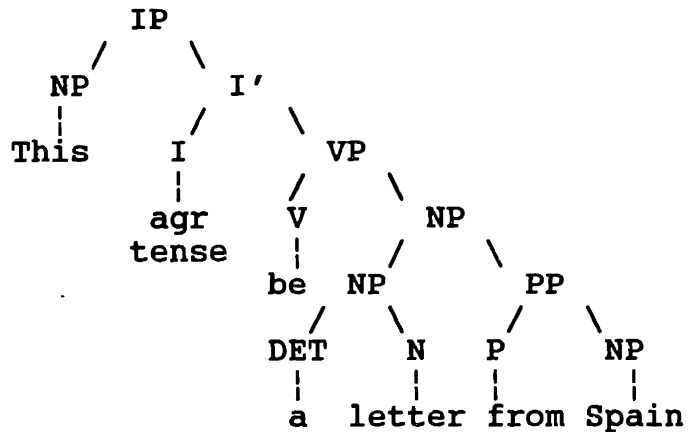
Here is an example. According to the empty element hypothesis, the tree in (74) gives the Syntactic Structure of an assertoric utterance of the (apparent) phrase "From Spain". The letter e stands for the phonologically null (i.e. "empty") element:

(74)



Compare this Syntactic Structure with that of utterances of the (ordinary) sentence "This is a letter from Spain":

(75)



The trees are the same, except that many of the bottom nodes in (74) dominate phonologically null elements. This explains why an utterance having the Syntactic Structure in (74) sounds different from one that has the Syntactic Structure given in (75).

In sum: on both the deletion and empty element hypotheses, all utterances are sentential, syntactically speaking. That is to say, the Syntactic Structure of every utterance is headed by INFL. The difference between the two ellipsis hypotheses is the means they employ to explain why one does not hear the subject and inflected verb, even though they are syntactically present. Where the deletion hypothesis introduces shortened linguistic representations, the empty element hypothesis posits phonologically null elements.

3 Against the Empty Element Hypothesis

In the following sections we will encounter objections -- both empirical and methodological -- that apply to both the empty element hypothesis and the deletion hypothesis. First, however, we should like to make some methodological remarks that apply specifically to the empty element hypothesis.

There are two good methodological reasons for not adopting the empty element hypothesis.

First, this hypothesis introduces a new kind of empty element into the theory. We know it is new

because no previously known element is dominated by all of N, P, I, DET, V, A and so on. Hypothesizing a new empty element is ad hoc, since the only reason for hypothesizing it is to account for the assertoric use of (apparent) words and phrases in isolation.

It might be said that, at least when it is dominated by N, e is independently required. But even here, the hypothesis requires introducing another kind of empty element. The four familiar empty elements that are dominated by N are: wh-trace, NP-trace, PRO and pro. But e can be none of these.

English is not a pro-drop language. If it were, sentences like (76) would be grammatical.

(76) * [_{IP} pro is sleeping]

Hence e cannot be pro.

And e cannot be either an NP or wh- trace either. First, because no movement has taken place in sentence (74). Second, because traces require antecedents, whereas e does not. Third, because e does not share a theta role with any overt element, but is itself assigned a theta role. (Traces do not get assigned

theta roles on their own. I.e. a trace cannot form a single member chain.) All of these properties are exhibited by the empty element dominated by N in the sentence (74), repeated here:

(77) [_{IP} [_{NP} e] [_{I'} [_I e] [_{VP} [_V e] [_{NP} [_{NP} e] [_{PP} from Spain]]]]]

The empty element e cannot be PRO either. PRO can sometimes occur without an antecedent, as sentence (78) shows.

(78) [PRO to sleep now] would be dangerous

But, by the PRO theorem, PRO cannot be governed. (For introductory discussions of the PRO theorem, see Lasnik and Uriagereka (1988: 52-54) and Haegeman (1991: 251ff).) Both the NP positions in (74), however, are governed. We know this because overt NPs can occur in these positions -- as (75) shows. (Overt NPs can only appear in case marked sites; and case marked sites are necessarily governed, because case is assigned under government.)

So e, if it exists, is a hitherto unfamiliar empty element. The only reason provided for positing e is to

account for the fact that speakers (appear to) make assertions with (and hearers appear to construe) words and phrases in isolation. So their introduction into the theory is not independently motivated.

This phenomenon can be explained without positing *e* by agreeing that words and phrases can be used in isolation to make assertions. And, as we shall see, there are independent reasons -- beyond the fact that speakers appear to actually assertorically utter ordinary words and phrases -- for thinking that speakers can assertorically utter ordinary words and phrases. As we explain in Chapter Five, a typical speaker has the ability to assert by uttering ordinary words or phrases, even if she never chooses to actually make a lexical or phrasal assertion. Hence the introduction of *e* is not only ad hoc; it is completely unnecessary.

Let us stress: our objection is not that positing empty elements is, generally speaking, methodologically promiscuous. The postulation of an empty element may be independently motivated; and this postulation may explain facts which would otherwise remain unexplained.

But the particular phonologically null element

which the empty element hypothesis appeals to is not independently motivated. This empty element does allow one to claim that when speakers (appear to) utter words and phrases in isolation, they are actually producing elliptical sentences. But it serves no other purpose. And the phenomenon which the empty element hypothesis accounts for -- the fact that people appear to utter and construe words and phrases in isolation -- can be explained without appeal to empty elements. This is one very good methodological reason for rejecting the empty element hypothesis.

The second reason is that the empty element hypothesis posits a phonologically null element which we know almost nothing about; in fact, the only thing we do know is that it appears in linguistic representations of utterances of (apparent) words and phrases in isolation.

It remains utterly mysterious, for example, why this element cannot appear in ordinary sentences. One would have expected the phonologically null verbs, inflection, etc. to be ubiquitous. Yet the following Syntactic Structures are ungrammatical.

(79)

(a) *_{IP} John [_I, e] [_{VP} [_V e] [_{AP} tall]]]

(b) *_{IP} Steve [_I, [_I e] [_{VP} be shopping]]

(c) *_{IP} John comes [_{PP} [_P e] France]]

So far as we can see, no plausible constraints can be placed upon the distribution of e. In particular, we are at a loss to explain why it cannot appear in these positions.

Keeping these methodological concerns about the empty element hypothesis in mind, we now turn to objections that apply to both it and the deletion hypothesis.

4 Against Both Syntactic Ellipsis Hypotheses

In this section, we present several arguments against both syntactic ellipsis hypotheses. The arguments will be of two kinds. First, we will see that the notion of ellipsis called into service is not plausible. Second, we will see that the syntactic ellipsis hypotheses has empirically false consequences about where (apparent) words and phrases in isolation can acceptably occur.

4.1 The Infinite Ambiguity of Phonetic Forms

One consequence of the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis is that Phonetic Forms do not uniquely determine linguistic representations. Given only a Phonetic Form, there is no way to single out a unique linguistic representation having that Phonetic Form.

Consider an example. It would follow from the deletion hypothesis that all of (80a) through (80c) are well-formed linguistic representations:

(80)

(a) <[_{IP} Mary loves Fred], *mary*>

(b) <[_{IP} Fred loves Mary], *mary*>

(c) <[_{IP} Mary detests Steve], *mary*>

We know that these linguistic representations would exist, on the deletion hypothesis, because the Phonetic Form *Mary* can serve as a reply to any of the following questions:

(81)

(a) Who loves Fred?

