

## Meaning and Assertibility: Some Reflections on Paolo Casalegno's 'The Problem of Non-conclusiveness'

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### 1.

It is a great and in many ways nostalgic pleasure to have this opportunity to reflect on Paolo's characteristically perceptive and trenchant paper (Casalegno 2002). For anyone unfamiliar with it, the paper's target is the verificationist idea, associated with the writings of Michael Dummett and others in the 1960s and 1970s, that a systematic theory of meaning for a natural language *L* might best be based on a core theory characterizing, for each of its indicative sentences, *S*, the *assertibility conditions* of *S* (in contrast to the more usual idea that such a theory should recursively characterize the *truth conditions* of each *S* of *L*).

Dummett, as is familiar, conceived this proposal as effecting a needed relocation, to within the theory of meaning, of the metaphysical disputes between realism and anti-realism about different regions of discourse, so that the focus of debate was to become: what is the proper form for an adequate theory of meaning for a contested region of discourse to take? – a focus that, it was intended, would render the metaphysical debates more tractable. This suggestion depended on thinking of truth-conditional semantics as already implicitly realist, and – accordingly – of truth as some form of non-epistemic correspondence property. The viability of an assertibility-conditional semantics for a given region of discourse would demonstrate, correspondingly, that the discourse was free of realist commitments. And the viability of such a semantics across the board would demonstrate the idleness of realist semantics – and hence realist metaphysics – everywhere.

Dummett's ideas provoked a very intense debate which, in my opinion, assertibilism lost. Almost everyone who was at least initially drawn to the assertibilist proposal – or anyway sympathized with Dummett's reasons for it – realized quite quickly that there were serious difficulties with it. No one, perhaps, had been more sympathetic to Dummett's ideas than the present author, but by 1983, I was myself

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already writing in terms that proposed doing recursive semantics for areas where one might be uncomfortable with realist truth in terms of an anti-realist construal of the notion of truth, rather than assertibility (see Wright 1993a). I will say more about my own motivations for abandoning Dummett's proposal below.

Anti-realist metaphysics does not provide the only motive, though, for an interest in assertibilism. Non truth-conditional metasemantic views, broadly conceived, have continued to draw distinguished support, for example in the writings in the 1990s and since of deflationists such as Paul Horwich and Hartry Field (see Field 1994 and Horwich 1998).<sup>1</sup> If these views cannot successfully be pursued in an assertibilist direction, that sharpens the issue of how else they might be successfully pursued. And, in any case, descendants of Dummett's programme remain at the forefront of recent and contemporary work in the philosophy of language. In particular, there is the heavily Dummett-influenced inferentialist semantic project pursued by Robert Brandom in *Making It Explicit* (Brandom 1994), and elsewhere. Brandom's approach differs from what one might think of as basic assertibilism only by, in effect, compounding the assertibilist account of statement meaning with the inclusion of a role for conditions of *commitment* as well as of what Brandom termed "entitlement" – in effect, by adding a play with Out-rules to the implicit Dummettian emphasis on In-rules. If simple assertibilism will not play out, it is *prima facie* a good question whether, or how, other non-truth-conditional types of view can do better, and in particular how problems afflicting a basic assertibilism could be addressed simply by augmenting an assertibilist account with additional commitment-related aspects of use, as in Brandom's development (for a detailed discussion, see Hale and Wright 2010). So there was certainly, in 2002, a live context of debate for Casalegno's argument to contribute to. And, I would suppose, there probably still is.

## 2.

'Assertibility-conditional semantics' may be taken to denote a project of a systematic compositional semantics that proceeds in terms of warranted assertibility as its central notion, in the sense that the meaning-specifying theorems of the theory are to consist in specifications of the conditions of warranted assertion of each meaningful sentence of the language under study. But the phrase may also be taken to denote merely the informal philosophical proposal that to know the meaning of a

<sup>1</sup> It is widely accepted, by its protagonists and critics alike, that deflationism will not marry with truth-conditional semantics – presumably on the ground that if truth is no substantial property of sentences, then the distinction between the conditions under which a sentence is true and others can be no substantial distinction either, and can therefore hardly amount to a meaning-determining distinction. It has often seemed to me that this line of thought could use some careful scrutiny.

declarative sentence is to know under what conditions its assertion is justified, and under what conditions it is not – a possible interpretation of one aspect of Wittgenstein's slogan that meaning is use. A philosopher might endorse the philosophical proposal without any commitment to the project of systematic semantic theory. Casalegno's argument is best interpreted as directed against the prospects of successful execution of the systematic project. I too, as remarked, had become pessimistic about that project by the early 1980s, for reasons that I will outline shortly. But there is a general misgiving, not often remarked on, which one might have even about the informal proposal. This is perhaps a good occasion on which to give it expression.

