

**Western University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Robert J. Stainton**

---

November 1, 1996

## What Assertion Is Not

Robert J. Stainton, *Carleton University*



---

What Assertion Is Not

Author(s): Robert J. Stainton

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), pp. 57-73

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4320726>

Accessed: 24/02/2012 18:06

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## WHAT ASSERTION IS NOT

(Received in revised form 10 January 1995)

### INTRODUCTION: THREE CLAIMS<sup>1</sup>

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. Dummett believes that assertion should, instead, be viewed as a conventional action, on a par with promising, bringing down a verdict, or doubling in bridge. Call this Dummett's General Claim about assertion.

- (1) *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.

In what follows, I won't say much against Dummett's General Claim. The dispute between intention based approaches (e.g. Donnellan (1968), Davidson (1979, 1986), and Sperber and Wilson (1986)) and convention based approaches (e.g. Dummett (1973), MacKay (1968) and possibly Wittgenstein (1958)) needs to be decided; but it won't be decided here.

Dummett (1973) 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. Call this Dummett's Specific Claim about assertion.

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

I want to focus on Dummett's Specific Claim. My conclusion will be that it flies in the face of actual linguistic practice. Having argued against the Specific Claim, I will turn to a Weaker Claim which Dummett does not endorse, but could:

- (3) *The Weaker Claim:* There is some class of linguistic expressions E such that assertion just is the saying of some member of E under conventionally specified conditions.

#### SPELLING OUT DUMMETT'S SPECIFIC CLAIM

Here is Dummett himself, on assertion:

... 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: 311).

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:

- (4)  $\{x: x \text{ is an act of asserting}\} = \{y: y \text{ is the utterance of an assertoric sentence}\}$

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 (this paraphrase of ) Dummett's Specific Claim:

- (5) *Convention Based Analysis of Assertion*: A speaker S asserts that P iff:
- a. S utters an assertoric sentence whose sense is P
  - b. The set C of conventionally specified conditions for assertion obtain.

Notice that Dummett's account of assertion is an application of a general picture, one often applied to more widely studied conventional acts. Acts such as doubling in bridge, bringing down a verdict, or promising are thought by some philosophers – Austin (1962) may be an example – to be identical to the acts of saying 'double', 'guilty' and 'I promise' respectively – under conventionally specified circumstances.

The general picture is as follows:

- (6) Saying E in conventionally specified conditions C is identical to the bringing about of social fact F.

After saying an expression E under conventionally specified conditions C, certain social facts F obtain which didn't obtain before. (The speakers may, for example, acquire certain rights and obligations which she did not previously have.) If we ask how the speakers managed to institute these changes, it is answer enough to say that she pronounced the right words in the right circumstances.

Dummett's great insight is to apply this picture to assertion. It is true that Dummett does not enumerate the conventionally specified conditions C under which the saying of an assertoric sentence constitutes assertion. Nor is he clear about what social facts F are established by the saying of assertoric sentences. But, for the sake of argument, I will assume that these can reasonably be treated as details, to be filled in later.

Dummett does tell us what the class of expressions E is supposed to look like. He maintains that the appropriate E for assertion is the class of assertoric sentences. About this, I will argue, he is mistaken. Dummett's claim of identity between assertion and the saying of assertoric sentences, even hedged, simply does not hold.

First, however, a remark about exegetical accuracy. The interpretation I've presented of Dummett's writings is not, I think, implausible. Indeed, Donald Davidson (1979) reads Dummett in roughly the same way. He attributes to Dummett the view that, "an assertion is an indicative uttered under conditions specified by convention . . ." (Davidson 1979: 111) Nevertheless, I'm not completely confident that the view I've just presented is the one endorsed in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. It is a notoriously difficult book. Moreover, this specific account of assertion seems to have been abandoned in Dummett's more recent work.<sup>2</sup> But, regardless of whether this was his view in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, it is an interesting and initially plausible alternative to intention based accounts of assertion. And it's worth discussing in its own right.