(b) Who does Fred love?

(c) Who detests Steve?

If a speaker responds to (81a) with the Phonetic Form

Mary, his utterance -- on the deletion hypothesis -- has the Logical Form [_{IP} *Mary loves Fred*]. That the utterance has this Logical Form in this context is clear because, in saying *Mary*, the speaker asserts that *Mary loves Fred*.

On the other hand, if a speaker responds to (81b) with an utterance that has the Phonetic Form *Mary*, then that utterance must (on this view) have the Logical Form [_{IP} *Fred loves Mary*]. That is because, in saying *Mary* in this context, the speaker asserts that *Fred loves Mary*.

So, given that utterances with the Phonetic Form *Mary* can serve as an answer to any of (81 a-c), there must be at least three linguistic representations that share this Phonetic Form -- if the deletion hypothesis is correct. But notice: for any given Phonetic Form, there are an unlimited number of questions to which utterances with that Phonetic Form can serve as a reply. Therefore, by parity of reasoning, any Phonetic Form whatever corresponds to an unlimited number of Logical Forms.

Each Logical Form has a meaning. And different Logical Forms have different meanings. So, because

every Phonetic Form corresponds to infinitely many different Logical Forms, every Phonetic Form will correspond to infinitely many meanings.

Recall, for example, that the Phonetic Form *Mary* corresponds to the following meanings -- and many many more:

(82)

- (a) that Mary loves Fred
- (b) that Fred loves Mary
- (c) that Mary detests Steve

The infinite ambiguity of Phonetic Forms holds for the empty element hypothesis as well. According to that hypothesis, all of the following linguistic representations, plus many many more, are shared by the Phonetic Form *mary*:

(83) <[_{IP} [_{NP} e] [_I, [_I e] [_{VP} [_V e] [_{NP} Mary]]]], *mary*>

(84) <[_{IP} [_{NP} Mary] [_I, [_I e] [_{VP} [_V e] [_{NP} e]]]], *mary*>

(85) <[_{IP} [_{NP} e] [_I, [_I e] [_{VP} [_V e] [_{PP} [_P e] [_{NP} Mary]]]], *mary*>

But the displayed Logical Forms mean different things. Hence: if either syntactic ellipsis hypothesis

is true, then to every Phonetic Form there corresponds an unlimited number of Logical Forms -- and hence an unlimited number of meanings.

The consequence that Phonetic Forms are infinitely ambiguous is devastating for the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis; it renders the view enormously implausible.

4.2 Linguistic Antecedents

Having spelled out the two versions of the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis in some detail, let us now consider what they have in common. The syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, on its broadest construal, can be paraphrased as follows: utterances of (what appear to be) words and phrases in isolation actually have sentential Syntactic Structures. But these utterances do not sound like utterances of typical sentences because they are, so to speak, PHONETICALLY ABBREVIATED when compared with ordinary syntactically sentential utterances.

The difference between the deletion hypothesis and the empty element hypothesis has to do with how the phenomenon of phonetic abbreviation is explained.

Let us call utterances which fit this broad construal ELLIPTICAL UTTERANCES. And let us call linguistic representations of such utterances ELLIPTICAL EXPRESSIONS. There are good reasons for thinking that natural languages do contain some elliptical expressions. VP deletion constructions, sluicing constructions, and PP deletion constructions provide prototypical examples. (See especially Hankemer and Sag (1976) for discussion.)

(86)

(a) VP Deletion: <[_{IP} John does not smoke], *John doesn't*>

(b) Sluicing: <[_{IP} I wonder when Steve left], *I wonder when*>

(c) PP Deletion: <[_{IP} Alex is in France too], *Alex is too*>

These paradigm examples of elliptical expressions share an important characteristic: they cannot appear in discourse initial position. One cannot walk into a room and say "I wonder when" or "John doesn't". The generalization is that elliptical expressions -- linguistic representations which are phonetically abbreviated in the way described -- cannot acceptably occur discourse initially. If this generalization is

correct, then the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis is mistaken.

We define a DISCOURSE as an ordered n-tuple of linguistic representations, such that said n-tuple is not itself an element in an n-tuple. Some discourses are acceptable, in a rough pretheoretical sense. Others are unacceptable. (We use "acceptable" and "unacceptable" rather than "well formed" and "ill-formed" because we do not wish to take a stand on whether the unacceptability of discourses derives from ungrammaticality or from some other source.)

The discourse in (87) is unacceptable, in some pretheoretical sense. This is predicted by the generalization, since this discourse (which happens to consist of a single linguistic representation) begins with an elliptical expression.

[Mary is holding a gun to her head. Alex says]

(87) *Mary doesn't

The discourse in (6), on the other hand, is perfectly acceptable.

[Two people are talking at a party. Mary points to a

man near the door and says]

(6) John's father

Yet, on the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, this discourse also begins with an elliptical expression. So, either the generalization is incorrect, or "John's father" is not an elliptical expression.

In fact, the generalization does not hold for any word or phrase. All words and phrases -- even very complex words and phrases -- are acceptable in discourse initial position. Several of this unlimited number of words and phrases are given below.

(88)

(a) An emergency generator shutdown

(b) Another scoop of ice cream

(c) At the house of the seven gables

(d) To my dearest wife of many years, from your loving husband

(e) Coffee, black, with seven lumps of sugar

(f) Of all the stupid things to say (Quirk et al 1985:

850)

The syntactic ellipsis hypothesis and the generalization cannot be true together. The evidence

for the generalization is rather strong: it holds for all the familiar cases of ellipsis, and fails only when applied to these controversial cases of (apparent) words or phrases in isolation. There is, on the other hand, no independent evidence for the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis.

4.3 VP Deletion, Sluicing and PP Deletion³⁰

Recall that, by definition, a discourse is an ordered n-tuple of linguistic representations. Now, discourses that contain VP deletion, sluicing and PP deletion constructions are acceptable only if there is a prior element of the n-tuple that is syntactically sentential. The following discourses, for example, are wholly acceptable.

(89) VP Deletion

(a) Jason: We're having french fries with gravy

(b) Mark: And Betty is too

(90) Sluicing

(a) Jason: We're having french fries with gravy

(b) Mark: I wonder when

³⁰ Thanks are due to Tony Bures, who discussed these examples with me.

(91) PP Deletion

(a) Jason: Steve is in Washington

(b) Mark: Mary is too

However: these constructions (VP deletion, sluicing and PP deletion) cannot acceptably occur if there is no prior syntactically sentential linguistic representation in the discourse. This provides a sort of test for syntactically sentential linguistic representations in prior discourse.

(92) The Test: Take an acceptable discourse D -- containing one of these constructions -- and a syntactically sentential linguistic representation S that precedes the construction. Replace the syntactically sentential linguistic representation S with an expression E that differs minimally from S. If the resulting discourse D' is acceptable, then E is a syntactically sentential linguistic representation. (Because D' contains a construction that requires, for acceptability, a prior syntactically sentential linguistic representation. And, ex hypothesis, the only candidate is E.) If, on the other hand, the resulting discourse D' is unacceptable, then E is not a syntactically sentential linguistic representation.

This test is not conclusive, of course. The cause of the unacceptability of D' could be due to some irrelevant feature of E, or of D', that has nothing to do with E's status as a syntactic sentence/non-sentence. But the test does provide some evidence.

Now notice: discourses containing VP deletion constructions, sluicing constructions and PP deletion constructions become unacceptable when (apparent) words and phrases are substituted for ordinary sentences.