It is important to remember that assertibility in this philosophical context is intended as a purely epistemic notion: the assertibility conditions of a sentence are conditions under which its assertion would be epistemically justified, even if improper in some other way (on account for instance, of its having false implicatures in context, or being downright impolite, or irrelevant . . .). But an assertion is a voluntary public action. What could it be for any voluntary public action to be *epistemically* justified? There is actually no clear sense in which any voluntary act can be *purely* epistemically justified. The justification of any such act has to proceed in terms both of the beliefs of the agent *and* her goals (desires or values) and whether the act is justified will depend not just on the justification of the agent's relevant beliefs but on what her goals are (and, perhaps, on whether they are themselves justified). There is simply no clear, separable notion of the act's being justified as far as the agent's information is concerned, irrespective of her aims. A lie, a facetious remark, a joke and a piece of pure speculation may each take an assertoric form and may be justified by the utterer's information, modulo suitably varying goals. So the idea of purely epistemic justification of a particular token assertion, still less for a whole class of tokens of a particular assertion-type, actually makes no sense at all.

Why then does it seem to pass muster; why has so much discussion simply taken it in stride? The answer, the reader is probably impatient to say, is that it is tacitly taken for granted that we are concerned with cases where the goal of the assertor is simply to speak the literal truth. Fix the goals parameter for any action and it does then make sense to enquire whether it is epistemically justified – whether the subject's actual information, or evidence, is such as to justify that action relative to those particular goals. In the case of assertion, and the relevant notion of assertibility condition, we have in effect rigidified the goals parameter – fixed it to the specific invariant aim of truth-telling – and it does, consequently, make sense to ask whether the subject's information justifies the act.

That is indeed, no doubt, the tacit thinking behind the 'taking in stride'. But there is the rub. If this is how epistemic assertibility of a sentence is characterized, the characterization is made to rest upon a prior idea of the goal of *aiming at the*

*truth* by the use of that sentence, and hence, presumably, a conception of what it would be to succeed in that goal. That is as much as to say that the relevant notion of assertibility needs to be understood in terms that presuppose an understanding of what it would be for the sentence concerned to be true, i.e. of its truth condition. Not that there need be anything objectionable about that in general. But it is obviously hopeless in a context where a theorist is, philosophically, aiming to do without recourse to the notion of truth in the characterization of meaning and understanding.

One way of masking the force of this point, at least for a while, is by working under the aegis of the idea that the notion of warranted assertibility is simply a way of giving expression to the public face, as it were, of *warranted belief*: that the conditions under which an assertion of S would be *epistemically* justified are just the conditions under which one would be *justified in believing the proposition thereby expressed*. Dummett, it may be suggested, could as well have proposed – perhaps, in effect, was proposing – an account of meaning in terms of warranted belief: that the meaning of S is determined by the conditions under which it might justifiably be believed. This immediately finesses the worry about goals since – or so one would suppose – whether a given body of information justifies a particular belief is simply a matter of the content and quality of that information and involves no dependence on the goals of the thinker comparable to the kind of dependence on the goals of an asserting agent just reviewed. Actions are justified by information/goals pairings. Beliefs are justified by information alone.<sup>2</sup>

Now, however, there is a different trouble. Assertibilism, as originally intended, was a thesis not just about understanding but about the *metaphysical ground* of meaning: it was offered as an instance of the thesis that meaning is determined by use. There is, to be sure, a perfectly good notion of assertibility whereby a sentence is assertible just in case one is justified in believing what it says, the proposition it expresses. Indeed, this is hardly more than a platitude. But this cannot, it seems, be a fundamental characterization of the intended notion of assertibility from an assertibilist point of view – not if the content of a sentence is supposed not just to be reflected by but to be to be *determined* by its assertibility conditions. For, on this proposal, matters are explained the wrong way round; whether a sentence is assertible is determined by the believability of the proposition it expresses. To put the point another way: it is indeed a near-platitude that the assertibility conditions of a sentence, epistemically understood, co-vary with the believability conditions of its content, but we cannot combine the thesis that content is *determined* by assertibility conditions with the thesis that assertibility conditions are *determined*

<sup>2</sup> I am not endorsing this claim, baldly and boldly so made. For one thing is it is quite plausible that *being sufficient evidence for* is a stakes-sensitive relation. For another, I would not want so quickly to dismiss the suggestion – though I believe it to be wrong – that believability too is goal-sensitive, with truth merely its normal, approved goal.

by the believability conditions of contents. If it is the former that is intended, then we cannot just help ourselves to the latter when the challenge is to explain what, relevantly (epistemically) understood, the assertibility conditions of a sentence are.