#### AN OBJECTION TO DUMMETT'S ACCOUNT

Davidson (1979) rejects this proposal of Dummett's because, he argues, using an assertoric sentence in conventionally specified circumstances cannot be a *sufficient* condition for making an assertion. He writes:

Whatever is conventional about assertion can be put into words, or somehow made an explicit part of the sentence. Let us suppose that this is not now the case, so that Frege's assertion sign is not just the formal equivalent of the indicative mood, but a more complete expression of the conventional element in assertion. It is easy to see that merely speaking a sentence in the strengthened mood cannot be counted on to result in an assertion; every joker, storyteller, and actor will immediately take advantage of the strengthened mood to stimulate assertion (Davidson 1979: 113).

I agree: using an assertoric sentence, even in "conventionally specified conditions", cannot be sufficient. And, I would add, using an assertoric sentence in conventionally specified conditions is not a *necessary* condition for asserting either. I support this contention with evidence from actual linguistic practice. It happens that speakers often make assertions by uttering ordinary, unembedded words or phrases – expressions which are not part of any containing sentence. Such utterances are assertings. But they are not assertoric sentence utterings, because words and phrases are not assertoric sentences. A fortiori, they are not assertoric sentence utterings *under conventionally specified conditions*. (This restricted class is contained in the

class of assertoric sentence utterings, hence it can't contain anything which the class of assertoric sentences utterings doesn't contain.) Dummett's proposal is too restrictive.

One might say: it's self-evident that using an assertoric sentence isn't a necessary requirement for assertion; e.g., people use imperatives and interrogatives to assert all the time. But this isn't obvious to Dummett; or to me, for that matter. Dummett (1993: 209) rightly distinguishes between "what the speaker actually says and the point of his saying what he did". On the basis of this distinction, he is able to dismiss the apparently assertoric use of interrogatives and imperatives. Thus, to take an example from Davidson (1979: 110): of course it's true that a speaker, in producing the words 'Did you notice that Joan is wearing her purple hat again?' may intend to induce the belief that Joan is wearing her purple hat again; she may even successfully communicate this proposition by so speaking. But, Dummett (1993) maintains, Davidson is wrong to conclude that such a speaker may strictly and literally *assert* this proposition by saying these words. This conflates assertion with (mere) communication.

It seems to me, however, that the use of unembedded words and phrases is importantly different. I hope it will become clear that, in using unembedded words and phrases, speakers actually assert propositions; they do not merely communicate them.

Let us begin with several examples. Here are a number of situations where, I believe, phrases can be used in isolation to make an assertion.

- (7) {Two people are talking at a party. One points to a man near the door and says} John's father
- (8) {A student is receiving instruction in painting. The teacher looks at the current canvas and says} Nice work
- (9) {A boat speeds by. A spectator says} Very fast
- (10) {A letter arrives. The recipient looks at the envelope, and says} From Spain

Notice: in each case, the speaker apparently utters a phrase, not a sentence. That is to say, the speaker apparently produces an expression which appears as an intermediate constituent in simple sentences. Furthermore, unlike the use of imperatives and interrogatives in

communicating propositions, these are clearly cases of assertion: the speaker may lie, and not merely mislead, by using such words and phrases.

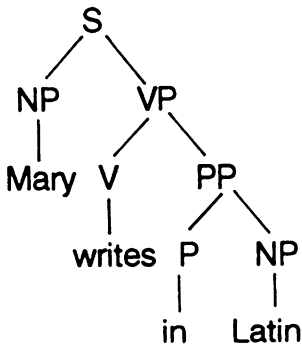
There is a natural and obvious reply to this objection. I call it 'the ellipsis defence'. It is tempting to suppose that what the speaker produces in each case is really an elliptical sentence; as Dummett might have it, an elliptical assertoric sentence. In fact, Dummett considers a case in which someone says 'The highest mountain in the world' in isolation (Dummett 1973: 298). He concedes that, given an appropriate context, one can utter these words and thereby make an assertion. (He explicitly calls this an instance of *saying that*.) 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: the speaker's action of asserting would still consist in his producing an (elliptical or 'abbreviated') assertoric sentence in conventionally specified conditions. As a matter of fact, however, what get produced are not elliptical assertoric sentences.<sup>3</sup> There are, I think, two rather different ways of understanding the 'ellipsis defence'. On the one hand, there is a syntactic story, familiar from traditional grammar and current linguistics.

