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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The status of the knowledge account of assertion

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**Abstract** According to the increasingly popular knowledge account, assertion is governed by the rule that speech acts of that kind require knowledge of their content. Timothy Williamson has argued that this knowledge rule is the constitutive rule of assertion. It is argued here that it is not the constitutive rule of assertion in any sense of the term, as it governs only some assertions rather than all of them. A (qualified) knowledge rule can in fact be derived from the traditional analysis of assertion according to which assertion is the linguistic expression of belief. Because it is more informative, this analysis provides a better point of departure for defending the knowledge account than Williamson's view according to which the knowledge rule is part of the analysis of assertion.

**Keywords** Assertion · Knowledge account of assertion · Belief-expression analysis · Williamson

According to the increasingly popular knowledge account of assertion, knowledge is a normative requirement of assertion. More precisely, assertion is that speech act that (normatively) requires knowledge of its content. This means that it is appropriate to criticize someone who makes an assertion if she does not know that what she asserts is true. Thus, the defining claim of the knowledge account is that assertion is governed by the knowledge rule, which requires of asserters that they know that which they assert (DeRose 2002, 179; Douven 2006, 449). Williamson (1996, 2000) claims, in addition to this, that this knowledge rule governs assertion necessarily and that it is the constitutive rule of assertion.

I will take it for granted that assertion does indeed require knowledge, at least in many situations. The issue on which I will focus is how such a

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requirement should be accommodated in our conception of assertion. I shall argue that the traditional analysis of assertion as the linguistic expression of belief can be retained. We should take the requirement to apply to belief directly, and to assertion only indirectly. The link between belief and assertion is provided by what I call 'the norm of sincerity'. According to this norm, one ought to be sincere in situations of cooperative communication, or normal trust (see Sect. 4). This norm entails that in such situations one must assert that P only if one believes that P.

As I recently discovered, Kent Bach has formulated the position that I defend in this paper as follows:

> [I]t seems unnecessary to posit what Williamson calls a "knowledge rule" on assertion. It seems to me that the only relevant rule on assertion is belief, since an assertion essentially is the expression of a belief; there is a separate knowledge rule or, rather, norm on belief itself. So the knowledge rule has no independent status – it's the relative product of the belief rule on assertion and the knowledge norm on belief. (2007, n 22)

I will in fact defend the stronger claim that the traditional analysis of assertion as the linguistic expression of belief provides the best point of departure for defending the knowledge account of assertion. *Pace* Williamson, the speech act of assertion is not constituted by a rule.

## 1 Constitutive versus regulative rules

According to Williamson, assertion is governed by a knowledge rule. Using P as a schematic sentence letter, he formulates this rule as follows (494):[1]

> [$R_{AK}$] One must: assert that P only if one knows that P.

On the assumption that our practice of assertion is indeed governed by this rule, a person can legitimately be criticized if she asserts something she does not know. This fits our linguistic practices, as we sometimes respond to assertions by asking questions such as 'How do you know?' and 'Do you know that?' We take such responses to be appropriate. They appear to challenge whether the asserter knows what she asserts and seem to presuppose she should.

These and other considerations motivate the knowledge account of assertion.[2] Although it is becoming more and more popular, many are critical of the account. However, if their criticisms are correct, the position defended here can easily be adapted to accommodate them. The reason for this is that I am more concerned with the form of the analysis than with its content. If, for instance, assertion requires rational credibility or truth instead of knowledge, as Douven

[1] Page references pertain to Williamson (1996) unless indicated otherwise.

[2] See Unger (1975), Slote (1979), Williamson (1996, 2000), and DeRose (2002). The most prominent among the other arguments in favor of the knowledge account of assertion are the impropriety of asserting of a particular lottery ticket that it will turn out not to be a winning ticket and the impropriety of asserting Moorean sentences such as 'Dogs bark, but I don't know that they do'.

(2006) and Weiner (2005) have argued respectively, the proposed account can be changed accordingly.[3] Rather than the content of the requirement that governs assertion, my main target is Williamson's claim that assertion has a constitutive rule.