3.

Those are concerns that afflict what I called the “informal proposal”. But when it comes to the prospects for systematic assertibility-conditional semantics, what most influenced me was the reflection that, when we help oneself to routine intuitive preconceptions about sentence meanings and assertibility, assertoric contents and their assertibility (believability) conditions do not line up in the right kind of way. A systematic theory of meaning aims to deliver theorems that plausibly account for the content of each meaningful indicative sentence of the language under study in terms of its semantic structure. If this end is to be discharged by a recursively axiomatizable semantics that delivers theorems specifying – somehow – the assertibility conditions of sentences, then the relation between assertoric contents and assertibility conditions has to be one–one: sentences whose contents differ should have different assertibility conditions and differences in assertibility conditions should correspond to differences in sentential content. Of course here the notion of difference in content is bound to be to some extent intuitive and pre-theoretic – (otherwise we shall have no test for the adequacy of such a theory). Proponents of Davidsonian-style truth-conditional theories notoriously had trouble with the analogue of the first of those conditions,<sup>3</sup> but assertibility-conditional theories are certain, it appears to have worse trouble, and with both directions – content to assertibility conditions and assertibility conditions to contents.

The first problem is illustrated by the fact that the members of sentence pairs like:

{I will live to ninety; I foresee that I will live to ninety}

and

{It will rain tomorrow; all the evidence is that it will rain tomorrow}

should have the same (epistemic) conditions of warranted assertion, yet they differ in meaning in the clear sense that their members embed differently, under e.g. negation and the conditional, even on an assertibility-conditional account of meaning. The assertibility conditions of, for example:

<sup>3</sup> That is, the condition that sentences whose contents differ should have different truth conditions. The *locus classicus* for this difficulty for Davidsonian semantics is Foster (1976).

If I (will) live to be ninety, I will change my will,  
and

If I foresee that I will live to ninety, I will change my will;  
or

If it will rain tomorrow, it is rational to pack your waterproofs,  
and

If all the evidence is that it will rain tomorrow, it is rational to pack your waterproofs,  
are intuitively quite different and so are the assertibility conditions of

I won't live to be ninety  
and

I won't (ever) foresee living to be ninety.

The upshot is not merely that that an assertibility-conditional semantics cannot be straightforwardly compositional. Notoriously, it proved a thorn in the flesh of Davidsonian truth-conditional semantics to devise straightforward compositional clauses for a great many natural language constructions. What is new here is the point that assertibilism seems certain to have problems with compositionality *even where the connectives of propositional logic are concerned*. For, as illustrated, the embedding of clauses with the same assertibility conditions within the scope of such connectives can effect a change in the assertibility conditions of the result.

That consideration is to the effect that the same assertibility conditions may be associated with sentences with different meanings, but the converse direction is problematic too. While a fixed propositional content can only have one truth condition – all circumstances in which it is true are alike in satisfying that condition – a single content can have many, radically different conditions of warranted assertion: many different finite, intuitively quite inequivalent bodies of information – even total bodies of information – can warrant acceptance of a given content. Casalegno's leading example makes the point nicely. That it rained last night can be assertible if my information includes last night's weather forecast, or my overhearing the sound of rain while lying awake, or my seeing the dampness of the streets from my window on wakening, or the fresh cool smell of the air on waking after the stuffiness of last evening, or – of course – my seemingly remembering having been out in the rain. These various information states have their warranting power only holistically: it depends what other information I have whether any of them contributes to a total state of information in which my assertion is justified. In general, whether conditions mandate the assertion of a statement depends not just on what the conditions are but on other aspects of the

assertor's information. The point, very familiarly, is that empirical evidence is generally a function of background theory – it is in general only in the context of a lot of background acceptances that one has a case for regarding any given condition P as grounds for accepting a sentence S. Perhaps there are exceptions – the kinds of grounds that Wittgenstein maybe had in mind by his term, 'criterion'. But most empirical sentences lack criteria in this sense (cf. Wright 1993b). For the most part, meanings can remain fixed even though assertibility conditions can vary. This obstructs a characterization of meaning in terms of assertibility conditions in much the way that the holism of belief and desire in the explanation of behaviour obstructs a simple dispositional construal of belief.