Here are examples. The initial element of (89) and (90) -- the sentence "We're having french fries with gravy" -- differs minimally from the (apparent) phrase "French fries with gravy". Yet, if we substitute the (apparent) phrase "French fries with gravy" for the sentence in the acceptable discourses (89) and (90), the result is unacceptable.

(93) VP Deletion

(a) Jason: French fries with gravy

(b) Mark: *And Betty is too

(94) Sluicing

(a) Jason: French fries with gravy

(b) Mark: *I wonder when

According to our test, "French fries with gravy" is not syntactically sentential. For if it were, the discourses (93) and (94) as a whole should be acceptable. But, in fact, they are unacceptable.

Similarly for (91). When we replace the sentence "Mary is in Washington" with the (apparent) Prepositional Phrase "In Washington", the discourse as a whole becomes unacceptable.

(95) PP Deletion

(a) Jason: In Washington

(b) Mark: *Mary is too

Our test therefore suggests that "In Washington" is not syntactically sentential.

It might reasonably be replied that, for a discourse containing one of these constructions to be acceptable, what is required is the presence of a special kind of Phonetic Form³¹ in prior discourse -- call it Phonetic Form of kind K.

But there is a surprising, though very real,

³¹ Both James Higginbotham and Ken Hale pointed this out to me, independently.

feature of human linguistic communication which hints that ours is not a test for a certain kind of Phonetic Form. There are of well-formed bilingual discourses. Such discourses are, admittedly, quite peculiar. But they indicate that it is the Logical Form, and not the Phonetic Form, of preceding linguistic representations which influences whether a discourse containing VP deletion, sluicing or PP deletion is acceptable. Consider the following discourse:

(96)

- (a) André: Marie a fini sa thèse
- (b) Bill: And Betty has too

There is a clear sense in which this discourse is acceptable. Especially if we compare it with (97).

(97)

- (a) André: La thèse de Marie
- (b) Bill: *And Betty has too

Notice however that in the acceptable discourse (96) the English verb "to have" is not phonetically present. Only the French verb "finir" is. It seems very plausible then that it is not anything about Phonetic Forms which permits VP deletion, PP deletion

and sluicing; rather, it is the Logical Form of a linguistic representation which determines whether it can be followed by one of these constructions. In particular, it is not a matter of whether the linguistic representations have a Phonetic Form of kind K. Hence our test is indeed a test for syntactically sentential linguistic representations.

4.4 Non-Sentential Responses

We now turn to examples in which (purported) syntactically sentential linguistic representations cannot follow constructions that are known to license syntactic sentences.

Propositional attitude WH-interrogatives license syntactically sentential answers. For instance, the following discourse is acceptable:

(98)

(a) Alex: What does John believe?

(b) Betty: Snow is white

According to the ellipsis hypothesis, "An emergency generator shutdown" is syntactically sentential. The hypothesis therefore predicts that "An emergency

generator shutdown" can serve as an answer to (99a).
Here again, the proposal runs afoul of the facts.

(99)

(a) Alex: What does John believe?

(b) Betty: *An emergency generator shutdown

5 Summary

In this chapter, we introduced the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, repeated below:

(5 a) The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that the linguistic representation of her utterance has a Syntactic Structure that is headed by INFL.*

We considered two different versions of this hypothesis: the deletion hypothesis and the empty element hypothesis.

(5 a.i) The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis, Version I: The Deletion Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in

isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence in the sense that the linguistic representation of her utterance is syntactically sentential, but it is shortened.

(5 a.ii) The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis, Version II: The Empty Element Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence in the sense that the linguistic representation of her utterance is syntactically sentential, but that Syntactic Structure contains a number of phonologically null (i.e. "empty") elements.

We first argued that the empty element hypothesis was methodologically promiscuous. Next, we showed that the machinery required to spell out the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis has consequences which are unacceptable (i.e. the idea that every Phonetic Form is infinitely ambiguous). Finally, we argued that the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, in both its variants, had consequences which were not empirically borne out. The syntactic ellipsis hypothesis incorrectly entails that discourses which begin with (apparent) words or phrases are unacceptable; it incorrectly entails that (apparent) words and phrases can license VP deletion,

PP deletion and sluicing; and it incorrectly entails that (apparent) words and phrases can occur as answers to propositional attitude WH-interrogatives.

6 Epilogue: Reflexives, Reciprocals and Bound Variable Readings

In the preceding section on the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, we gave evidence that (apparent) words and phrases do not have sentential Syntactic Structures. We omitted from consideration one piece of data which might have been thought relevant: the presence of reflexives, reciprocals and bound variables within (apparent) words and phrases that appear in isolation.

Recent work in generative syntax might lead one to conclude that only syntactically sentential linguistic representations could contain these elements. Hence their presence in purported phrases might be thought to tell against our view that the expressions produced have non-sentential Syntactic Structures. However the evidence from reflexives, reciprocals and bound variable readings is inconclusive.

According to Condition A of the Binding Theory, reciprocals (e.g. "each other") and reflexives (e.g.

"herself") must be c-commanded by a Noun Phrase with which they are co-indexed. (We are, of course, greatly simplifying the statement of the condition.) Here are some syntactically sentential examples which violate this grammatical rule:

(100)

(a) *Himself is shaving

(b) *It seems each other are hitting

The reflexive "himself" is the first word in sentence (100a). Clearly, then, no Noun Phrase is serving as the antecedent for it. That is why the sentence is ungrammatical. As for example (100b), the Noun Phrase "it" is an expletive element, and hence cannot be co-indexed with the reciprocal "each other". This explains why (100b) is ungrammatical.

This rule of grammar -- that reflexives and reciprocals must be c-commanded by a co-indexed antecedent -- would appear to give a test for the presence of "hidden" syntactic material: if a reciprocal or a reflexive Noun Phrase appears in some expression without an overt antecedent, and if that expression is nevertheless well-formed, then we have evidence for a covert antecedent. Presence of a

reflexive, or a reciprocal without an antecedent, should therefore be strong evidence that syntactic ellipsis of some kind has occurred: the Phonetic Form can fail to contain the antecedent only because the Syntactic Structure actually does contain it.

This is roughly the argument Morgan (1973) gives for an ellipsis analysis of (101b) (We have updated the notation somewhat):

(101)

(a) Question: Who is John_i looking at?

(b) Answer: Himself_i

Morgan claims that the Syntactic Structure of an utterance of (101b) in this discourse must be the one given in (102):

(102) [_{1p} John_i is looking at himself_i]

If this were not the case, then "himself" -- which is a reflexive -- would lack an antecedent in (101b), and the expression should be ill-formed. But, patently, it is perfectly well-formed.

Reflexives also occur in so-called Negation Phrase

(NEGP) answers:

(103)

(a) Luke: Who does Bill admire?

(b) John: Not himself

Here again, this suggests that ellipsis has occurred. For, if (103b) is not elliptical, then it too is an exception to Condition A.

The case for an ellipsis account of such examples seems still more compelling when one considers the following discourse.

(104)

(a) Luke: Who hates his mother?

(b) John: Nobody

The response (104b) has a bound variable reading: the quantificational Noun Phrase "nobody" appears to act as a binder for the variable "his". This strongly suggests that (104b) should be assigned the Logical Form below:

(105) [_{IP} Nobody_i hates his_i mother]

Unless we assign this structure to (104b), it is hard to see how it comes to have a bound variable reading. However, assigning this Logical Form to (104b) constitutes giving an ellipsis treatment of it, because the corresponding Syntactic Structure is syntactically sentential.