Williamson claims that [$R_{AK}$] is the constitutive rule of assertion. Concerning the notion of a constitutive rule, he writes: '[A] rule will count as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to that act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of that act.' (490) Necessarily governing an act, then, is a necessary condition for a rule being a constitutive rule. Note that, in the case of assertion, this does not mean that knowledge is a necessary condition of assertion. This would be rather implausible, since—as Williamson acknowledges—we often assert things we do not know. Rather than meeting the requirements of the knowledge rule, *being governed by the knowledge rule* is a necessary condition of assertion.

As he does not discuss the traditional expression analysis of assertion, it remains somewhat unclear why Williamson analyzes assertion in a different way and claims that the knowledge rule is the constitutive rule of assertion. Williamson starts from the idea that assertion is governed by rules just as games are, and goes on to analyze assertion as if it has constitutive rules just as games do.[4] He urges us to postpone our scepticism about the analogy:

> This paper aims to identify the constitutive rule(s) of assertion, conceived by analogy with the rules of a game. That assertion has such rules is by no means obvious; perhaps it is more like a natural phenomenon than it seems. One way to find out is by supposing it has such rules, in order to see where the hypothesis leads and what it explains. That will be done here. (489–490)

The idea appears to be that relying on the analogy is justified if the analysis that this methodology leads to has a significant amount of explanatory power. As it stands, this defence is incomplete. The methodology is only compelling if the

[3] Douven (2006) argues that the rational credibility account is just as good at explaining the linguistic data as the knowledge account. The former is to be preferred over the latter because it is simpler: whereas the knowledge account requires us to postulate the knowledge rule, the rational credibility account is implied by two of our basic commitments, to wit our aiming to be rational and the belief-assertion parallel, according to which belief is subvocalized assertion. Douven suggests that Williamson is committed to the belief-assertion parallel, because he holds that 'occurrently believing *p* stands to asserting *p* as the inner stands to the outer' (Williamson 2000, 255). On the view I defend in this paper assertion is vocalized occurrent belief. This view is also consistent with Williamson's claim, and can also serve as an explication of the parallel between belief and assertion. Weiner (2005) argues that the truth account can explain the linguistic data just as well as the knowledge account by appealing to Gricean maxims that govern conversation generally. In addition to this, it can account for predictions and retrodictions, which 'are generally acceptable in the absence of knowledge precisely because the most likely and satisfactory warrant for believing in their truth is not sufficient for knowledge', while the knowledge account cannot account for these kinds of assertions (ibid., 238).

[4] This idea goes back at least to Searle (1969), who proposed to analyze all speech acts in terms of constitutive rules. See Bach and Harnish (1979) for a criticism.

explanatory power of the resulting analysis is larger than that of a more obvious analysis, and Williamson does nothing to support this claim. In fact, we will see that the traditional analysis explains more by less.

Even though the analogy with games does not suffice to justify the methodology on which he relies, the parallel Williamson draws with game rules does provide a further clue as to the kind of rule he has in mind. It suggests that the relevant notion of a constitutive rule is the one discussed by Lewis (1983; cf. Searle 1969). Lewis argues that games consist of a combination of constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules are specifications akin to definitions, whereas regulative rules are akin to directives (Lewis 1983, 237). Consider chess. A characterisation of a bishop, for instance, includes a specification of the pieces that are bishops in terms of their starting position (c1, c8, f1, and f8) and a directive that lays down the moves one is permitted to make with them (they can only move diagonally).[5] The specification is a constitutive rule; the directive is a regulative rule.

This gives a further clue as to what Williamson might have in mind when he claims that the knowledge rule is a constitutive rule. Note that on Lewis' view the regulative rule applies to a type of entity that is independently characterized in terms of a specification of the features any token of it must have. That specification is a constitutive rule. So, in addition to necessarily governing an act, Lewisian constitutive rules specify the features an entity must have in order for a regulative rule to apply to it (the regulative rule 'A bishop can only move diagonally' applies to those pieces that start on c1, c8, f1, and f8 as specified by the constitutive rule for bishops).

