

Subjective assertions are weak: an experimental study on perspective-dependent meaning.

The issue – Sentences containing subjective predicates – e.g., *beautiful* in (1) – intuitively feature a perspective-dependent flavor, contrary to sentences describing objective facts (as in (2)).

- (1) **Subjective:** Paris is beautiful. (2) **Objective:** Paris is in France

While authors have long debated on whether this intuition tracks a lexical distinction between subjective and factual predicates, much remains to be explored on whether, and how, the difference between (1) and (2) is reflected at the illocutionary level. We show that assertions with subjective predicates (henceforth **SAs**) display a different discourse behavior from objective assertions (henceforth, **OAs**), unveiling a genuine empirical difference between subjective and factual speech.

Background – A wide open issue in the study of subjectivity revolves around whether assertions like (1) should be treated on a par with (2), that is, as a regular proposal to update the Common Ground with p or whether they merely presentational moves, which update the speaker’s individual commitments but don’t aim at increasing the CG (Dechaine et al. 2014). An intermediate position is that SAs do target the CG, but rely on a *weaker* norm of assertion than OAs, where p can be asserted as long as the speaker judges it to be true, but is only added to the CG if all participants in the conversation judge it as true (Stephenson 2007; see Coppock 2014 for a variant). We test these proposals experimentally, comparing the behavior of SAs and OAs with respect to two distinctive parameters of assertions.

Exp1: Silent Replies and CG Update – Adding p to the CG represents the unmarked outcome of an assertion (Stalnaker 1978 a.o.). As such, while rejection needs to be overtly signaled with a denial, silence typically leads accepting the proposal, on a par with an explicit “Yes” reply (Farkas&Bruce 2010). Exp1 compares SAs and OAs on this ground. If SAs work like regular assertions, silent responses should lead to updating the CG with p . This should not be observed, by contrast, if SAs are merely presentational, in which case no proposal is made at all; or if they rely on a weak norm of assertion, in which case an explicit response would be required from all participants before an update. 2 factors were crossed in a 3x3 design. Each trial consisted of a written dialogue in which Greg makes one of three possible moves – OA, SA or Polar Question (PQ) – and Mary provides one of three possible responses – Confirmation, Denial or Silence. Following each dialogue, participants were asked to assess on a 1-7 scale (7=“totally agree”) the statement “It is now part of Greg and Mary’s mutual knowledge that p ”, which operationalized the idea that the CG has been updated with p . The higher the score, the higher the likelihood that the update went through.

Greg: {**OA:** “Paris is in France”/**SA:** “Paris is beautiful”/**PQ:** “Is Paris in France?”}
Mary: {**Conf.:** “Yes, indeed!”/**Den.:** “No, not really!”/ **Silence:** [Keeps listening, says nothing.]}
Statement to assess: “It is now part of G and M’s mutual knowledge that {Paris is beautiful/is in France.}”