These considerations are far from decisive, however. To begin with, there are phrases which contain reflexives and reciprocals, but which can be produced in discourse initial position. That they can occur discourse initially strongly suggests that they do not result from ellipsis. Examples follow.

First example: Alex is looking through Betty's photo album. There is a picture of Betty on nearly every page. Alex complains, after flipping the page,

(106) Another picture of herself!

Second example: Every Tuesday, the same cab driver picks up John and Steve at the same bar. Each time, John goes to Steve's home, while Steve goes to John's. Tonight, as John and Steve climb into the taxi, the driver asks:³²

³² Example due to Chris Collins, in conversation

(107) To each other's homes again?

There are also expressions that are clearly not elliptical sentences, but which exhibit bound variable readings:

(108)

(a) Luke: I love my wife

(b) John: Ditto for everybody

There is no temptation to say that "ditto for everybody" in (108b) results from ellipsis. (What could it be elliptical for?). Yet such non-sentences do exhibit bound variable readings.

These same expressions, though they are clearly not elliptical sentences, can also contain reflexives and reciprocals:

(109)

(a) Luke: The barber shaves Bill

(b) John: Ditto for himself

(110)

(a) Luke: Mary likes Sue, and Bill likes Tracy

(b) John: Ditto for each other

Here again, it seems clear that "Ditto for himself" and "Ditto for each other" are not elliptical sentences; their Syntactic Structures are [Ditto for himself] and [Ditto for each other] respectively. Hence the presence of reflexives and reciprocals, and of bound variable readings, are not in themselves convincing evidence for the ellipsis hypothesis.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SEMANTIC ELLIPSIS HYPOTHESIS

1 The Proposal

Having argued against both variants of the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, we will now consider the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, repeated below.

(5 b) The Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that (a) the semantic type of the linguistic representation of her utterance is propositional and (b) the linguistic representation of her utterance has illocutionary force.*

Consider an example. A typical speaker can make assertions by saying (111) on its own. Let us suppose Mary says it, thereby asserting that there is a fire nearby.

(111) Fire

According to the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, this is not a case of uttering an ordinary word or phrase in

isolation; rather, what gets produced in this case is a sentence, in the semantic sense. This sentence expresses a proposition (in particular, that there is a fire nearby) and has illocutionary force (in particular, assertoric force).

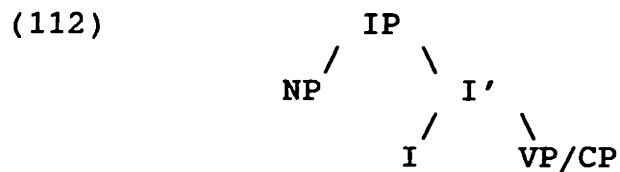
Here is a helpful mnemonic: when speakers (appear to) utter words and phrases in isolation, what they really produce are one-word or one-phrase sentences. The semantic type of these one-word and one-phrase sentences is, we repeat, propositional. And these one-word and one-phrase sentences have illocutionary force. (It is in this semantic sense that they are "really" sentences, and not words and phrases at all.)

So: on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the sound *fire* is actually ambiguous. On the one hand, the sound *fire* corresponds to the ordinary word "fire". That word is a noun that occurs within sentences. The semantic type of this noun is type one, an individual concept. (I.e. the word "fire" denotes some rather peculiar object.) Furthermore, the ordinary word "fire" has no illocutionary force at all.

On the other hand, the sound *fire* also corresponds to the one-word sentence "fire". The semantic type of

this one-word sentence is propositional. What's more, the one-word sentence "fire" has assertoric force.

The semantic ellipsis hypothesis is importantly different from the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. According to the latter, but not the former, utterances of (apparent) words and phrases inevitably have sentential Syntactic Structures. That is, only the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis is committed to the view that every assertoric utterance has a Syntactic Structure of the following form:



The contrast between the two hypotheses can be brought out sharply by applying the question in (113) to some utterance u .³³

(113) What is the subject, verb and inflection of u ?

Suppose we ask this question about Mary's assertoric utterance of "fire".

³³ We are indebted to Sylvain Bromberger for this insightful illustration of the difference between the two ellipsis hypotheses.

When asked (113), a proponent of the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis will reply that the subject of Mary's utterance is the expletive "there" and the verb of her utterance is "to be", in present singular.

A proponent of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, on the other hand, will reply that the question has a false presupposition. Mary's utterance, according to the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, contains no subject, no verb, and no inflectional element. Mary uttered the one-word sentence "fire". And, though the one-word sentence "fire" expresses a proposition and has assertoric force, it is not a syntactic sentence. (I.e. its Syntactic Structure is not headed by INFL).

If the semantic ellipsis hypothesis could be generalized to cover all assertoric utterances of (apparent) words and phrases, we would entirely circumvent the objections raised in Chapter One.

Dummett's view that assertion simply is the production of an assertoric sentence under conventionally specified conditions would not be threatened: when speakers (appear to) make assertions with words and phrases, they are actually producing semantic sentences. In particular, Dummett might say,

speakers are producing semantic sentences whose force is assertoric. If this were true, Dummett's analysis would straightforwardly apply to these cases: the speaker's act of asserting consists in his producing a (semantically elliptical) assertoric sentence under conventionally specified conditions. (Similar considerations rescue Evans' principle.)

Notice too that at least one interpretation of Frege's context principle is salvaged: the claim that words are meaningful only in the context of a semantic sentence is not in the least challenged by the meaningfulness of one-word and one-phrase sentences.

Nor is Russell's theory of descriptions threatened -- for, if the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is true, what speakers make assertions with are not descriptions at all; they are one-phrase sentences that merely sound the same as ordinary descriptions.

2 Against the Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis

2.1 Illocutionary Force

In this section we will argue that when speakers (appear to) assertorically utter words and phrases in isolation, the expressions they produce do not have illocutionary force. As illocutionary force is a property of semantic sentences, this will establish that what speakers produce are not semantic sentences.

Recall what we said in Chapter Two about the illocutionary force of utterances and expressions: an expression E has illocutionary force if and only if there is some assumption schema $S(P)$ such that hearers, upon encountering utterances of E , automatically embed the utterance's propositional form in $S(P)$. We believe that this is the right approach. But it might be thought that proponents of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis should not be saddled with this particular view about when expressions have illocutionary force.

To avoid so saddling them, we will proceed as follows. First, we will consider several syntactic sentences (that is, maximal projections of an inflectional element), which do have illocutionary

force. This will give us an intuitive grasp of the property which these linguistic representations share. We will then inquire whether, according to our understanding, these so-called one-word and one-phrase sentences exhibit this same property. Our conclusion will be that they do not. Hence they are not really semantic sentences at all.

First, however, a word of caution is in order. The issue will not be whether utterances of these so-called one-phrase sentences exhibit illocutionary force. It is a platitude that whenever someone asserts, commands, or asks their utterance has illocutionary force. Since it is part of our claim that these expressions -- whether they turn out to be words, phrases or sentences -- are commonly used to make assertions, we of course agree that utterances of them have illocutionary force; in particular, some have assertoric force. The question at hand concerns the expressions, not utterances of them. That is, to employ some standard vocabulary: we are inquiring about the properties had by certain linguistic types, not their tokens. Our conclusion shall be that these linguistic types do not have illocutionary force.

