

*Wookiee Statements, Semanticism, and Reasonable Assertion**

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Abstract

It is assumed that the content of an assertion is determined either by the semantically defined content or by the interaction of the latter with the context. Here I present a counterexample by means of the Wookiee problem. After considering several options I offer what appears to be its most satisfactory solution. This requires that we give up the assumption in favor of a view according to which it may be that semantic information does not at all determine the content of an assertion, not even partly so.

Keywords: assertion, semantic content, context, presupposition.

1. Assertion

All conversations take place in a context and convey something by uttering some or other sentence. On the received view (see Stalnaker 1978 and 1987) the goal of an assertion is to communicate *what is said*. The *context* and *content* of an assertion interact in order to determine *what is said*.

In order to properly describe this interaction Stalnaker 1978 proposes a two-dimensional model. One dimension is determined by the contextually relevant information: e.g., who is the speaker, which are the salient objects, and what does the world look like. The other dimension is determined by semantic information: the meaning of the words used by the participants.

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This model has been used and interpreted in different ways. Stalnaker 2004 claims he intended to use his model with a “metasemantic” interpretation according to which the model offers a mere description of the context-content interaction within conversations. Others (see Chalmers and Jackson 2001 and Chalmers 2002) intend to use the model with a “semantic” interpretation according to which the model offers a description of the semantic and conceptual knowledge that competent speakers have. Both interpretations, however, agree on what I call “the semanticist assumption” or *SA* for short:

Semanticist Assumption (SA): the content of an assertion is determined either by the semantically defined content of the expression used *or* by the interaction between the latter and the context.

It is easy to see how *SA* works within two-dimensional semantics. According to Chalmers 2002, for example, every linguistic term has two different kinds of meaning or content. On the one hand, A-intensions track epistemic dependence. Epistemic dependence tells us how the sentence’s truth-value depends on the speaker’s a priori (i.e., semantic) knowledge. For example, for all I know a priori a purely indexical use¹ of the English sentence ‘I am here’ is true if and only if the speaker is located at the place of the utterance. On the other hand, C-intensions track factual dependence. Factual dependence tells us how the sentence’s truth-value depends on the facts. For example, if *M* uses ‘I am here’ indexically while being in Cambridge, what *M* says will be true if and only if *M* is in Cambridge.

Two-dimensional semantics (see Stalnaker 1978, Chalmers 2002, 2004, and 2006) can be understood as claiming that for every declarative assertion or thought there is a two-dimensional intension that maps pairs of worlds (one considered as actual and the other as counterfactual) into truth-values. The result is a two-dimensional matrix where the horizontal lines describe propositions that are determined by the interaction between content and the context. Stalnaker 1978 famously argues that the corresponding two-dimensional matrix includes a second distinguishable kind of proposition: that which is described by the diagonal of the matrix.²

The central claim of two-dimensional semantics is that the content of an assertion will be either a horizontal proposition or the diagonal one. There is no third option. Now, given that both, horizontals and diagonal, are determined either by the semantically defined content or by the interaction of the latter with the context, the two-dimensional view is committed to *SA*.

¹ I mean “purely indexical” in Kaplan’s way in order to exclude demonstrative uses of ‘here’ where the speaker is pointing at a particular location distinct from hers; e.g., when someone is trying to give her location by pointing at a map and saying ‘I live here’.

² For several reasons, Chalmers 2004 and Stalnaker (see Block and Stalnaker, 1999, and Stalnaker, 2004) distinguish this from Chalmers’ A-proposition. The distinction, however, is irrelevant for the purpose of this discussion.

Whether two-dimensionalist or not, almost everyone seems to agree with Stalnaker's 1978 claim that the content of an assertion is determined in the way described by *SA*. Some such assumption seems to underlie, for example, the current debate concerning relativism (see Egan 2005 and Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009).