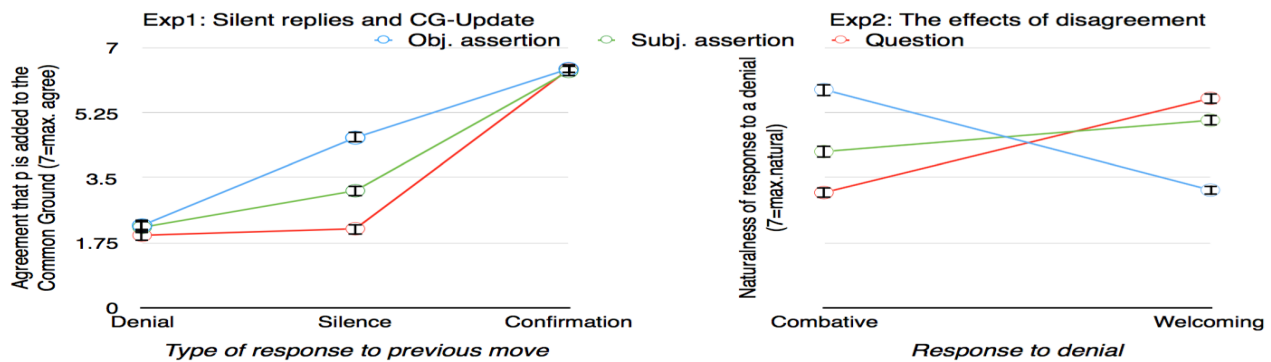
27 items, each with a different set of predicates, were distributed in 9 lists with a Latin Square Design. 54 native speakers of English were recruited on MTurk. The results are plotted on page 2. A mixed effects model with random intercepts for Subject/Item revealed main effects of Move and Response and an interaction Move:Response ($ps < .001$). Confirmation and denials led to respectively high and low CG-acceptance scores across moves. Silent responses lead to high and low scores respectively following OAs and PQs; following SAs, however, they record a higher score than PQs, but a much lower one than OAs ($ps < .001$). This indicates that silent replies were taken as a cue to update the CG with OAs, but not with SAs.

Exp2: The Effect of Disagreement – A converse property of assertions is that denials are highly

marked and lead the conversation into a state of *crisis* (F&B), which needs to be acted upon before the participants can move on. Exp2 compares OAs and SAs by looking at the naturalness of two types of reactions to a denial: “Aha, interesting to hear!”, which signals a welcoming disposition towards disagreement; and “No way! That can’t be true”, which signals willingness react to the denial. 2 factors were crossed in a 3x2 design. Each trial consisted of a written dialogue in which Greg makes one of three moves (OA, SA or a PQ); Mary responds with a denial; and Greg follows up with one of the two reactions above. Subjects provided a 1-7 naturalness judgment (7=perfectly natural) on the final reaction. An example is below.

Greg: {OA: “John is 18.”/SA: “J. is a great teacher!”/PQ: “Is J. 18?”}.
 Mary: “No, he’s not.”
 Greg: {Welcoming: “Aha, interesting to hear!”/Combative: “No way! That can’t be true”}

If SAs do not differ from OAs, in both cases denials should engender a crisis, making a welcoming response odd. However, if SAs have no or weaker assertoric force, disagreement should be less disruptive, making it more natural for the interlocutors to welcome it. 18 items were distributed in 6 lists with a LSD (20 fillers). 54 subjects were recruited on MTurk. To ensure that welcoming and combative replies were perceived as such, subjects were explicitly instructed to assume that Greg was *not* being sarcastic. A mixed effects model with random intercepts for Subject/Item showed an interaction Move:Response ($p < .001$). As predicted, combative responses are rated higher than welcoming ones with OAs ($p < .0001$). Concerning SAs, welcoming replies are rated higher than combative ones ($p < .001$), similar to PQs; however, the two types of response are respectively rated considerably lower/higher than with PQs (all p s $< .001$).



Discussion – While OAs feature the canonical behavior of canonical assertions, SAs turn out to be different on two counts: (i) when followed by a silent response, they do not systematically lead to a CG update; (ii) they allow the listener to welcome the ensuing disagreement, rather than inducing a crisis. While this argues against the idea that SAs are just canonical assertions, note that SAs also behave differently from questions. In particular, the fact that combative responses to denials, though dispreferred to welcoming ones, are still more natural for SAs than for PQs provides evidence against the view that SAs have merely presentational force. Quite the contrary, these speech acts *do* make a positive proposal for increasing the CG, which can justify the speaker’s effort to stand by the assertion after it has been rejected. Concerning the specific illocutionary profile of SAs, our findings suggest that these moves are *not* categorically biased towards the addition of *p* to the CG, contrary to what has been argued for regular assertions (see F&B); rather, their discourse profile, at the very least, must project disagreement as an equally unmarked outcome, explaining the failure of silent responses to default to CG Update, and the non-disruptive nature of denials.