In spite of the fact that Williamson invokes the analogy with games, the knowledge rule cannot be a constitutive rule in this sense. Lewisian constitutive rules specify (non-normative or descriptive) requirements an entity such as an action has to have in order to constitute another entity. A move in chess, for instance, counts as checkmating just if the conditions for checkmate are met. And a piece counts as a bishop if it starts on c1, c8, f1, or f8. As we saw, however, an act can be an assertion even if the knowledge rule is violated. A related problem regarding the knowledge rule as a Lewisian constitutive rule is that $[R_{AK}]$ is a directive rather than (merely) a specification: it forbids assertions that do not express knowledge (492). Thus, instead of a constitutive rule, the knowledge rule is a regulative rule on the interpretation Lewis gives to these terms in the context of games.

[5] This does not hold for all kinds of chess. The claims made in the main text pertain to chess as it is defined by the World Chess Federation (see the handbook on http://www.fide.com). Note also that I do not mean to say that only chess pieces that start on c1, c8, f1, or f8 are bishops. This is obviously incorrect, as pawns can be promoted to bishops. A complete specification of the constitutive rule for bishops in chess would take this into account. The rule for promotion can be seen as a rule that expands on the specification of chess pieces in terms of their starting positions (this is at least how things are presented in the handbook mentioned; see articles 2.2, 2.3, and 3.7e). The directive mentioned in the main text is also incomplete in the sense that the moves that bishops are permitted to make are also restricted by the rule that, just as rooks and queens, bishops may not move over any intervening pieces (see article 3.5; see article 3.2 for the official formulation of the basic directive that applies to bishops). I thank Kent Bach for pressing me on these issues.

## 2 Constitutive rules and necessity

What should we take the knowledge rule to be if it is not an ordinary constitutive rule such as those that occur in games? Can we save the idea that the knowledge rule is a constitutive rule in one sense or another? The salient alternative is to regard it as a regulative rule that is constitutive of the kind of act it governs. On this conception of constitutive rules, regulative and constitutive rules are not mutually exclusive. In particular, some regulative rules are constitutive rules as well. Recall that Williamson claims that the knowledge rule governs assertion necessarily. The idea to be investigated here is that the necessity of a rule governing a certain kind of act is not only a necessary condition for it being a constitutive rule, but a sufficient condition as well. So, we let go of the idea that, in addition to this, constitutive rules are specifications rather than directives. Instead, they govern all acts of the kind to which they apply and do so necessarily.

Presumably, the kind of necessity Williamson has in mind is conceptual necessity. Thus, on this second conception of constitutive rules, the rule should show up in a conceptual analysis of assertion. Williamson defends the view that the knowledge rule is unique to assertion and that it is the only constitutive rule of assertion (492). This in turn means that if the rule appears in the conceptual analysis of assertion it is the only rule that does so. Williamson does indeed believe that the knowledge rule is part of the conceptual analysis of assertion. The following passage provides us with a clue as to what the analysis in which this rule appears looks like: '[N]ecessarily, assertion is a speech act A whose unique rule is ''One must: perform A with the content that P only if C(P).''' (492) In case of the knowledge rule 'C(P)' stands for 'one knows that P'. Thus, we get the following analysis:

> [KR] An act is an assertion that P just if it is a speech act of the kind that is necessarily governed by the rule 'One must: perform that kind of speech act with the content that P only if one knows that P'.

I will call this 'the [KR] analysis' with 'K' for 'knowledge' and 'R' for 'rule'. Williamson can plausibly be read as proposing [KR] as the analysis of assertion.

A problem with [KR], however, is that it is not as informative as one might wish an analysis of assertion to be. Imagine presenting it to someone who wants to know what assertion is. When confronted with [KR], this person may well respond by saying: 'OK, you have told me that assertion is the kind of speech act that requires knowledge of its content. But how do I know whether a speech act is such as to require knowledge of its content?' [KR] has nothing to say on this. Perhaps, however, it would be too much to ask of an analysis of assertion that it explains how we are able to recognize assertions. The point remains that a more informative analysis would specify the descriptive conditions a speech act has to meet in order for the knowledge rule to apply to it.