Some reject the idea that all truth-conditionally relevant information is semantically encoded in favor of what is known as truth-conditional pragmatics (see Chomsky 1996, Travis 1997, Bezuidenhout 2002 and Asher and Lascarides 2003). On this view, there is truth-conditionally relevant contextual information that is *not* semantically encoded. Still, it is assumed the content of an assertion is at least partly determined by the semantically encoded information. Something like *SA* is taken to be true even within truth-conditional pragmatics.

The case is clearer for Neo-Russellians like Soames 2007 who reject the two-dimensional approach just described. On this view, the content of an assertion is *always* the semantically defined proposition. This suggests an even stronger endorsement of *SA*.

So it seems fair to say philosophers of language have adopted a semanticist attitude by assuming that something like *SA* is true. As I will show, this assumption is mistaken. There are informative assertions the content of which is not semantically determined at all, not even partly so.

2. Theoretic constraints

Speakers seem to utter sentence tokens, more often than not, for communicative purposes. It is plausible to think that utterances of declarative sentences count as assertions. And it is plausible to think that what the assertion expresses for the speaker is identified with what the speaker wants to communicate with her assertion. If this is accepted, then there must be a way in which a theory that assumes *SA* helps us understand this phenomenon.

At first glance it seems like it can readily do so. All it needs to do is find out which content, either the horizontal or the diagonal, gets to play the role of the asserted content. But, when it comes to communication, there are some constraints. I take it for granted that any account –for sure, any two-dimensional account– of communication must observe the following principles owed to Stalnaker (1978).

Informative: A proposition asserted (or thought) is always true in some but not all of the possible worlds in the context.

No gaps: Any assertive utterance (or thought) should express a proposition, relative to each world in the context, and that proposition should have a truth-value in each world in the context.

No ambiguities: The same proposition is expressed (or thought) relative to each world in the context.

These principles work under the assumption that the goal of an assertion is to reduce the set of possibilities in the context set. This cannot be achieved if the relevant proposition is either necessarily true or necessarily false, that's what we need the first principle for. The same happens with the second principle. If there is a world where the proposition in question has no truth-value then we will not know whether that possibility should be carved out of the space of possibilities; that's what the second principle is for. Similar considerations apply to the third principle. Propositions can be understood as recipes for logical carving. If the matrix offers many of them we will not know which *recipe* to follow.³

It should be clear that any theory that accepts *SA* must embrace these principles. They determine what a given speaker expresses by means of her assertive utterance. So here comes the challenge, can a theory that accepts *SA* account for the way in which speakers utter sentences to communicate information while being constrained by the three principles above? The answer, I believe, is negative.

3. The Wookiee problem

There are successful (i.e., informative) assertions where neither a horizontal nor the diagonal proposition –i.e., neither the C-intension nor the A-intension, on Chalmers' view– can be said to determine the content of the assertion in light of the principles above.

Consider the following situation. I am looking for Tom. We agreed to meet at the department at noon, either in the commons room or in his office. It's noon and as I walk through the hallway I call out *p*: "Tom, where are you?" Tom replies by uttering *q*: "I am here" from within his office. Tom's speech act observes the principles. It lets me know where he is (i.e., not ambiguous), it is contingent (i.e., informative), and does not seem to be incomplete (i.e., has no truth-value or meaning gaps). The question is, then, how should we represent this situation?

There are two worlds in the set of possibilities: world w_1 in which Tom is in the commons room and world w_2 in which Tom is in his office. The purpose of the conversation is to let me know which of these worlds is the actual one. Matrix A_1 represents the two-dimensional proposition of Tom's utterance *q*.

³ The third principle comes with a wrinkle. On the semantic interpretation, the assertion (or assertive thought) will correspond to two propositions at once. If present, an ambiguity will be represented in the horizontal lines, which correspond to the external content. Followers of the view could simply reply that there is no ambiguity since, in those cases, there is still a single proposition, the diagonal or A proposition, represented by the matrix. If this is so, then so be it. The point is irrelevant for the purposes of the present discussion.