Another way of putting the point is to say that if the meaning of declarative sentences is conceived as determined by their assertibility conditions, then we have to conceive of assertibility conditions as including (warranted) acceptances and rejections of many other sentences. The generic form of a specification of assertibility conditions cannot be that of the simple one–one pairings involved in the recursively generated specification of truth conditions in accordance with the T-scheme:

(T) S is true if and only if P,

but will rather at best approximate to a range of instances of the rubric,

(A) If one's information includes all of  $B_1, \dots, B_n$ , then S is assertible if (and only if?) it also includes P,

where P is some further item of information. A systematic assertibility-conditional semantic theory for a language would need both to characterize in advance, for each of its declarative sentences S, the relevant class of instances of (A) which it was aiming to capture, and then to deliver them on the basis of a recursive axiomatization, based on semantic assignments to the language's sub-sentential primitives. I do not think anyone has ever had the slightest idea how that might be accomplished.

The explanation of that is unlikely to have been a want of ingenuity. To think of the meaning of a sentence as determined by a raft of associated assertibility conditions instantiating the rubric of (A) is to think of its meaning as a function of the sentential contents variously itemized under  $B_1, \dots, B_n$ . So sentential contents are implicitly being conceived as *interdetermined*, in the kind of fashion urged by the Quine of "Two Dogmas". That is a form of semantic holism. Assertibilism, by contrast, at least in Dummett's scheme, was to have been, like realist truth-conditional semantics as he conceived it, a molecular approach: sentential meanings were to be conceived as determined bottom-up, from the meanings assigned to their constituents. So Dummett's proposals contained a tension:

assertibility-conditional semantics is implicitly holistic; but Dummett was an opponent of holism, regarding it as indeed inconsistent with the possibility of any systematic theory of meaning at all.

The tension is *not* quite a flat contradiction. Sentence meanings can be holistically interdependent, and at the same time determined by sub-sentential semantic assignments and recursive semantic structure, if the semantic properties of the primitives are themselves somehow attuned to – if they somehow contain the seeds of – the holistic interdependencies at the sentential level. Exactly that – how to write sub-sentential semantic clauses that would somehow incorporate information sufficing to provide for a deductive basis for suitably many correct theorems of the (A)-form – is exactly what no-one knows how to do.

I have no proof that it cannot be done, but it seemed, and continues to seem, to me that at this stage of the argument, the dialectical balance is with a different thought: that for each S, it is a compositionally determined sentential meaning that in turn determines the large and seemingly disorganized range of relevant instances of (A). With that thought one abandons the idea that sentential meaning is fixed by assertibility conditions. Whether that should be taken as invigorating the idea that it is fixed instead by truth conditions, when conceived as by realism, is of course quite another question.

#### 4.

So, to Casalegno's discussion. The problem he discerns for assertibility-conditional semantics is that, for a wide class of empirical statements, there is no such thing as *conclusive* verification. But what does he understand conclusive verification to consist in, why is it a problem for assertibilism if it cannot be obtained, and how does the problem it raises relate to the foregoing?

An unwary reader might be confused by Casalegno's initial characterization:

We have verified S conclusively means that we have ruled out ever acquiring in the future new evidence which would entitle us to assert not-S. (75)<sup>4</sup>

This seems to involve equating one's actually having a conclusive verification – say, of the number of books on the shelf by a correctly executed count – with being in position to rule out that it might turn out that one does not, and that what one thought one had verified was false. That equation would hold only if possession of a conclusive verification was always somehow epistemically luminous and certain. But there is no reason why that should be so.