Consider the chess example once more. Suppose someone explains to you what a bishop is by saying: Bishops are those chess pieces that are governed by the rule 'chess pieces of this kind are only permitted to move diagonally'. If you have never played chess before, this answer is not very helpful. It would be

natural for you to respond by asking: 'But how do I know whether a particular chess piece can only move diagonally?' The immediate answer is, of course, that you can recognize them by means of their shape. Their shape, however, is only a conventional rather than a constitutive matter (article 2.2 of the handbook mentioned in footnote 5 states that bishops are 'usually indicated by' the familiar symbol). What we are looking for instead is a set of descriptive conditions that have to be satisfied by definition in order for the directive mentioned to apply. As we saw earlier, an explication of those conditions can in fact be provided. A more informative analysis of what a bishop is, then, combines the directive mentioned with a specification of which pieces are bishops. The resulting analysis is this: Those pieces that start on c1, c8, f1, and f8 are bishops; bishops are only permitted to move diagonally (recall the qualifications presented in footnote 5).

The point of the analogy is this. If in response to your question what bishops are you receive as an answer 'Bishops are those pieces that are only allowed to move diagonally', you will be left somewhat mystified in case you do not already know quite a few things about how to play chess, in particular what the descriptive characteristics of bishops are. Similarly, the answer 'Assertions are those speech acts of which you must know the content' in response to your question what assertions are leaves you wondering whether you have really received an adequate answer. The problem stems from the fact that the analysis is formulated in terms of a normative requirement or rule and does not inform us which descriptive conditions have to be satisfied by a speech act in order for that rule to apply to it. A more informative or reductive analysis would do just this. As the bishop example shows, such an analysis provides descriptive conditions characteristic of the entity to which the normative requirement applies. In the case under consideration, this is a matter of explicating descriptive conditions that have to be met in order for a speech act to be an assertion. The normative requirement, i.e. Williamson's knowledge rule would then apply to acts that meet those descriptive conditions.

Now, one might wonder why all of this is relevant. In the context of Williamson's paper, it may seem unproblematic that [KR] is uninformative in this respect. Williamson's main purpose is to argue that assertion requires knowledge and that this requirement is constitutive of assertion. It seems initially plausible that saying more about the nature of assertion is not needed for that purpose. The first thing to note in this connection is that Williamson (2000, 242) claims that his analysis is a simple one, and that this is an advantage of his analysis over others. If such an epistemic (or pragmatic) consideration is relevant to the quality of an analysis, we should also allow for appealing to the extent to which an analysis is informative. This criterion is of the same kind as simplicity in that it is also an epistemic (or pragmatic) condition. Secondly, in order for it to be warranted, a claim about an entity should survive consideration of additional information about that entity. I shall argue that this condition is not met by Williamson's claims about assertion. *A more informative analysis is available and*, as we will see in Sects. 3 and 4, *it sheds a different light on the status of the knowledge rule*. In particular, the idea that the knowledge rule

governs all acts of assertion cannot be salvaged. This undermines the case for regarding the knowledge rule as the constitutive rule of assertion also in the sense at issue in this section. Thus, providing descriptive conditions a speech act has to meet in order for a knowledge rule to apply to it will turn out to be important for evaluating the status of the claim that assertion requires knowledge.[6]

Before moving on to this analysis, let us pause to take another look at Williamson's motivation for claiming that the knowledge rule governs assertion necessarily (see Sect. 1). As we saw above, he regards investigating the constitutive rule of assertion as akin to the process of articulating the rules of a game (490–491). Now, this can be taken to mean that the knowledge rule is a constitutive rule in the Lewisian sense of the term. We saw in the previous section that the knowledge rule is not of this kind. The alternative would be to say that the knowledge rule is like game rules (only) in that it governs the act to which it pertain necessarily. This can be accounted for by taking the knowledge rule to be part of the analysis of assertion, as this would imply that it governs assertion as a matter of conceptual necessity. [KR] can be seen as a way of making this idea precise. It would imply that all acts of assertion are governed by this rule. In the remaining sections, I will argue that an analysis is available that is more informative than [KR], and that on this analysis, the knowledge rule does not apply to all assertions. Given the condition that, in order for it to be warranted, a claim about an entity should survive consideration of additional information about that entity, this implies that we should not regard the knowledge rule as the constitutive rule of assertion.