A_1	w_1	w_2
w_1	T	F
w_2	F	T

So, which proposition did Tom just assert? There are two candidates: the diagonal and a horizontal. But none of them observe the principles. The diagonal proposition fails to meet *Informative* because the sentence Tom uttered is bound to be true in every possible world in which he utters it. In short, it has a necessary diagonal, which is trivial. The horizontal propositions, determined by the C-intensions, go against *No ambiguities* because Tom's utterance expresses different propositions relative to different worlds. So there are different horizontal propositions. Hence, neither of the two candidates explains how Tom's utterance observes the principles.

Matrix-level update?

If you are a two-dimensionalist you might be thinking: “but why should we be forced to pick one, either a horizontal or a diagonal proposition. Why not update on the whole matrix?”

The only kind of “matrix-level” update that I know of is Stalnaker's diagonalization by means of the dagger operator. Stalnaker 1978 introduces the dagger as a pragmatic tool, but there is no problem if we want to interpret it semantically (see Chalmers 2002). The dagger \dagger works in a very straightforward fashion: it takes a matrix as an input and gives a matrix as its output by taking the diagonal of the former and projecting it on the horizontal lines of the latter. To illustrate, the result of applying \dagger to Tom's original problematic Matrix A_1 is given by Matrix $\dagger A_1$.

$\dagger A_1$	w_1	w_2
w_1	T	T
w_2	T	T

As you may see, the result is no good. I do not seem to have learned anything in virtue of the semantics of Tom's utterance. Matrix $\dagger A_1$ does not offer any recipe to update from Tom's utterance. Of course, there might be other more interesting, perhaps even more semantic, kinds of “matrix-level” update. So far, there seems to be no alternative one. Furthermore, it's unlikely that any non-arbitrary matrix-level strategy will solve the problem.

It goes without saying that the pragmatic use of \dagger is in no better standing (see Stalnaker 1978). So far, Tom's felicitous assertion is problematic for both sorts of two-dimensionalism.

A more natural response

It is commonly agreed (see Stalnaker 1978 and 2002) that there are at least two processes by means of which one can be informative. Accommodation, on the one hand, takes place prior to the acceptance of the content and after the utterance takes place. It simply adds on one more presupposition to the context, namely, that the speech act took place. Reduction, on the other hand, takes place after the acceptance of the asserted content by eliminating incompatible worlds. This gives the two-dimensionalist a response: we are in trouble because we left out an important step: we have not yet accommodated the speech act into the context.

The speech act is an observable fact. The fact that we communicate verbally presupposes that we both are able to hear the sounds produced by one another. More specifically, Tom presupposes that I presuppose that he presupposes that I can identify the sound of his speech act and where it comes from. Tom is correct. I presuppose this. Furthermore, from the observable fact that Tom has uttered a sound I can infer that the utterance comes from his office.

This gives us a derived set of possibilities: the result of accommodation from the observed fact that the utterance took place. This is the context in which I am supposed to interpret Tom's utterance and determine its content. It includes the presupposition (Φ), from which we can derive (Υ).

(Φ) that Tom is speaking from within his office.

(Υ) that Tom is in his office.

But (Υ) is incompatible with w_1 , the world in which Tom is in the commons room. So I must get rid of it. The accommodated context includes only w_2 , the world in which Tom is in his office. This, *apparently*, solves the problem. The accommodated matrix represents a single contingent proposition: i.e., (Υ). Such proposition can explain how Tom's speech act observes the principles of communication.

Another troubling fact

Unfortunately, the problem is still standing. For now that we have updated by accommodating the fact of the utterance the *semantically determined* content of Tom's utterance doesn't have any communicative work to do. Any utterance—indeed any production of noises—would have the same communicative effect. So now we are left wondering why would Tom—and for that matter, anyone—would ever make *that* utterance to convey *that* information.

What we learn from accommodation, by definition, has nothing to do with the content of the uttered sentence. Thus, it is not something that can be explained by any semantically determined proposition. However, we get too much from accommodating these presuppositions. So much that prior to the acceptance of content I already know that the actual world is w_2 . This preempts the semantically deter-

mined content from being informative.