It soon becomes clear, though, that this initial characterization poorly reflects what Casalegno intends. A better stab would be to say that we have verified S

<sup>4</sup> Page references are to 'The Problem of Non-conclusiveness' (Casalegno 2002) unless otherwise stated.



conclusively just in case we have accumulated powerful evidence  $e$  for  $S$  of a kind that enables us to rule out *overriding* defeat of  $e$  – that is, to rule out the existence of further evidence which makes a stronger case for not- $S$  than  $e$  makes for  $S$ , but our possession of which is consistent with the good standing of  $e$  and its speaking for  $S$  to the extent that we take it to do. If  $e$  consists in our carefully counting the books on the shelf and getting the result 17, and we then learn from an unquestionable source that there are in fact not 17 books on the shelf, this *undermines*  $e$ , rather than overriding it – it compromises the good standing of  $e$ , rather than merely making a more powerful case to the contrary. We cannot say: “Well, a correct count yielded 17 but actually that’s wrong”. We have to say that there was somehow a miscount, that the evidence we acquired was flawed. So, we might suggest, conclusive verification consists in the possession of powerful evidence that cannot be overridden.

This, however, would be to overlook certain complexities in the notion of evidence-undermining. I may quite properly take  $e$  to be adequate evidence for  $S$  and then acquire information  $e'$  which, while not amounting to evidence that not- $S$ , or calling in question the good standing of  $e$ , does nevertheless raise a question about the evidential significance of  $e$ : about whether (in the resulting overall informational context)  $e$  should still be regarded as supporting  $S$  (or as doing so to the same extent.) In general, if we think of evidence as a propositional in character, evidence,  $e'$ , that defeats a case that  $e$  provides for  $S$  may override that case by providing more powerful evidence that not- $S$ ; or it may call into question the truth of  $e$ , or whether it should itself be believed. But it may also, without doing either of those things, cast doubt on the proposition that  $e$  provides good reason to accept  $S$ . Such, for example, will be the situation when an alternative possibility,  $S'$ , is presented which provides for no worse an explanation of  $e$  than  $S$ , and whose prior credibility matches that of  $S$ .<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> These contrasts are illustrated in the following passage: “Assume that the presence of puddles in the streets is an assertibility condition of the sentence ‘It has been raining’ for John. Imagine the following case: At a time  $t$  – in the early morning, let us say – John leaves the house and sees that there are puddles in the streets; since he believes that there are puddles in the streets, he feels entitled to assert ‘It has been raining’. At a later time  $t'$  he convinces himself, rightly or wrongly, that he has been the victim of an optical illusion: as a matter of fact, there were no puddles in the streets. At  $t'$ , therefore, he no longer believes that it has rained; on the contrary, he now believes that it has *not* rained (if it had rained, there *would* have been puddles in the streets); so at  $t'$  he withdraws the assertion made at  $t$ . Such a case is certainly possible. Does this show that the assertibility condition consisting in the presence of puddles in the streets is non-conclusive? No, it does not: for, in the case described, at time  $t'$  John is no longer disposed to admit that at time  $t$  the assertibility condition of the sentence he asserted was satisfied: the reason why at  $t'$  he withdraws his previous assertion is precisely this. To show that the presence of puddles in the streets is a non-conclusive assertibility condition, we need instead a case like the following. At time  $t$  John leaves the house and sees puddles in the streets; since he believes that there are puddles in the streets, he feels entitled to assert, ‘It has been raining’. At a later time  $t'$  he is told that, as a matter of fact, it has *not* been raining and that the puddles are there because during the

Call this form of undermining *neutralization*. Neutralizing information undermines one's evidence not by calling its veracity into question, or one's warrant to believe it, but by undermining its status as evidence. That this form of undermining need not amount to overriding is not easy to illustrate cleanly, but perhaps the following example will serve. Consider the statement, "There is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe", based on some astronomical evidence – perhaps an intriguing pattern of incoming radio-waves in a context of only very vague information concerning their possible area of origin. Such is the nature of open existentials, it is in such a case very hard to envisage powerful overriding evidence – at least if we restrict our attention to the kind of evidence that might be disclosed by science. What would it be to have independent scientific evidence, strong enough to dismiss such a pattern, that there is *no* intelligent life elsewhere in the universe? But it is readily foreseeable that we might acquire information to call in question the evidential significance of the radio-wave pattern: an equally good, or better, but less romantic explanation of the pattern exhibited by the waves.