- (11) *The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis*: When a speaker (appears to) utter a word or phrase in isolation, what they really produce are complete sentences – with subject, inflected verb, and so forth. However, some portion of the sentence is left unpronounced.

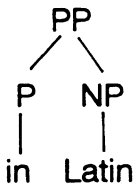
An example of syntactic ellipsis: imagine Steve produces the sound [in Latin] in response to the question, 'What language does Mary write in?' According to the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, the syntactic structure of the sentence Steve uttered is described by the tree in (12).<sup>4</sup> This syntactic structure has a subject (i.e. 'mary') and an inflected verb (i.e. 'writes'), like all ordinary sentences. Nevertheless, though the syntactic structure of Steve's utterance is (12), what he pronounces sounds just like the Prepositional Phrase, given in (13).



(12)



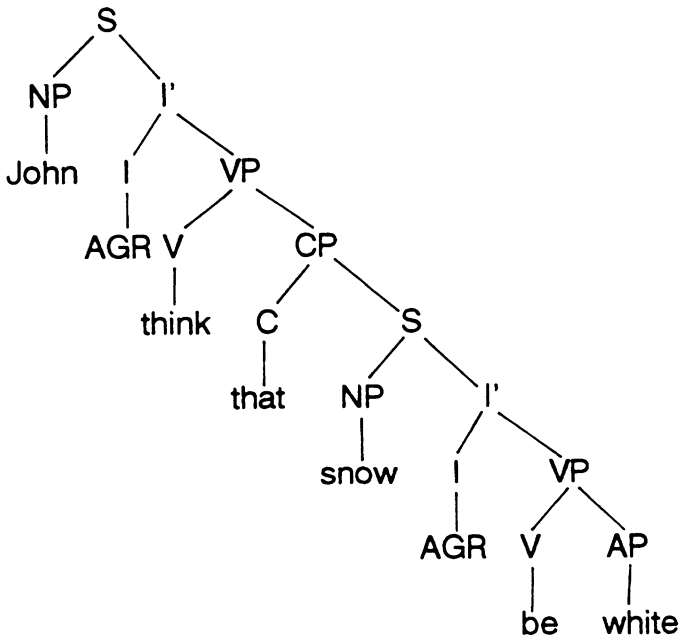
(13)



Another familiar example of syntactic ellipsis is *that*-deletion. When a speaker says (14), it's natural to suppose that the word 'that' is present in the syntactic structure, even though it hasn't been pronounced. So, the syntactic tree for (14) is (15):

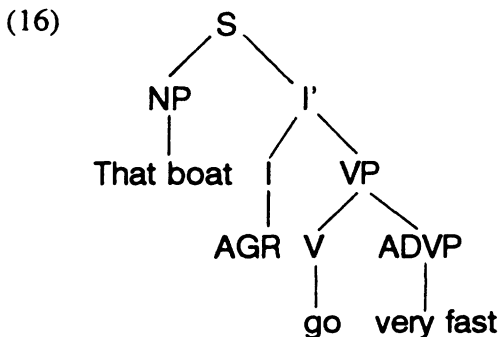
(14) John thinks snow is white

(15)



Notice: the word ‘that’ does appear in the syntactic structure, in the complementizer position. But it goes unpronounced. This is syntactic ellipsis.

This is an initially plausible picture of what goes on when speakers (appear to) produce words and phrases in isolation. Take example (9). The speaker (appears to) say ‘very fast’, on its own. But, according to the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, what the speaker really produces is a sentence, whose syntactic structure is given in (16).



If current linguistics is even close to right, however, then the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis has been shown false, on empirical grounds. The arguments are lengthy and complex, and they presuppose a fair amount of current syntax. So, I’m not going to present them here. Instead, let me simply give an example of the kind of evidence which weighs against thinking that when speakers (appear to) utter words and phrases in isolation, their utterances have fully sentential syntactic structures.