It follows that, according to the theory, the semantically determined content of any appropriate use⁴ of the English sentence ‘I am here’ is uninformative. Given that the assertion *is* informative, it follows that the content of the assertion is not *in any way* semantically determined.

The Wookiee problem

Let me make this more dramatic. Suppose that Tom replies, instead, by uttering a sentence-token from a different language, say, *r*: “Ich bin hier”. Is this a successful communicative act? Tom presupposes that I presuppose that he presupposes that I can identify the sounds he is uttering and, hence, that I can infer the location of his utterance from the observable fact that it took place. This presupposition is easily satisfied.

This time things look a bit worse. Not only is the content informatively irrelevant. It is not even relevant whether the participants are competent in the use of the language of which a sentence-token has been uttered. How is it then that speakers always try to convey the *semantically determined* content?

Why not twist this a little bit more? Tom is a *Star Wars* fan. In particular, he is pretty knowledgeable about Chewbacca and the Wookiee species. He knows, for example, that they speak Shyriiwook. Like many other fans, he knows pretty well how to utter a sentence-token of Shyriiwook. You only have to utter two vocal sounds without using your vocal chords. I walk through the hallway and ask, *p*: “Tom, where are you?” Could Tom not reply with his favorite Shyriiwook sentence? If he does I can do the same sort of accommodation described above and find out where he is. He is not even speaking a human language (Yes, Tom is amazing). Yet, his utterance is informative and successful in meeting the goal of the conversation.

What is the Wookiee problem about? The problem is not that the theory is unable to explain those cases where Tom decides to speak like Chewbacca. The problem, rather, is that the meaning of ‘*I am here*’ is not playing *any* interesting role in the story about how Tom uses it to communicate. Assuming the truth of SA, one would have thought that ‘*I am here*’ is, in virtue of its semantics, uniquely well suited for conveying the sort of information that Tom is trying to convey. But it seems that it is not.

That is the Wookiee Problem. Thus far, the theory cannot tell us how Wookiee utterances –e.g. Tom’s *q*: “I am here”– manage to be informative in virtue of asserting *any* sort of semantically determined content.

⁴ It would be terribly inappropriate (uncooperative) of Tom to say, “I am here”, when I ask him, “Where are you?” by the phone. Among other reasons, because some central presuppositions are not satisfied: e.g., the presupposition that I be able to infer the location of the utterance from the fact that it took place.

4. A reasonable solution

Speakers usually observe certain principles when communicating. It is good communicative practice, for example, to be relevant, clear, not ambiguous, brief, and orderly. So, when I ask *p*: “Tom, where are you?” Tom should not reply with “No worries!” unless he wants to change the topic; or with “Ich bin hier”, unless he wants to be obscure. Similarly, Tom should not reply in Shyriiwook because that would be obscure, unclear, and irrelevant.

This gives us a simple solution. Why is *q*, an utterance of the English sentence ‘I am here’, uniquely well suited for Tom to convey the sort of information that he wants to communicate? The answer is: because *q* is uniquely well-suited, in virtue of its semantics, for Tom to say something *relevant, clear, brief, etc.*

The example we are concerned with involves a context in which by simply accommodating the fact of the utterance we manage to update all the relevant information. Yet, it will be best, for communicative considerations, if the speaker picks an utterance the semantically determined content of which coincides with the information we have contextually inferred. That way we will avoid confusions and misunderstandings. For example, an utterance of *q* semantically expresses the same proposition that gets communicated, thereby allowing Tom to be relevant.

Wookiee utterances seem to carry too many presuppositions with them; so many that the semantically determined content becomes *irrelevant*, but only partly so. The informative purpose of the speech act is satisfied prior to the acceptance of content. But being informative is not the only goal of a conversation. By uttering *q* Tom manages to be well behaved.

This is not the good old two-dimensional picture, clearly. However, it might still be acceptable for two-dimensionalists. It would be surprising otherwise. They simply need to add something like: when the principles of assertion are not observed, it must be that they are being exploited for manners’ sake.