## 3 Assertion as the linguistic expression of belief

The traditional analysis of assertion is what I shall call 'the belief-expression analysis'. This analysis has been defended, among others, by Grice (1989), Searle (1969), Bach and Harnish (1979), Alston (2000) and Williams (2002).[7]

[6] In contrast to Williamson, I need to appeal to the norm of sincerity in order to derive a knowledge rule. One might think that my account of assertion is more complex than Williamson's in this respect (even though my analysis is simpler than his). This is not the case, however. We need to postulate such a norm anyway. Note also that it is not specific to assertion but applies to a wide range of speech acts. And even if it would make the account more complex, this should not be seen as a disadvantage. As we shall see below, appealing to the norm of sincerity in order to derive a knowledge rule is rather attractive: it leads to a natural way of conceiving of permissible lies.

[7] Williamson takes Grice to defend a [TR] analysis with 'T' for 'truth', referring to Grice's (1989, 27) supermaxim 'Try to make your contribution one that is true' as support for this interpretation. Note, however, that this maxim is a *conversational* maxim. Rather than being part of the analysis of assertion, it is a condition that governs conversation generally including sequences of assertions. Grice can in fact plausibly be interpreted as supporting the belief-expression analysis (ibid., 42). Perhaps Williamson takes the belief-expression analysis to be equivalent to the [TR] analysis, which is somewhat plausible if it is assumed that belief aims at or normatively requires truth. However, it is not obvious that rule and expression analyses are even consistent with one another. At least on the view I go on to defend below, expression analyses do not contain rules. Furthermore, the rules that can be derived from them do not apply to all assertions, but only to some. Thus, I take Grice to defend a belief-expression analysis only.

According to this analysis, to assert that P is to express the belief that P using linguistic means.[8] Some of the things Williamson writes suggest he agrees with this view. Williamson claims for instance that 'assertion is the exterior analogue of judgment, which stands to belief as act to state' (2000, 238) and that 'the linguistic expression of a belief is an assertion' (2004, 284). As we saw, however, the analysis he explicitly defends is a different one. And if the argument of this paper is correct, the two are in fact inconsistent with one another.

The belief-expression analysis can be formulated as a first approximation as follows:[9]

> [BE] To assert that P is to utter a sentence that means that P and thereby express the belief that P.

This is the [BE] analysis of assertion, with 'B' for 'belief' and 'E' for expression. It is formulated at the same level of generality as Williamson's analysis in order to avoid getting embroiled in the controversies concerning how an analysis of this kind should be developed in further detail (but see footnote 9 for a suggestion as to how this can be done). For the purposes of this paper, it needs to be developed only in one respect. As Williamson acknowledges, lies are assertions too, so belief cannot be a necessary condition of assertion. Belief is only a necessary condition of *sincere* assertion. In order to show that [BE] does not imply that belief is a necessary condition for assertion, more must be said about the meaning of 'express'.

In the speech act literature the term 'express' is commonly defined in such a way as to allow for someone to express a belief without having it (see Siebel 2003). Consider the following definition derived from Bach and Harnish (1979, 15): One expresses a belief if and only if one intends the hearer to take one's utterance as a reason for believing one has the belief. This definition accom-

[8] This is the claim that all the philosophers mentioned subscribe to. Their analyses differ, for instance, in that some claim there is more to assertion than just the linguistic expression of belief. For instance, Bach and Harnish write: 'In most cases the speaker not only expresses his own (putative) attitude towards the propositional content but also his intention that the hearer form a corresponding attitude.' (1979, 39) The main argument does not depend on such further issues.