Here then are some paradigm cases of sentences

which do have illocutionary force:

(114) Snow is white

(115) Is John wearing a hat?

(116) Montevideo is the capital of Uruguay

(117) Buy war bonds

Here is our hypothesis: taken apart from any context, someone who knows English can make an educated guess about what a speaker of each expression would be doing. This, we think, is the property which all expressions with illocutionary force share.

Now let us consider again the examples with which we began, and inquire whether, independent of extralinguistic context, a hearer can form an initial hypothesis -- an educated first guess -- about the illocutionary force of utterances of these expressions:

(6) John's father

(7) Nice work

(8) Very fast

(9) From Spain

It is clear that, unless we specify some extralinguistic context, knowledge of English does not give

any idea of what a speaker of these expressions might be doing -- not even an educated first guess.

The same is true for words and phrases generally: without knowing something about the extra-linguistic context, one cannot even form an initial hypothesis about what act a speaker would be performing by saying a word or phrase in isolation.

We conclude, therefore, that these expressions do not have illocutionary force. Hence they are not semantically elliptical sentences. And they can be assertorically uttered in isolation. Hence the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is false.

2.2 Against the Restricted Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis

Given that (purported) one-word and one-phrase sentences do not exhibit illocutionary force, let us weaken the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, leaving out the condition that these expressions must have illocutionary force. The result is the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis:

(5 b') The Restricted Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis:
Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an

(apparent) word or phrase in isolation, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that the semantic type of the linguistic representation of her utterance is propositional.*³⁴

We will now argue that even this restricted hypothesis is false. Since the original semantic ellipsis hypothesis entails the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the former is false if the latter is.

2.2.1 Ambiguity

In what follows we will argue that on the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis every word and phrase which can (apparently) be used in isolation is multiply ambiguous. Treating these expressions as multiply ambiguous is implausible on the face of it.

Consider the following contexts in which someone might say "red".

³⁴ Notice that Dummett's specific claim about assertion is not salvaged by the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis. On Dummett's specific view, assertion is the utterance of assertoric sentences; and, to be an assertoric sentence, an expression must have illocutionary force. (In particular, it must have assertoric force.) So: if speakers can make assertions by using expressions that lack illocutionary force, Dummett's (1973) account is too restrictive.

First Situation: A doctor is testing her patient for color blindness. She shows the patient paint samples, to see which ones he can distinguish. Upon presenting him with a red paint sample, the patient (appears to) produce the word "red", thereby asserting that the displayed paint sample is red.

Second Situation: Several friends are discussing their favorite thing about life. One says his favorite thing is Woody Allen movies; another says it is dancing; still another has an inclination toward ham salad sandwiches. The most poetic of the group (appears to) produce the word "red". In so saying, he asserts that the color red is his favorite thing about life.

Third Situation: An art dealer is looking over some new paintings by an abstract artist. The first ten have been painted entirely in shades of red. He looks at the next one, looks all around the room, and complains: "red". Here he might assert that all the paintings in the room are red.

Fourth Situation: An interior decorator is telling his client what color he plans to paint the rooms of the client's house. He walks into the bathroom, and

says "baby blue". He proceeds into the bedroom and mumbles "red". What he asserts thereby is that red is a color he should use in the bedroom.

We believe these four situations illustrate that, on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the purported semantically elliptical (i.e. one-word) sentence "red" must be multiply ambiguous.

The four different propositions expressed in the four described situations cannot result from indexicality. The logical type of an expression is not the sort of thing that is context dependent. Even sentences that contain indexicals do not change from, say, argument-predicate to quantificational form just because of the context.³⁵ Obviously, however, the four uses of "red" described above do exhibit different logical types.

The four uses of "red" have the logical types associated with sentences (118a) through (118d)

³⁵ In standard philosophical argot one would say that these are propositions which exhibit different propositional forms. To avoid confusion with Sperber and Wilson's (very different) notion of propositional form, however, we will instead say that these propositions are of different logical types. Examples of logical types include: first order identities (e.g. $a=b$), second order identities (e.g. $P=R$), first order predications (e.g. Pa), second order predications (e.g. $N(P)$), first order quantifications (e.g. $Ex(Px)$), and so on.

respectively:

(118)

(a) That paint sample is red

(b) Red is my favorite color

(c) Every painting is red

(d) Red is a color I should use in the bedroom

The sentence (118a) -- and hence the word "red" as uttered in the first situation -- expresses a proposition with argument-predicate form, where the predicate is "red". Its translation in the predicate calculus would be something like "Red(that-paint-sample)".

The two propositions communicated by uttering "red" in the second and third situations do not have argument-predicate form: one describes an identity, while the other expresses a universal quantification.

"Red" in the second situation expresses an identity between properties. This proposition would be rendered as "Red = My-Favorite-Color" in the predicate calculus. "Red" in the third situation expresses a universally quantified proposition. It corresponds to:

(119) (For every x)[Painting(x) -> Red(x)]

The proposition expressed by sentence (118d) -- and by the word "red" in the fourth situation -- does have argument-predicate form. But here red is the argument, not the predicate. Its translation into the predicate calculus would have the form "Color-I-should-use-for-the-bedroom(Red)", where "Color-I-should-use-for-the-bedroom" expresses a second order property.

As we said: the logical type of an expression is not the sort of thing that is context dependent. Therefore, to account for these four different uses of "red", the semantic ellipsis theorist must admit that this one-word sentence has at least the following meanings:

1. The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the (contextually specified) object o is red.
2. The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the color red has the (contextually specified) second order property P .
3. The one-word sentence "red" expresses the

proposition that the color red is numerically identical to the (contextually specified) property P.

4. The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the (contextually specified) generalized quantifier $\langle Q, P \rangle$ applies to the color red. (E.g. the quantifier $\langle \text{Every}, \text{painting} \rangle$ applies to red).

In short, on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the one-word sentence "red" will be at least four ways ambiguous. This postulation of meanings is implausible and ad hoc.

2.2.2 How Many Semantically Elliptical Sentences Are There?

Suppose that (purported) one-word and one-phrase sentences were univocal -- a supposition which, we have argued, could not be true. Would the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis then be plausible? We think not. The reason is that the semantic ellipsis hypothesis has the following rather unhappy consequences:

(120) If the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is true, there is a very large class of one-word and one-phrase sentences, in addition to the infinitely large class of syntactic sentences and the infinitely large class of ordinary words and phrases.

(121) If the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is true, speakers and hearers know the meaning of every expression in this very large class. (It is this knowledge which explains their ability to use and construe (apparent) words and phrases in isolation.)

We do not know how to prove that the class of one-word and one-phrase sentences is very large. But consider, for example, this rather lengthy list of examples. Any of them could be used in isolation to make an assertion.

(122)

(a) Nice dress

(b) To Cathy, from Santa

(c) A great idea which came from a great thinker

(d) Emergency generator shut-down in Building 20

(e) Black coffee with no sugar

(f) A good talker who knows a lot about literature

(g) Marilyn's portrait from the Steinhem collection

- (h) Another incredibly stupid thing to say
- (i) Dinner for seven
- (j) My poor baby (Quirk et al 1985: 850)
- (k) The door to the left of that blue painting

This is not a happy result. It makes the semantic ellipsis hypothesis very much less plausible. It is easy enough to suppose that there are a scattered few one-word and one-phrase sentences. But if the proponent of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is to handle all possible assertoric utterances of (apparent) words or phrases, then he must postulate a very large class of extra formatives; and a corresponding semantic competence which, as we shall shortly see, does no explanatory work.