The solution is, however, clearly incompatible with the generally accepted truth of SA.

Semanticist Assumption (SA): the content of an assertion is determined either by the semantically defined content of the expression used *or* by the interaction between the latter and the context.

If the *reasonable* account of the Wookiee problem I just gave is correct, and I see no reason to think it is not, then the *content* of the assertion is *not* determined either by the semantically defined content of the expression ‘I am here’ or by the interaction of the latter with the context. The only relevant role that the semantic features of ‘I am here’ play in this case is purely diplomatic, to put it somehow. Semantic information is relevant *only* for *manner’s* sake, not for *content’s* sake.

5. Wookiee statements and stipulations

Appropriate utterances of the English sentence ‘I am here’ are, of course, not the only ones that can help make the case against SA. There are many other cases, within and across languages, of Wookiee statements. Consider, for example, appropriate uses of sentences such as ‘I am speaking now’, ‘I am here now’, and ‘I exist’.⁵ All appropriate utterances of these sentences are such that the presuppositions are enough to determine the content of the assertion. Even before determining the meaning of the relevant sentences, as soon as the speech act takes place the audience knows that the speaker is speaking, that the speaker is located at the place and time of the utterance, and that the speaker in fact exists. I dub these “Wookiee statements.”

Wookiee statements have one further feature in common: their associated two-dimensional matrix is made up of different contingent horizontal propositions and a necessary diagonal. As such, they are similar to another kind of problematic statements: *stipulations*. This is not the place to offer a theory of stipulations. But reflecting on some plausible considerations will help us see that they constitute one more case of Wookiee statements.

A well-known example is that of the standard meter. Consider a competent speaker making the following stipulation *s*: “This length is one meter”, while point at a particular metal rod. We know that, whatever the actual length of the relevant metal rod is, it will be one meter long. Thus, regardless of contextual variations, including variations in length of the relevant metal rod, the speaker making the stipulation *s* will assert something true. This gets described in the two-dimensional matrix as a necessary diagonal (see Matrix B). Suppose the stipulation takes place in a context where the participants ignore what the actual length of the metal rod is, and consider the following possibilities: world w_1 where the length of the metal rod the speaker refers to is in fact l_1 , and world w_2 where it is l_2 , and $l_1 \neq l_2$.

B	w_1	w_2
w_1	T	F
w_2	F	T

Not surprisingly, the same Wookiee problem arises. Whoever makes the stipulation *s* will be asserting nontrivial information. Which proposition is she asserting?

⁵ Another, yet controversial, example is given by ‘Honey, I’m home!’. If one considers it to be inappropriate when uttered at a place different from home, then such utterance does present us with the same Wookiee problem. Other controversial examples are ‘I am thinking’ and ‘I am thinking now’. The latter are controversial insofar as it is controversial to claim that it is a common presupposition (i.e., common ground) in ordinary conversations that participants are thinking.

It will not be the diagonal, for it is trivial; and we cannot pick a horizontal proposition because there is not enough information, including the semantic one, to determine whether we are in w_1 or w_2 . It is also not viable to diagonalize, since the resulting proposition will still be trivial. Furthermore, if we pay close attention to the process of accommodation, by means of which the fact that the speech act has taken place is included in the context, we realize that there is enough information among the presuppositions to preclude the semantic information from being informative and, thus, from determining the content of the assertion.

It seems at least intuitively correct to interpret the speaker issuing the stipulation s as asserting something like (B):

(B): From now on ‘one meter’ will be correferential with this use ‘this length’.

There are at least two reasons to think that the information has to be so underdetermined. On the one hand, stipulations are ways of “coining” new terms. Ludlow 2006 and 2008 forcefully argues for a dynamic view of the lexicon according to which “discourse participants routinely mint new linguistic items” and also that what seem to be “common coins [...] are typically “thin” – in the sense that their meanings are underdetermined and fleshed out on a case-by-case basis.” [Ludlow, 2008, p. 115] If, as Ludlow suggests, commonly used terms have a very underdetermined meaning, one should expect that new, not previously used, terms have a radically underdetermined meaning, if any at all, at the moment of their issuing. This claim is rather uncontroversial: if we want to introduce the term ‘T’ into our linguistic practice we cannot do this by presupposing that ‘T’ means m , for in order to be understood we would have to presuppose that our audience presupposes that ‘T’ means m . That is tantamount to presupposing that ‘T’ has already been introduced.