Certain constructions can acceptably appear only if there is a fully sentential syntactic structure in preceding discourse, able to license the construction in question. (I use ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ rather than ‘well formed’ and ‘ill-formed’ because I do not wish to take a stand on whether the unacceptability of discourses derives from ungrammaticality, or from some other source. For my purposes, the important fact is that there is *some* significant contrast.) These kinds of constructions provide a sort of diagnostic, to see whether there *is* a sentential syntactic structure in preceding discourse. VP Deletion provides a good example of this kind of test. Across human languages, VP Deletion – leaving a verb phrase unpronounced – is

grammatically possible only if a licensing sentential syntactic structure is present in prior discourse. For instance, if John says (17), then Mary can grammatically say (18), which is a VP Deletion construction:

(17) John: That boat is going very fast

(18) Mary: That car is too

Now consider situation (9) again. John says 'Very fast'. If the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis were correct, this utterance would have a sentential syntactic structure. Therefore, we should expect 'very fast' to license VP Deletion. Mary should be able to add, 'That car is too'. But in this context Mary can't say this, while observing the rules of English grammar.

(19) John: Very fast

Mary: \*That car is too

'Very fast', said in isolation, does not license VP Deletion. Which suggests that it does not have a sentential syntactic structure. Which means that it is not an elliptical sentence, in the syntactic sense.

Of course this isn't conclusive evidence. But there are many other such tests, all of which tell against the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. (See, for example, Barton (1989, 1990), Brame (1979), Dalrymple (1991), Morgan (1989), Napoli (1982), Stainton (1995a), and Yanofsky (1978).) If all this is right, the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis cannot save Dummett's Specific Claim, because the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis is, as a matter of fact, false.

There remains another variant of the 'ellipsis defence': semantic ellipsis.

- (20) *The Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis*: When speakers (appear to) utter words or phrases in isolation, what they produce are not syntactically sentences – the expressions uttered have no subject, verb, etc. But they are semantically sentences, in the sense that they express propositions.

The word 'fire' provides a good example. It is tempting to think that this expression, which is used in theatres and such, has a proposition

as its meaning: the same proposition expressed by (21).

(21) There is a fire

According to this approach to ellipsis, when someone yells ‘fire’ in a theatre, he doesn’t utter a sentence in the *syntactic sense*; i.e. something with a grammatical subject, an inflected verb, and so on in its syntactic tree. Syntactically speaking, ‘fire’ is a single word. But what this symbol expresses is a proposition – not (say) an individual concept.<sup>8</sup> ‘Fire’, one might say, is a one-word sentence. Other familiar “one-phrase sentences” are ‘Foul ball’ (as said by a baseball umpire), ‘Gavagai’ (as said by Quine’s natives), ‘Private property’, and so on.

Applying this to our examples, the hypothesis says that expressions like ‘From Spain’, ‘Very fast’, and ‘John’s father’ lead a dual life. Within sentences, they are ordinary phrases, which express properties, individual concepts, or what have you. On their own, however, they are one-phrase sentences, which expresses propositions.

If, when speakers (appear to) produce words and phrases in isolation they are really producing one-phrase assertoric sentences, then my objection is avoided. All acts of asserting are acts of uttering assertoric sentences – including semantically elliptical assertoric sentences – under conventionally specified conditions.

Unfortunately for Dummett, the semantic ellipsis hypothesis cannot be plausibly defended. What initially motivates the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is a pre-theoretical intuition: “Those are just one-word sentences”. Spelling out this intuition – in a way that distinguishes it from a mere re-statement of my objection – requires the introduction of a new class of expressions: things which can be used assertorically, are syntactically non-sentential, but which nevertheless are *not* ordinary words and phrases.<sup>6</sup> Introducing this new class is innocent and plausible enough – as long as said class remains fairly small. However – a minor point, but one worth making – if the semantic ellipsis hypothesis were true, there would be 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. I don’t know how to *prove* that the class of one-word and one-phrase sentences is very large.

But consider this rather lengthy list of examples. Any of them could be used to make an assertion.