[9] [BE] is a condensed version of the belief-expression analysis of assertion. The definition of 'express' presented below adds further detail to the analysis. It is also incomplete in that certain contextual conditions have to be satisfied in order for an uttering of a sentence that means that P to amount to expressing the belief that P. Roughly speaking, the utterance act is an act of expressing the belief that P if that belief is expressed in virtue of the fact that the sentence uttered means that P (Searle 1969, 44, argues that Grice's account fails in this respect; see the Speech Act Schema presented in Bach and Harnish 1979 for a way of giving more substance to the rough proposal made here). Finally, [BE] needs to be developed further. As it stands it does not, for instance, apply to sentences containing indexicals, as their meanings are not propositional. This can be accommodated by reformulating it in terms of the content of an assertion and the content of a sentence uttered in a particular context. I refrain from complicating [BE] further, however, because it is primarily supposed to bring across the basic idea underlying the traditional analysis of assertion. It is not supposed to be the ultimate version of it. After all, the overall point of the paper is that accepting the knowledge account of assertion as defined in the introduction is not a good reason for switching to a completely different kind of analysis of assertion. The arguments I provide in support of this claim pertain to the (dis)advantages of choosing for a certain kind of analysis, rather than a particular instance of that kind.

modates both lies and sincere assertions. Note that it needs to be qualified for familiar Gricean considerations. The qualification that needs to be added is that the hearer should take the utterance as a reason to believe one has the belief *in virtue of recognizing the speaker's intention.* In the terminology of Bach and Harnish (ibid., 39), the intention should be an R-intention ('intends' in the definition presented above should be replaced by 'R-intends'). The (illocutionary) point of assertion, then, is to give the hearer the impression that one has the belief one expresses by means of such a speech act. Given this improved definition of 'express', the [BE] analysis accommodates sincere assertions as well as lies.[10]

In contrast to [KR], the belief-expression analysis is a descriptive rather than a normative analysis. It does not mention a normative requirement or rule. Instead, it provides a set of descriptive necessary and sufficient conditions for assertion. In other words, [BE] opens what [KR] treated as a black box. It provides a descriptive characterization of assertions independent of the rules that apply to it. Hence, the former is more informative than the latter, at least in this respect. We now need to ask two questions. First, is it possible to derive the knowledge rule from [BE]? Second, in which respects, if any, does the derived rule differ from the one that Williamson has postulated?

## 4 The norm of sincerity

As Williamson acknowledges, assertions can be praised for being sincere (489). This is because assertion, just as many other speech acts, is governed by a norm of sincerity.[11] In combination with the definition of 'express' presented above, this norm can be used for deriving a knowledge rule from [BE]. Using Williams (2002) as a source of inspiration, the norm of sincerity, [NS], can be formulated as follows:

[NS] In situations of normal trust, one ought to be sincere.

According to Williams, situations or, as he puts it, 'circumstances of normal trust' include those of manifestly coincident self-interest, as well as those involving relations shaped by some degree of friendly acquaintance (ibid., 112 and 114). More generally, they are the circumstances that are presupposed by co-operative communication (ibid., 110). This is, or at least can be, a matter of mutual expectations (ibid., 114). There is more to it, however. Williams subscribes to a moralized conception of situations of normal trust (which is only natural, as [NS] is a moral norm). He claims that the murderer at the door has objectives because of which he does not 'deserve the truth' (ibid.). Furthermore, it may be 'fair' to deceive someone (ibid., 120). This implies that one does not

[10] This analysis of 'express' is the best one on offer, which is not to say that it is unproblematic (see Siebel 2003 for some criticisms).

[11] In the speech act literature sincerity is sometimes regarded as a felicity condition for the successful performance of a speech act (Bach and Harnish 1979, 39 and 56).

necessarily know that the conversational situation one is in is not one of normal trust. After all, how can someone deceive someone else if that person knows the other has little or no (normative) reason to be sincere?

In the context of expression analyses of speech acts, [NS] amounts to the obligation to express an attitude only if one has that attitude, the obligation being operative in situations of normal trust. Thus, the norm of sincerity as applied to assertion is:

> [$NS_{AB}$] In situations of normal trust, one must: express the belief that P only if one believes that P.