On the other hand, and partly in virtue of the previous consideration, there is no way to further determine the information conveyed by s . One might think, for example, that what the speaker conveys is, at least, a little bit more determined than (B), something perhaps like (Δ):

(Δ) From now on ‘one meter’ will refer to *this length*.

However, the context in which s appears offers no way to determine what ‘this length’ refers to. All the participants can learn from the speaker’s issuing of s is that ‘one meter’ refers to whatever it is that the length of the relevant metal rod is. So it seems that the only way of taking (Δ) as appropriately describing the information conveyed by the speaker’s issuing of s is to take it to mean something like (B).

(B): From now on ‘one meter’ will be correferential with this use of ‘this length’.

If so, then it seems that the content of the speaker’s stipulation s : “This length is one meter” is in fact determined by sheer accommodation. As it happens with Wookiee statements, once the participants accommodate the fact that the speaker has uttered the sentence ‘This length is one meter’, they can infer (B) without both-

ering to consider the meaning of the terms used. All they need to know to draw that inference is that the relevant speech act is a stipulation, but that piece of knowledge is certainly not semantic but merely contextual.

It seems, then, that stipulations, such as the one described, constitute another counterexample against the semanticist assumption.

Semanticist Assumption (SA): the content of an assertion is determined either by the semantically defined content of the expression used *or* by the interaction between the latter and the context.

For it seems that the information asserted by the speaker's issuing of *s*: "This length is one meter" is something like (B), which is fully determined by merely accommodating the fact that the speech act has taken place, prior to the acceptance of any semantic information. Furthermore, it seems that (B) simply does not express any of the information that the English sentence 'This length is one meter' may *semantically* encode.

6. Objections and replies

Could the semanticist philosopher of language not claim that the English sentence 'This length is one meter' semantically encodes the information that " 'this length' and 'one meter' are correferential"? If so, could she not claim, furthermore, that the content of the speaker's issuing of *s* is in fact semantically defined?

There is in fact a rather simple move that the semanticist could make: to claim that part of the lexical meaning of each word is the word itself. Based on evidence from linguistic practices, Geurts 1998 claims that "ALL expressions from any language are equivocal in a way: besides their ordinary meaning(s) they can also be used to designate themselves." [Geurts, 1998, p. 291] Semanticist philosophers may want to follow Geurts and claim, for example, that every referential expression has at least two referents: the object it is ordinarily used to refer and the expression itself.

From this it would follow, against what I said toward the end of last section, that the information conveyed by the issuing of the stipulation *s*: "This length is one meter", namely, that 'this length' and 'one meter' are correferential, *can* be semantically determined. In other words, if the semanticist makes the "equivocal" move described by Geurts 1998, she could claim that the proposition asserted by issuing *s* *could* be either one of the semantically defined contents of the relevant English sentence or the result the interaction of the latter with the context.

Furthermore, the semanticist could make a similar claim about the cases of what I have called "Wookiee" statements. After all, the information conveyed by Tom's assertion of *p*: "I am here", namely, that Tom is in his office, *coincides* with the

proposition determined by the interaction of the semantically defined content of the English sentence ‘I am here’ and the relevant context. So, it seems that even with Wookiee statements the content of the assertion *could* be semantically determined, either by the semantic content or by the interaction of the latter with the context.

These objections will help clarify the point I am trying to make. I am *not* claiming that the content of Wookiee assertions or statements *cannot* or *could not* be semantically determined either by the semantic content or by its interaction with the context. What I am claiming is that the content of these peculiar assertions *is not*, as a matter of fact, semantically determined at all, not even partly so.