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

This makes the semantic ellipsis hypothesis rather less appealing. It may be easy enough to suppose that there are a scattered few one-word and one-phrase sentences – just like idioms and such. Indeed, if there were just a few, one could give their meaning by providing a short list. But, if semantically elliptical sentences are to do the work demanded of them, there cannot be just a few of them: 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. To assign them their meaning, his theory must specify recursive, compositional rules which yield propositional meanings for each member of this enormous class. Rules which, it's worth stressing, apply to syntactically non-sentential expressions which nevertheless are not ordinary words and phrases. The resulting machinery is, therefore, additional to that required for assigning meanings to ordinary words, phrases, and syntactic sentences.

That the semantic ellipsis hypothesis requires its proponents to postulate many many extra expressions, and wholly unfamiliar compositional semantic rules for them, is not a good thing. But it is not ultimately damning. Much more damaging is the fact that, so far as I can see, the introduction of semantically elliptical sentences does no explanatory work. In order to use and construe syntactic sentences, the speaker/hearer needs 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, the speaker/hearer needs at least some pragmatic devices. So: we already know that these competences are present. However – and this is the crucial premise, argued for at length in Stainton (1994) – given *only* knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and a limited range of pragmatic devices (i.e. devices like those described in Sperber and Wilson (1986)), a speaker could make non-sentential assertions; and, given *only* knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and a limited range of pragmatic devices, a hearer could interpret utterances of ordinary words and phrases as assertions. In a nutshell: already attested competences are alone sufficient for using and construing ordinary words and phrases in isolation. Hence there is no reason to introduce, as an extra competence, knowledge of one-word and one-phrase sentences.

Take one example. It is true enough that an individual whose idiolect contained the one-word sentence 'red', assigned the propositional character THE SALIENT OBJECT IS RED, would be able to construe the sound [red] as, e.g., an assertion that a displayed paint sample was red. But, it seems clear, another individual whose idiolect *lacked* the one-word sentence 'red', but contained the ordinary word 'red', would *also* be able to understand the sound in this way – essentially because the meaning of the ordinary word 'red' could not be relevant, in Sperber and Wilson's (1986) sense. (Only propositions can be relevant, and the ordinary unembedded word 'red' does not express a proposition.) Hence, to interpret the speaker, the hearer would automatically search for a relevant proposition; one which the speaker could have meant. The proposition that the displayed paint sample is red is an obvious candidate.

Given this, should we say that typical English speakers know *both* the ordinary word 'red' and the one-word sentence 'red'? Not unless this gains us sufficient explanatory power. Which, it seems, it does not. One can explain the use of the sound [red] in isolation without introducing the one-word sentence. So one should not introduce it. Of course the same holds for purported one-word and one-phrase sentences generally: each requires positing extra knowledge without any corresponding extra explanatory power; which violates Occam's

Razor. (For an extended discussion of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, and its failings, see Stainton (1995b).)

One can avoid the needless and ad hoc postulation of extra expressions and extra semantic knowledge by agreeing that words and phrases – not elliptical sentences, but ordinary words and phrases with the *meanings* of ordinary words and phrases – are commonly used in speech. But this concession leads immediately to the conclusion that words and phrases can be used to make assertions. And this fact flies in the face of the specific analysis of assertion which Dummett presents in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*.

To sum up: to defend Dummett's analysis of assertion, it may be suggested that what speakers produce, and what one hears in conversation, are not ordinary words and phrases at all; rather, what one hears are elliptical assertoric sentences. It will then remain plausible that uttering an assertoric sentence under conventionally specified conditions is a necessary condition for asserting. This defence is unsatisfactory because, in its syntactic version, it can be shown to be false on empirical grounds. And, in its semantic version, it leads to an implausible, overly complex and ad hoc semantics for English (and other natural languages).

I therefore conclude that what speakers utter really *are* ordinary phrases, with both the structure of phrases and the meaning of phrases. And, in uttering ordinary words and phrases, speakers can and do make assertions. Hence Dummett's specific analysis is simply mistaken.