Together with the [BE] analysis, this norm implies that lying is wrong in many situations. The qualification 'in situations of normal trust' serves to allow for permissible lies. Imagine, for instance, a Nazi asking you whether there are Jews in your house. If you are in fact hiding Jews because you want to protect them from being deported, we deem it permissible to lie to the Nazi.[12]

Rather than admitting that the knowledge rule does not apply to permissible lies, Williamson would presumably say that the knowledge rule is sometimes overridden by the norm of sincerity. He points out that sometimes one 'knows that one does not know that P, but the urgency of the situation requires one to assert that P anyway' (508). He goes on to claim that such cases 'do not show that the knowledge rule is not the rule of assertion; they merely show that it can be overridden by other norms not specific to assertion' (ibid.). One of the examples he gives pertains to speaking a foreign language:

> [W]hen I am speaking a foreign language, the urgency of the situation may require me to speak ungrammatically, because it would take me too long to work out the correct grammatical form for what I want to say; it does not follow that my utterance satisfied the rules of grammar in that context. (508–509)

The idea is, then, that, even though you are required to speak ungrammatically, the rules of grammar still apply. So, the fact that a rule is overridden does not mean that it no longer applies. In the case of assertion this means that, even if one lies in a situation in which lying is permissible, there is still a sense in which one should know that which one asserts. I take this to be rather counterintuitive. It appears to be more natural to take the knowledge requirement to apply only to people who are (or should be) honest, the only possible relevant objection to dishonest people being that they are not sincere (supposing they should be).

[12] The points made about lies can be reformulated in terms of illocutionary point and perlocutionary effects. In order to account for the fact that lies are assertions too, the *illocutionary* point of assertion should be seen as giving the hearer the impression one has the belief expressed. In order to account for the fact that lying is often wrong, a norm should be invoked that condemns the intended *perlocutionary* effect of lying, which is (usually) to deceive the person(s) to whom the assertion is directed. Since deceiving someone is not always wrong, that norm, the norm of sincerity, should be formulated in such a way that it only applies in situations of normal trust. Thus, *permissible* lies are taken into account at the level of perlocutionary effects, whereas lies per se are taken into account at the level of illocutionary point.

A perhaps more substantial criticism surfaces once we realize that combining [KR] with the norm of sincerity [NS] implies that the natural criticism to make to someone who lies in a situation in which this is not permissible is that he does not know that which he asserts even though he should. After all, the obligation involved in the norm of sincerity is the obligation to express an attitude only if one has that attitude. And if [KR] is correct, the attitude expressed in assertion is knowledge (note that Williamson regards knowledge as a mental state). Now, Williamson takes the normativity involved in [KR] to be non-moral (490–491).[13] And this is as it should be, because there are no moral grounds for criticizing someone for not knowing that which he asserts. The moral criticism of a liar is that he does not believe it. The problem is, however, that, once [KR] is combined with the generic norm of sincerity, the moral criticism of a liar can also be formulated in terms of knowledge. But merely failing to know what one asserts is not lying, whereas not believing it is. In response, one might want to say that all this only shows is that the norm of sincerity should be formulated in terms of belief rather than knowledge. This is rather unattractive, however. It means that the norm of sincerity that applies to assertion has to be postulated as a norm specific to assertion rather than being derived from a general norm of sincerity that applies equally to assertion and, for instance, promising.

The norm of sincerity [$NS_{AB}$] can be used for deriving a knowledge requirement from [BE]. As indicated in the introduction, another premise we need is a premise concerning belief, [$R_{BK}$]:

[$R_{BK}$] One must: believe that P only if one knows that P.

On Williamson's view, knowledge is necessarily a normative requirement on belief (2000, 255–256). So, this move does not raise any new problems. The derivation is as follows:

[BE] To assert that P is to utter a sentence that means that P and thereby express the belief that P.

[$NS_{AB}$] In situations of normal trust, one must: express the belief that P only if one believes that P.

∴ [$R_{AB}$*] In situations of normal trust, one must: assert that P only if one believes that P.

[$R_{BK}$] One must: believe that P only if one knows that P.

∴ [$R_{AK}$*] In situations of normal trust, one must: assert that P only if one knows that P.