2.2.3 Explanatory Adequacy

No extra explanatory power is achieved by attributing knowledge of this class of one-word and one-phrase sentences.

In order to use and construe syntactic sentences - that is, Inflectional Phrases -- we need to know the meaning of ordinary words and phrases. After all, the meaning of whole sentences is built up from these

smaller constituents. And, to use and construe syntactic sentences, we need something like the pragmatic devices described by Sperber and Wilson. But, given knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and limited inferential powers, a speaker who was aiming for optimal relevance could assert; and, given knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, a hearer who took her interlocutor to be aiming for optimal relevance could interpret utterances of ordinary words and phrases as assertions.

In a word: any speaker who is able to use syntactic sentences to make assertions can, ipso facto, use words and phrases in isolation to make assertions; and any hearer who is able to construe utterances of syntactic sentences as assertions can, ipso facto, construe utterances of (ordinary) words and phrases as assertions. No extra knowledge is required. Hence attributing knowledge of the class of one-word sentences and one-phrase sentences explains nothing that is not already explained without positing this knowledge. This holds true, of course, regardless of the size of class of one-word and one-phrase sentences, and regardless of whether the members of this class are ambiguous or univocal.

Take an example. It is true enough that an individual who assigned the proposition that the salient object is red to the purported one-word sentence "red" would be able to use this expression to assert, e.g., that the demonstrated paint sample is red. And, if this person heard an utterance of "red", he would be able to construe it as an assertion that the contextually salient object was red.

But these same abilities would be exhibited by a person who was able to use and construe syntactic sentences containing the word "red" -- even if his idiolect did not contain the one-word sentence "red". So, positing knowledge of this one-word sentence achieves nothing: a person who had this knowledge would demonstrate the same abilities as a minimally different person who lacked it.

As will become clear in Chapter Five, we can explain our ability to communicate with words and phrases by appealing to relevance theory and the semantics of ordinary words and phrases; both of which are independently required to explain our ability to communicate with syntactic sentences. We therefore do not need to introduce semantically elliptical sentences to explain the use and construal of words and phrases

in isolation. And semantically elliptical sentences serve no other explanatory purpose. Hence we should not postulate them.

To sum up: to circumvent the issues raised in Chapter One, it may be suggested that what one hears in conversation are not really words and phrases in isolation; rather, what one hears are semantic sentences. Though not syntactically sentences, they are "one-word" or "one-phrase" sentence in the sense that they express propositions. This idea is unsatisfactory because (a) it leads to an implausible multiplication of ambiguities; and (b) it is committed to linguistic knowledge of an enormous set of expressions -- knowledge that would be redundant.

3 Conclusion

Having now rejected both the syntactic and semantic ellipsis hypothesis, we conclude that speakers not only appear to assert by uttering words and phrases in isolation; they actually do assert by uttering words and phrases in isolation. And, what speakers actually do, speakers can do. Hence, the Thesis is correct:

(1) The Thesis: Speakers can make assertions by

uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

CHAPTER FIVE: A NON-SENTENTIAL ASSERTION

For every affirmation, it seems, is either true or false; but of things said without any combination none is either true or false (e.g. 'man', 'white', 'runs', 'wins'). (Aristotle, Categories, IV, 10a)

1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters we argued for the Thesis (and against the Counter Thesis) on the grounds that speakers actually do make assertions using words and phrases in isolation. In this chapter we will argue for the Thesis by showing that if relevance theory is correct (indeed, if any theory appropriately like relevance theory is correct -- see Chapter Two), then speakers are able to assert by uttering ordinary words and phrases; regardless of whether they actually do make assertions in this way.

The argument runs as follows. We start with a single example -- the phrase "John's father". We employ relevance theory to show that a typical speaker is able to use "John's father" in isolation to make a particular assertion. Specifically, we show that:

(123) The Possibility Premise: A typical speaker is

able to use the ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation to assert that the man near the door is the man who fathered John Adams.

From the possibility premise it follows that a typical speaker is able to use at least one ordinary word or phrase in isolation to make at least one assertion. This refutes the Counter Thesis.

But, of course, the very same arguments which establish the possibility premise with respect to "John's father" apply, mutatis mutandis, to a multitude of ordinary words and phrases. Hence we can generalize: a typical speaker is able to use ordinary words and phrases in isolation to make assertions.

Let us stress: the truth of the possibility premise is not dependent upon whether any speaker ever has or ever will use the ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation to make an assertion. The possibility premise concerns the actions speakers are able to perform by uttering the ordinary phrase "John's father"; not the actions (if any) speakers actually have or will perform by uttering this phrase.

Indeed, the possibility premise could be true even

if no actual speaker has ever made a non-sentential assertion; it could happen that a typical speaker has the ability to make assertions using "John's father" (and other words and phrases), but that all actual speakers choose not to exercise this ability.

Our demonstration of the possibility premise will take place in two steps. In the first step we use relevance theory to show that, given the right circumstances, a typical speaker is able to communicate the proposition in (124) -- hereafter referred to as JF -- by uttering the ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation.

(124) JF: The man near the door is the father of John Adams

In the second step, we introduce a slightly modified version of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) definition of assertion. Applying this definition to our example, we show that a typical speaker can assert -- not merely communicate, but assert -- JF by uttering "John's father" in isolation.

As we said: this argument can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to any number of words and phrases. We

therefore conclude that the Thesis is true not just for this case, but for a multitude of ordinary words and phrases.

2 Step One: Communication

As we saw in Chapter Two, an interpretation of an utterance is communicated if it is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance, repeated here in simplified form:

(125) Presumption of Optimal Relevance:

(a) The interpretation is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the utterance.

(b) The utterance is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate the proposition in question.

Applied to our example, an utterance of "John's father" communicates JF if:

(a) JF is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the utterance of "John's father"

(b) The utterance of "John's father" is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate JF

In what follows we will argue that, in at least one possible context C, conditions (a) and (b) are jointly satisfied. This conclusion is important because if it is possible for these two conditions to be jointly met, then it is possible for JF to be communicated by an utterance of "John's father". And if it is possible for an utterance of "John's father" to communicate JF, then it is possible for a typical speaker to communicate JF by uttering "John's father". This is the conclusion of step one.

2.1 Relevance

There are contexts in which interpreting an utterance of "John's father" as communicating JF would require comparatively little processing effort: the interpreter would only need to (a) complete the Logical Form of the utterance and (b) access one very manifest Logical Form. We shall shortly explain why this is so.

We begin by noting some important facts about the context C within which the utterance is to be imagined:

Two people are talking at a party. Mary points to a man near the door and says "John's father".

Furthermore, someone was recently talking about John Adams. Given this, the completion of the Logical Form of the utterance (i.e. [_{NP} John's father]) in C is sure to be (126).

(126) [_{NP} The man who fathered John Adams] .

That is: reference would be assigned such that the speaker is referring to John Adams, who was just mentioned, and not John Baker -- who no one has thought about for ten years. Also, in the described situation, the genitive case marker would be enriched such that "John's father" refers not the father who John brought along to new members night at the Association of Fathers, nor to the father who John "purchased" for the evening at a charity auction. Rather, [_{NP} John's father] would be enriched so that it refers to the man who actually fathered John. Again: [_{NP} John's father] would be enriched in this way because, in these circumstances, this reading is more accessible than any

other.