No doubt these distinctions could benefit from a more thorough cartography than it would be appropriate to attempt here, but we may perhaps simplify for present purposes. First, conclusive verifiability, properly understood, *is* a feature of many ordinary empirical statements. It is a relational feature: a statement is conclusively verifiable *by a certain procedure*, subject to a *state of the world*. Ordinary observation and memory, as well as recursive procedures in mathematics, can be sources of conclusive verification. They are so only if and when conceived as providing *non-inferential* means of assessment. We need to conceive of such faculties, or methods, in such a way that when they work properly, or are properly applied, they reach right out to embrace the very facts concerned (if I may be excused a phrase of McDowellian resonance). Second, it is a confusion to think that it is an obstacle to the notion of conclusive verifiability that no procedure that we can apply is going to be *foolproof*. Having the means conclusively to verify certain propositions is one thing; being proof against mistake in the application of those means is something else. The latter is infallibility; conclusive verifiability is not infallible verifiability. A belief-forming method is a source of conclusive verification if it gives wrong results when and only when it has somehow been

night the streets have been washed. He believes what he is told and as a consequence he withdraws the assertion made at *t*. In this case John withdraws at *t'* the assertion made at *t*, but at *t'* he has not changed his mind as to the fact that at *t* the relevant assertibility condition was satisfied and that he was therefore entitled to make that assertion. This case shows that the assertibility condition consisting in the presence of puddles in the streets is indeed non-conclusive." (76)

The testimony, that it has not been raining, overrides the evidence of rain earlier provided by the puddles given the collateral information about the washing of the streets. If John had simply been given the latter, the case would plausibly be one where new evidence neutralized the force of the old, without overriding it or calling into question its good standing.

botched or has misfired. That it has not been botched or misfired, however, may be something that, in particular contexts is far from certain.

Some empirical propositions, then, in some contexts, do admit of conclusive verification. They are propositions that, in context, allow of confirmation by means which do not involve the acquisition of inferentially supportive reasons. The consideration that is exercising Casalegno is that very many ordinary empirical propositions are not in that case, but are such that the strongest evidence for them is inevitably inferential and defeasible. For such a proposition, *S*, any finite body of information that is supportive of it will admit in principle of augmentation by new information whose effect, without compromising either the truth or the credibility of any of the original items, will be to spoil the case for *S*, perhaps by providing more powerful evidence to the contrary (overriding), perhaps by providing reason to disbelieve that the previous information favours *S* (neutralizing). Such examples are legion. They include propositions concerning the past beyond living memory, propositions concerning matters outwith our range of observation, propositions involving unsurveyable generality, many negative existentials and many counterfactual conditionals.

5.

Why does Casalegno think this presents a problem for an assertibility-conditional account of meaning? He offers the following initial characterization of an assertibility condition (75–76):

(I) C is an assertibility condition for a thinker *X* and a sentence *S* at *t* iff *X* accepts:

(1) If *C* obtains at *t*, then *S* is assertible at *t*.

If *X* accepts (1), then, Casalegno says, the following is entailed:

(2) If *X* believes that *C* obtains at *t*, then *X* will believe that *S* is assertible at *t*.<sup>6</sup>

Casalegno says that to believe that *S* is assertible at *t* is, for one who understands *S*, to believe the proposition expressed by *S* – which we may write as: *S*. So assertibility conditions, characterized as in (I), have this property: if *C* is an assertibility condition for *X* and *S* at *t*, then if *X* believes that *C* obtains at *t*, *X* believes *S*.

Now, however, the following consequence is salient. Let *S* be any sentence for which we have no means of conclusive verification in the sense noted above: *any* conceivable body of information provides at best defeasible evidential support for *S* – support that may conceivably be overridden, or neutralized, by additional

<sup>6</sup> There are issues here about the range of ‘*C*’, which properly should comprise only states of information, and about closure for belief, which I will not pursue.

information. Let  $C^*$  be any putative assertibility condition for  $S$ . Then we can conceive of additional information  $D$ , such that  $\{C^* + D\}$  does not mandate assertion of  $S$ . But then any rational subject  $X$  who came into possession of such a body of information would, while believing that  $C^*$  obtained – as part of his information – not consider that  $S$  was assertible. So  $C^*$  is not an assertibility condition for  $S$  in the sense of (I). Since this will hold for any putative assertibility condition  $C$  for  $S$ , it follows that  $S$  does not *have* any assertibility conditions. Non-conclusiveness is inconsistent with *being* an assertibility condition, at least in so far as we buy into the initial characterization, (I), above.