Together, [BE] and [NS] imply a qualified belief rule concerning assertion, [$R_{AB}$*]. Combining this with the premise that belief normatively requires

[13] This implies that it is not open to Williamson to incorporate the qualification 'In situations of normal trust' in the knowledge rule, as this would turn the knowledge rule into a moral norm.

knowledge, [$R_{BK}$], a qualified knowledge rule follows, [$R_{AK}$*]. The upshot is that it is indeed possible to derive a knowledge rule from [BE] after all. According to the resulting account, assertion requires sincerity as well as knowledge only in situations in which lying is immoral.

The derived knowledge rule [$R_{AK}$*] differs from Williamson's knowledge rule in that it is made relative to situations of normal trust. This means that the rule does not apply to all assertions, but only to some. Thus, the knowledge rule is not a constitutive rule of assertion, not even in the relatively weak sense circumscribed in Sect. 2.[14] The availability of the derivation presented in this section poses the following challenge to Williamson: Why postulate two knowledge rules—one governing belief, the other governing assertion—rather than only one—the one concerning belief? After all, a knowledge rule concerning assertion can be derived from the knowledge rule concerning belief. I only need to postulate the latter and I get the former basically for free. Given that Williamson will also have to appeal to a norm of sincerity in one way or another in order to account for our responses to lies, I incur fewer basic commitments than Williamson does. We are left wondering what Williamson's motivation is for proposing a new kind of analysis of assertion. The goal of his enterprise is, as we saw in Sect. 2, to see how far we can get by pursuing the hypothesis that assertion is governed by rules in the same way as games are. We have seen that the analogy with games breaks down. And we have seen that the traditional alternative gets us at least as far, if not further.[15]

## 5 Conclusion

Williamson believes that our practice of assertion is governed by a knowledge rule. On his view, the rule is general in that it presents knowledge as a normative requirement for all assertions. Furthermore, he claims that the rule governs assertion necessarily. This unqualified knowledge rule is put forward as the (only) constitutive rule of assertion, and is also claimed to be unique to that type of speech act. Almost all aspects of this view have been put into doubt.

[14] Wright (1992) acknowledges the fact that insincerity poses a problem for the claim that there is a constitutive rule of assertion (he has the truth rule in mind). Because of this, he writes about a constitutive rule of *sincere* assertion (he claims that asserting a proposition is claiming that it is true and that this norm is constitutive of the concepts of assertion and truth; before presenting this claim, he makes it clear that he is only talking about sincere (and literal) utterances). The thought is that, even though assertion per se is not necessarily governed by a rule such as the knowledge rule, sincere assertion is. I regard this move as rather ad hoc. Furthermore, it requires stretching the meaning of 'constitutive' to an extent that makes it rather implausible to say that on this view the rule is really constitutive of assertion.

[15] Williamson tells me that he pursued the analogy with games because it seemed wrong to him to regard the knowledge rule as a convention. After all, there is no symmetry between it and alternatives to it. On the account that I defend here, it is not a convention either. As it turns out, then, there is no need to invoke the notion of a constitutive rule in order to accommodate the necessity of the rule.

Most importantly, the status of the knowledge rule of assertion has turned out to be different from what Williamson takes it to be: it is not the constitutive rule of assertion, because it governs only some assertions rather than all.

Williamson has been interpreted as supporting the knowledge-rule analysis of assertion [KR]. This analysis, however, suffers from the problem that it cannot accommodate (permissible) lies in a natural way. It implausibly supports the idea of objecting to the liar that he does not know that which he asserts. Furthermore, [KR] is less informative than the traditional belief-expression analysis [BE]. It does not specify the conditions a speech act has to meet in order for the knowledge rule to apply to it. [BE] can accommodate the knowledge requirement in a natural way: a knowledge rule can be derived by appealing to a normative knowledge requirement on belief on the one hand, and to the norm of sincerity on the other.

Because the norm of sincerity needs to be qualified in order to be able to accommodate permissible lies, the knowledge rule that is derived is qualified as well. As a consequence not all assertions are governed by the knowledge rule. As the norm of sincerity is logically prior to the knowledge rule, a welcome consequence is that both sincerity and knowledge are required only in situations in which lying is immoral. As it turns out, then, the traditional analysis of assertion as the linguistic expression of belief, [BE], provides an excellent point of departure for defending the idea that assertion is indeed governed by a knowledge rule.

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