Similarly, the argument for my central thesis *does not* consist in showing that the asserted content cannot be semantically determined. Rather, the argument consists in showing that the relevant information is contextually conveyed in a purely non-semantic manner. To do this I have shown that prior to the acceptance of the semantic content of the sentence uttered, i.e., even before any assignment of semantic values, the audience has already inferred the relevant asserted information. Thus, even if that same information can be semantically determined, the semantic content is redundant and, hence, useless for truth-conditional or *content* purposes. As the solution to the Wookiee problem shows, the only role that semantic content plays in these cases is rather peripheral: it helps the speaker be respectful, clear, etc.

That much is clear for the case of Tom’s assertion *p*, and in general for appropriate uses of sentences such as ‘I am speaking now’, ‘I am here now’, and ‘I exist’. But something similar can be said about stipulations such as the issuing of *s*: “This length is one meter.” The metalinguistic information conveyed by such a stipulation, namely, that ‘this length’ is correferential with ‘one meter’, gets conveyed prior to the assignment of semantic values to ‘This length is one meter’. The semantic information encoded by this English sentence does not determine the content of the stipulation. That job has already been done. Still, the sentence’s semantic information is useful for manner’s sake: since the metalinguistic information associated with it will coincide with the already determined content, it will help the speaker be clear, respectful, etc.

7. The inclusive view

I have argued all along for a more inclusive view of assertive content. On this view, the semantically defined content of the sentence(s) used *may* not at all determine the content of an assertion, not even partly so. This goes against what I called the *Semanticist Assumption*.

Semanticist Assumption (SA): the content of an assertion is determined either by the semantically defined content of the expression used *or* by the interaction between the latter and the context.

On this more inclusive view what we get is something like *Reasonable Assertion (RA)*.

Reasonable Assertion (RA): the content of an assertion may be determined by different means, on a case by case basis, and by what appears to be the most reasonable manner. It is sometimes determined by the semantically defined content of the expression used *or* by its interaction with the context, but purely contextual non-semantic features may also determine it.

There are very good reasons to endorse *RA* instead of the traditional *SA*. First and foremost, *RA* will allow us to handle what would otherwise be problematic Wookiee assertions. This will potentially have further ramifications. Unlike *SA*, *RA* is open to assertions being a more flexible act as it, intuitively, appears to be. Such a flexible and inclusive position seems, in principle, more attractive than the stringent semanticist one.

Second, *RA* will help us avoid certain philosophical puzzles. At least since Kripke 1980, some have thought that certain special assertions provide speakers with what would otherwise be a rather doubtful kind of knowledge: that of contingent yet *a priori* truths. Such knowledge seems philosophically suspect for it purports to be *about* the world of our experience even though the *access* to it is independent of our experience.

Kripke 1980 argues that issuing stipulations, such as *s*: “This length is one meter”, provide the speaker with such contingent *a priori* knowledge. Further discussion (see Stalnaker 1978 and Chalmers 2002) has portrayed such contingent *a priori* truths as describing a two-dimensional matrix with contingent horizontals and a necessary diagonal.⁶ If we accept *RA* and, with it, the reasonable account of the Wookiee problem (see section 4), we can explain why such assertions seem special without accepting that they provide speakers with anything like contingent *a priori* knowledge. These assertions are special because their content is *not* determined semantically, not even partly so. Their content is, rather, contextually determined. And it is uncontroversial that there is no *a priori* access to contextual information: it must be acquired through experience. Thus, such assertions may provide speakers with contingent truths about the world of their experience, but there is no experience-independent access to such truths.

I hope this is enough to convince the reader that we need to give up our semanticist assumption in favor of a more *reasonable* account of assertion. Those that are not convinced will at least have to face a substantial challenge: to give a semanticist-friendly solution to the Wookiee problem.

⁶ Stalnaker appears to no longer endorse this diagnosis (see Block and Stalnaker 1999 and Stalnaker 2004). It is unclear whether Chalmers still does (see Chalmers 2010).

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