#### REMARKS ON THE WEAKER CLAIM

Until this point, I have focussed on Dummett's Specific Claim about assertion, presented in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. I also happen to disbelieve Dummett's General Claim. But I shall not present the arguments against it here. (Though note that its plausibility is sharply weakened in the absence of any specific account.) Instead, let me at least sketch the form of the argument against the Weaker Claim, repeated below:

- (3) *The Weaker Claim*: There is some class of linguistic

expressions E such that assertion just is the saying of some member of E under conventionally specified conditions.

As before, this claim can be understood in terms of the 'general picture' presented in (6).

- (6) *The General Picture*: Saying E in conventionally specified conditions C is identical to the bringing about of social fact F.

Applying this general picture to assertion requires finding the right class of expressions E whose utterance, under conventionally specified conditions, constitutes assertion. I argued above that E is not the class of assertoric sentences; that is too restrictive. Suppose Dummett therefore extends E, to include assertoric sentences and words and phrases. Would that work? I think not.

First, notice that speakers can use ill-formed expressions to make assertions. Someone – a foreigner, for instance – could easily enough assert that Mary seems to be sleeping by saying (23):

- (23) Mary seems sleeping

Or consider what I wrote above, when laying out the argument against Dummett. I repeatedly used the expressions 'assertings' and 'utterings'. But, so far as I know, these are not real English words at all; they're neologisms of my invention. Nevertheless, I used them to make assertions. A speaker could even mix words of different languages, say English and French. For instance, someone could utter (24) and thereby assert that the keys in question are his:

- (24) Those are mes clefs

Finally, one can easily enough use symbol systems other than natural languages to make assertions: codes, flags, logical notation, and so on. But such symbols lie outside any class E of *linguistic* expressions. And notice: unlike the use of imperatives and interrogatives, which Dummett discusses, none of these cases can be called non-literal communication. Each would be an actual case of *assertion*.



These kinds of examples have lead me to conclude that there is no class E of linguistic expressions such that uttering a member of E, under conventionally specified conditions, is necessary for making an assertion. The Weaker Claim is simply false.

In sum: Dummett's Specific Claim that assertion is the saying of assertoric sentences, under conventionally specified conditions, is falsified by the use of unembedded words and phrases to make assertions. Given this, Dummett might be tempted to retreat to the view that there is some class of expressions such that assertion is the saying of some member of this class, under conventionally specified conditions. However, the chances of finding such a class looks slim, because assertions can be made using an extremely wide range of symbols.

How, then, does Dummett's General Claim stand? Well, let me say this: I think I know why so many different symbols can be used to assert, given the right circumstances. The reason is that assertion really has a great deal to do with manifesting certain complex intentions. And speakers can manifest these sorts of complex intentions in a multitude of ways, given the right circumstances. On the other hand, I suspect Dummett is right to insist that there is *something* conventional about assertion. For, it seems to me, only conventions can distinguish strict and literal assertion from mere communication.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to a great number of people for discussion and comments on earlier drafts. However, I would be remiss if I did not single out Sylvain Bromberger, Andrew Brook, Noam Chomsky, Lenny Clapp, James Higginbotham, Tim Kenyon, Robert Stalnaker and Kate Talmage. Thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophical Studies*. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my wife, without whom not.

<sup>2</sup> 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). Notice, however, that if Dummett now takes assertion as a primitive, he faces a nagging problem: he may well *need* an adequate analysis of assertion if his larger philosophical projects are to succeed. For example: surely, if we can take assertion as primitive, we can equally well take *truth* as a primitive.

<sup>3</sup> Because my aim is to discuss Dummett, rather than ellipsis, I cannot adequately defend this claim here. Instead, I will only summarize some of the failings of the "ellipsis defence". I have argued against this "ellipsis defence" at length and in detail elsewhere. Stainton (1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I adopt the following notational conventions. Sound patterns are represented by English orthography in square brackets. Hence [in Latin] is a Phonetic Form. Syntactic Structures are represented by trees.

<sup>5</sup> To be more precise, semantically elliptical sentences would have to express propositional characters, in the sense of Kaplan (1977): functions from contexts to propositions. See also Stalnaker (1978). Ordinary words and phrases, on the other hand, would express functions from contexts to non-propositional entities: objects (e.g. 'John's father'), properties (e.g. 'red'), generalized quantifiers (e.g. 'some apples'), etc. I abstract away from this complication throughout.