So: the completed Logical Form of the utterance, in these circumstances, would be [_{NP} The man who fathered John Adams]. So far, very little processing effort has been expended.

Of course this is not yet what we are after: we want to show that, in these circumstances, the utterance of "John's father" is relevant enough. And the Logical Form (126), even completed, cannot be relevant enough because it cannot be relevant. Only assumptions can be relevant, and [_{NP} The man who fathered John Adams] is not an assumption.

Recall, however, Sperber and Wilson's definition of manifestness: a Logical Form is manifest to an individual if it is inferable, retrievable from memory or perceivable in the physical environment. (See Sperber and Wilson 1986: 81ff for discussion.) According to this definition, Logical Forms of all the following semantic types can be manifest -- because they can be perceived or retrieved from memory.

(127) Logical Forms of semantic type one: Logical Forms that express individual concepts

(128) Logical Forms of semantic type two: Logical Forms that express properties

(129) Logical Forms of semantic type three: Logical Forms that express generalized quantifiers, where a generalized quantifier is a function from properties to propositions

(130) Assumptions: Logical Forms that express propositions

Returning to our example, the following assumption schema -- which is a Logical Form of semantic type two -- would be very manifest to the hearer H in C, because the speaker is pointing at the man near the door.

(131) [The man near the door is x]

And JF results from conjoining this formative with the completed Logical Form of the utterance. So: H, the hearer, can arrive at JF by merely completing the Logical Form of the utterance, and accessing the very manifest Logical Form in (131). This is indeed comparatively little processing effort.

It is safe to assume that, in some context C, JF would have sufficient contextual effects to make this small amount of processing effort worth while. That

is: there is surely some context or other such that JF could be usefully added to that context, or such that JF would provide further evidence for some assumptions already in that context, or such that JF would remove some assumption from that context. Hence condition (a) of the presumption of optimal relevance is met in at least one context C:

(a) JF is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the utterance of "John's father"

But is condition (b) met in C as well?

(b) The utterance of "John's father" is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate JF.

2.2 Optimal Relevance

Recall that the most relevant utterance is the one which (a) communicates the set of propositions {I} while (b) requiring the least processing effort on the part of the hearer. But is there not another utterance which would communicate that the man near the door is John's father, and which would require less effort on

the hearer's part than an utterance of (6), namely (132)?

(132) The man near the door is John's father

There are two questions worth raising here. On the one hand: would an utterance of (132) and (6) really have the same contextual effects in the same context? On the other hand: would an utterance of (132) really require less processing effort than an utterance of (6)? As Sperber and Wilson (1986: 202) write:

It might seem that two utterances with the same linguistically determined truth conditions must have identical contextual effects. [We believe that], on the contrary, they may differ both in their contextual effects and in the processing effort they require, and that this is the key to an explanatory theory of style.

2.2.1 Contextual Effects

The style which a speaker adopts inevitably carries information about her relationship to the hearer, what she takes the hearer to know or believe,

her personality (e.g. does the speaker lean to formal and dignified, or casual and unceremonious communication?), and so on. As Sperber and Wilson explain,

From the style of a communication it is possible to infer such things as what the speaker takes to be the hearer's cognitive capacities and level of attention, how much help or guidance she is prepared to give him in processing her utterance, the degree of complicity between them, their emotional closeness or distance. In other words, a speaker not only aims to enlarge the mutual cognitive environment she shares with the hearer; she also assumes a certain degree of mutuality, which is indicated, and sometimes communicated, by her style. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 217-218)

Applied to our example, we see that an utterance of "John's father" has different contextual effects than an utterance of "The man near the door is John's father". Given the right circumstances, uttering the former might indicate that the style is informal, that the speaker and hearer can take a familiar tone with one another, that the speaker is relying on the hearer

to do some extra inferential work, and so on.

In general, uttering a word or phrase has different stylistic effects than uttering a sentence. The differences may be communicated. Or they may merely be registered by the hearer. (I.e. the hearer may receive extra contextual effects, without it being manifest that the speaker intended to make it manifest, etc.) Hence it simply is not true that utterances of (6) and (132) will inevitably have the same contextual effects in the same circumstances.

2.2.2 Processing Effort

How much processing effort an utterance requires is an empirical question about which we can only speculate. Nevertheless, we hope to show that there is no reason to believe that interpreting (6) requires more processing effort than interpreting (132), given the same circumstances. On the contrary, there are some reasons for thinking that, in the circumstances described, (6) requires the least processing effort of the two.

As Sperber and Wilson claim,

A speaker aiming at optimal relevance will

leave implicit everything her hearer can be trusted to supply with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt.
(Sperber and Wilson 1986: 218)

Let us look closely at our example. Sentence (132) contains more words than (6); words which need to be disambiguated, enriched and assigned reference. Is "man" to be taken as human being -- as in "earth man" -- or as male human being? In saying "the man", which man is the speaker referring to? Is "near" to be taken as near for two planets, near for two cities, near for a missed target, or near for two medium sized physical objects? And so on.

Discovering the propositional form of an utterance of the more explicit (132) may, therefore, require more processing effort than discovering the completed Logical Form of utterances of (6) and conjoining it with some formative; e.g. the very manifest Logical Form [The man near the door is x]. It may happen, given the right circumstances, that a speaker aiming at optimal relevance should leave the Logical Form [the man near the door is x] implicit, because the hearer can be trusted to discover [The man near the door is x] and connect it to [John's father] with less effort than

would be needed to process the explicit prompt "The man near the door is John's father".

2.3 Summary

According to Sperber and Wilson, an utterance of "John's father" communicates JF if:

(a) JF is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the utterance of "John's father"

(b) The utterance of "John's father" is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate JF

It is reasonable to suppose that there is at least one context in which both of these conditions obtain. If this is true, then an utterance of "John's father" can communicate JF:

(124) JF: The man near the door is the man who fathered John Adams

Of course if an utterance of "John's father" can communicate JF, then a typical speaker could use the

ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation to communicate JF. This is the conclusion of step one.

What remains, in order to establish the possibility premise, is to show that a typical speaker is able not only to communicate JF by uttering "John's father" in isolation; he can actually assert it.

(123) The Possibility Premise: A typical speaker is able to use the ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation to assert that the man near the door is the man who fathered John Adams.

3 Step Two: Assertion

3.1 Assertion Defined

When is a proposition asserted, and not merely communicated? According to Sperber and Wilson, an utterance is an assertion if the proposition it communicates is the propositional form of the utterance.³⁶ (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 181)

³⁶ Evans (1982) espouses roughly the same idea, though he puts it differently. Evans says that a proposition is asserted if it is expressed, in the circumstances of use, by the words used.

A quick review of the notion of propositional form: An utterance U has a propositional form P just in case P is a completion of U's Logical Form L -- i.e. P results from assigning reference to all indexicals in L, disambiguating L and enriching L. Consider an example. Mary utters (133).

(133) He is at the bank

The propositional form [John is at the river bank] is a possible propositional form of Mary's utterance, because it could result simply from assigning John as the reference of the pronoun "he" and disambiguating the word "bank" as meaning river bank. Another possible propositional form of this utterance is [Steve is at the money lending institution]. Again: this propositional form could result simply by assigning Steve as the reference of "he" and money lending institution as the appropriate reading of "bank".

Most utterances have many possible propositional forms, because there are usually many different ways that the Logical Form of the utterance can be filled in.³⁷ In contrast, there are infinitely many

³⁷ However: where communication is successful, utterances have only one actual propositional form. The propositional form which the utterance actually has is that unique possible

propositional forms which any given utterance could not have. These are the propositional forms which cannot result merely from filling in the utterance's Logical Form.

The propositional form [The king is dead], for example, is not a possible propositional form of Mary's utterance, because there is no way to complete the Logical Form [He is at the bank] to arrive at this propositional form. This is true despite that fact that, given the right circumstances, someone might communicate that the king is dead by saying "He is at the bank".³⁸

Given this notion of the propositional form of an utterance, we can spell out Sperber and Wilson's definition of assertion.

(134) Definition of Assertion: An utterance U is an assertion that P if and only if:

(a) P is the propositional form of U (I.e. P results

propositional form which is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance.

³⁸ Imagine that the propositional form of Mary's utterance is actually [John is at the river bank]. Suppose further that it is manifest to both Mary and her interlocutor that John would not go near the river bank unless the king were dead. In these circumstances, Mary might well communicate that the king is dead by saying "He is at the bank".

merely by completing the Logical Form of U -- by disambiguating it, enriching it and assigning it reference)

(b) P is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance (I.e. U actually communicates P)

3.2 Revising the Definition

This definition, as it stands, leaves out assertions made with words and phrases in isolation. Here is the problem.

According to Sperber and Wilson's definition, an utterance U is an assertion if and only if the assumption communicated by U is identical to the propositional form of U. But the assumption communicated by an utterance of an ordinary word or phrase cannot be identical to the propositional form of that utterance since the latter cannot be propositional, while the former must be propositional.

The "propositional form" -- or, more accurately, the COMPLETED LOGICAL FORM (LF-C(U)) -- of a lexical or phrasal utterance is inevitably of semantic type one, two or three; that is, the Logical Form of an ordinary word or phrase, even when completed, expresses either

an individual concept, a property or a generalized quantifier. Such a Logical Form can, of course, never be identical to the assumption communicated. Therefore, no utterance of an ordinary word or phrase can be an assertion -- according to Sperber and Wilson's definition.

To include utterances of ordinary words and phrases as assertions, we must amend Sperber and Wilson's definition as follows:

(135) Definition of Assertion (Revised): An utterance U is an assertion that P if and only if:

- (a) Either P is the propositional form of U (I.e. P results merely by completing the Logical Form of U -- i.e. by disambiguating it, enriching it and assigning it reference) or P could result merely by completing the Logical Form of U and conjoining it with another manifest Logical Form of the appropriate semantic type
- (b) P is consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance (I.e. U actually communicates P).

Hence:

(a) Where the Completed Logical Form expresses an Individual Concept: If LF-C(U) expresses an individual

concept and there is a manifest Logical Form LF' that expresses a property, and LF-C(U) conjoins with LF' to yield the proposition that is communicated, then U is an assertion.

(b) Where the Completed Logical Form expresses a Property: If LF-C(U) expresses a property and there is either a manifest Logical Form LF' that expresses an individual concept, or a manifest Logical Form LF'' that expresses a second order property, or a manifest Logical Form LF''' that expresses a generalized quantifier, and LF-C(U) conjoins with LF', LF'' or LF''' to yield the proposition communicated, then U is an assertion.

(c) Where the Completed Logical Form expresses a Generalized Quantifier: If LF-C(U) expresses a generalized quantifier and there is a manifest Logical Form LF' that expresses a property, and LF-C(U) conjoins with LF' to yield the proposition communicated, then U is an assertion.

Let us now apply this definition to our example of "John's father". We saw that:

(a) The proposition that the man near the door is the

man who fathered John results merely by completing the Logical Form of the utterance of "John's father" -- yielding (126) -- and conjoining it with another manifest Logical Form of the appropriate semantic type; namely, the Logical Form (131).

(126) [The man who fathered John Adams]

(131) [The man near the door is x]

(b) The proposition that the man near the door is the man who fathered John is, by hypothesis, consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance. (I.e. the utterance of "John's father" actually communicates this proposition.)

Therefore, according to our revised definition of assertion, a speaker who uttered "John's father" in the circumstances described would assert that the man near the door is John's father. So the possibility premise is true:

(123) The Possibility Premise: A typical speaker is able to use the ordinary phrase "John's father" in isolation to assert that the man near the door is the man who fathered John Adams.

The possibility premise on its own refutes the Counter Thesis. But notice: there is nothing odd or special about the phrase "John's father". The arguments in this chapter would work equally well for any of the words or phrases below, and many more -- mutatis mutandis, of course.

(136)

- (a) An emergency generator shutdown
- (b) Another scoop of ice cream
- (c) At the house of the seven gables
- (d) To my dearest wife of many years, from your loving husband
- (e) Coffee, black, with seven lumps of sugar
- (f) Of all the stupid things to say (Quirk et al 1985: 850)

We conclude, therefore, that speakers are able to assertorically utter a multitude of ordinary words and phrases -- regardless of whether they actually do so. Hence the Thesis is correct.³⁹

³⁹ It might be noticed that, while the Thesis makes a claim about speakers, the possibility premise makes a claim about a typical speaker. This does not pose a problem, however, since the word "speakers" in the Thesis refers to typical speakers only. (We might need to exclude severely retarded speakers, for example, for whom the inferences described might prove impossible.)

4 Conclusions: Words, Phrases and Philosophy (Again)

We have argued that the Thesis and its Corollary are true.

(1) The Thesis: Speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary words and phrases in isolation.

(20) The Corollary: Words and phrases have a meaning in isolation.

As we saw in Chapter One, this spells trouble for Dummett's (1973) convention based analysis of assertion, Evans' (1982) principle, Frege's (1978) context principle and Russell's (1919) theory of descriptions.

According to Dummett (1973):

(14) Convention Based Analysis of Assertion: A speaker S makes an assertion that P if and only if:

- a. S utters an assertoric sentence whose sense is P
- b. The conventionally specified conditions C for making an assertion obtain.

Ordinary words and phrases are not assertoric

sentences. Nevertheless, we have argued, a speaker can make an assertion by saying a word or phrase in isolation. Therefore, Dummett's convention based analysis of assertion is too restrictive.

Evans' principle is also mistaken.

(18) Evans' Principle: An expression E is suitable for asserting that P only if, in the circumstances of use, E expresses the thought that P.

The reason: ordinary words and phrases do not express thoughts, no matter what the circumstances of use. What words and phrases express, in the circumstances of use, are individual concepts, properties or generalized quantifiers. Yet, as we have shown, words and phrases are "suitable" for making assertions.

Frege's context principle faces trouble as well -- at least on the syntactic and semantic construals of it -- since ordinary words and phrases in isolation are meaningful.

(29) The Syntactic Construal: It is only in the context of an expression that has a subject and inflected verb

that a word has a meaning.

(30) The Semantic Construal: It is only in the context of a formative capable of expressing a proposition that a word has a meaning.

Finally: according to Russell's theory of descriptions, descriptions are symbols which are not constituents in any proposition. And, according to Russell's principle of significance, if a symbol or group of symbols is not a constituent in some proposition, then it has no significance. Therefore, if the theory of descriptions and the principle of significance were both correct, descriptions would have no significance. But, as we saw, descriptions do have significance. Hence either the theory of descriptions is false, or the principle of significance is false, or both are false.

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