<sup>6</sup> I've heard it said, purportedly in Dummett's defence, that a speaker may assert by using an ordinary word, with the meaning and form of an ordinary word, only when it is obvious what whole sentence would be used to make the same assertion. But, even if true, this is no defence. For it concedes that a speaker may assert by using an ordinary word. And this entails that using a sentence is not a necessary condition for assertion.

## REFERENCES

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barton, E. (1989). "Nonsentential Constituents and Theories of Phrase Structure". Paper delivered to the Views on Phrase Structure Conference, University of Florida. (Subsequently published in K. Leffel and D. Bouchard (eds.) (1991). *Views on Phrase Structure*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.)
- Barton, E. (1990). *Nonsentential Constituents*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Brame, M. K. (1979). "A Note on COMP S Grammar vs. Sentence Grammar", *Linguistic Analysis* 5, 383–386.
- Dalrymple, M. (1991). "Against Reconstruction in Ellipsis". CSLI Manuscript, Palo Alto, CA.
- Davidson, D. (1979). "Moods and Performances". Reprinted in Davidson (1984).
- Davidson, D. (1982). "Communication and Convention". Reprinted in Davidson (1984).
- Davidson, D. (1984). *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, D. (1986). "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs". In Ernest LePore (ed.) (1986). *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Donnellan, K. (1968). "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again". *Philosophical Review* 77, 203–215.
- Dummett, M. (1973). *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. London: Duckworth.
- Dummett, M. (1979). "What does the Appeal to Use Do for the Theory of Meaning?" Reprinted in A. W. Moore (ed.) (1993). *Meaning and Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dummett, M. (1981). *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy*. London: Duckworth.
- Dummett, M. (1989). "More about Thoughts". Reprinted in M. Dummett (1991). *Frege and Other Philosophers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Dummett, M. (1991). *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dummett, M. (1993). "Mood, Force, and Convention". In *The Seas of Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Evans, G. (1982). *The Varieties of Reference*. Edited by J. McDowell. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Frege, G. (1978). *Foundations of Arithmetic*. Translated by J. L. Austin. 2nd Revised Edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Grice, H. P. (1957). "Meaning". Reprinted in Grice (1989).
- Grice, H. P. (1975). "Logic and Conversation". Reprinted in Grice (1989).
- Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kaplan, D. (1977). "Demonstratives". In J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein (eds.) (1989) *Themes from Kaplan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacKay, A. F. (1968). "Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Referring", *Philosophical Review* 77, 197–202.
- Morgan, J. L. (1973). "Sentence Fragments and the Notion 'Sentence'". In B. B. Kachru and others (eds.) *Issues in Linguistics. Papers in Honor of Henry and Renée Kahane*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Morgan, J. L. (1989). "Sentence Fragments Revisited", *Chicago Linguistics Society: Papers from the Parasession on Language in Context* 25, 228–241.
- Napoli, D. J. (1982). "Initial Material Deletion in English", *Glossa* 16, 85–111.
- Quirk, R. et al. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stainton, R. J. (1993). *Non-Sentential Assertions*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.
- Stainton, R. J. (1994). "Using Non-Sentences: An Application of Relevance Theory", *Pragmatics & Cognition* 2, 269–284.
- Stainton, R. J. (1995a). "Remarks on Syntactic Ellipsis". Carleton University Manuscript, Ottawa, Canada.
- Stainton, R. J. (1995b). "Non-Sentential Assertions and Semantic Ellipsis", *Linguistics & Philosophy* 18, 281–296.
- Stalnaker, R. (1978). "Assertion". In P. Cole (ed.) *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 9*. New York: Academic Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (1974). "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts", *Philosophical Review* 73, 439–460.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Yanofsky, N. (1978). "NP Utterances", *Chicago Linguistics Society: Papers from the Regional Meeting* 14, 491–502.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*Carleton University*  
*Ottawa, Ontario*  
*Canada K1S 5B6*