Note, however, that the conclusion is very strong for Casalegno's purpose: the argument is not that the assertibility conditions of a sentence are unsuited to fix its meaning, but that sentences which admit of no conclusive verification do not so much as *have* any assertibility conditions, so that – *a fortiori* – it is not in those terms that semantic theory should proceed. This is apt to impress as more of a paradox than a result: for we began by characterizing the problematic class of sentences as those for which any conditions warranting their assertion are at best inconclusive. Casalegno's argument is that the notion of an inconclusive assertibility condition is, in effect, aporetic ("all but inconsistent", he likes to say). But surely there has to be *some* coherent notion of an inconclusive assertibility condition.

6.

If so, the initial characterization, (I), is wrong. But what should replace it? Casalegno suggests:

(II)  $C$  is an assertibility condition for a thinker  $X$  and a sentence  $S$  at  $t$  iff  $X$  accepts:

(1') If  $C$  obtains at  $t$ , *and circumstances are appropriate*, then  $S$  is assertible at  $t$ .

So knowing the meaning of  $S$  now becomes: knowing the assertibility conditions of  $S$  and knowing *when circumstances are appropriate for their application* – appropriate for responding to those conditions by regarding  $S$  as assertible.

This adjustment seems inevitable and brings us to the crux of Casalegno's argument. His principal point is that there is no properly accounting for the latter, italicized condition – that the 'defeaters' for a given assertibility condition, the cases where circumstances are *not* appropriate, are likely to compose an unprincipled and potentially infinite variety:

... how could I describe to you the situations in which the presence of puddles in the streets is indeed sufficient ground for the assertibility of "It has been raining"? A competent speaker who believes that there are puddles in the streets can nevertheless not feel entitled to assert, "It has been raining" for reasons which are infinite in number and infinitely varied in kind. The speaker may know that that the streets have

just been washed, or that water has been poured from an aeroplane, or that the police have employed water-cannons against a crowd of demonstrators, or that there is a leak in the aqueduct, etc., etc. Or perhaps the speaker has no idea at all as to why there are puddles in the streets, but he has spent the whole night at the window (because of a terrible toothache, say) and he has seen no rain. Or perhaps he has just been told by people, he trusts that it has not been raining. And so on ad infinitum. Not only is an exhaustive list of these possibilities inconceivable; they also appear to be too diverse to be characterisable by means of some common feature. But then it is also impossible to explicitly characterise the situations in which the presence of puddles in the streets suffices to make the sentence “It has been raining” assertible, for the situations in question are precisely those in which none of the possibilities we are talking about has occurred. (81)

Casalegno envisages just one avenue of possible solution to the problem: somehow or other, a constructive characterization of the relevant “appropriate circumstances” has to be given and he says he can envisage just one strategy for doing that (82). Where C is an assertibility condition in sense (II) for S, appropriate conditions may be said to obtain for the assertion of S on the basis of C just if:

(i) There is no plausible equally good or better explanation of C, compatible with ‘Not-S’,

and

(ii) There is no evidence in favour of the assertibility of ‘Not-S’ that is as strong or stronger than the evidence in favour of S provided by C.

How does this help? Well, expressed in terms of the distinctions I outlined in section 4, clause (i) amounts to the requirement that there be to hand no C-neutralizing information, and (ii) to the requirement that there be no C-overriding information. Casalegno’s thought on behalf of the assertibility theorist, is, presumably, that *if* we can legitimately presuppose an understanding of the negation of S, then we can in this way characterize at one fell swoop all the relevant defeaters of C, since they all fall into one of the two envisaged categories: neutralizers that suggest an alternative explanation of C, incompatible with S, or overrides of the evidential force of C.

Casalegno shows no inclination to contest this, but moves to consider instead the demands made by the presupposition, that the theorist may in this way invoke the negation of S in characterizing the assertibility conditions of S. And he takes this specifically to require that an understanding of the negation of a sentence, S, can be imparted by means independent of – so available to contribute to an explanation of – an understanding, conceived as consisting in a grasp of its assertibility conditions, of S itself.

Now, the idea that the assertibility conditions of a sentence and its negation – in effect, the conditions of correct assertion and denial of a sentence – have a measure of independence and need to be grasped separately, has been independently defended by writers such as Ian Rumfitt (Rumfitt 2000). It has some

pre-theoretical plausibility in any case – (“think again of ‘S’ and ‘S’ is assertible”, and Brandom’s example: “I will write a book on Hegel” and “I foresee I will write a book on Hegel”), but Casalegno sees it as committed to the idea that

negation has no single meaning and that the meaning of “not-S” has to be learnt anew for each sentence S. (83)

which strikes him as “obviously absurd”. And with that observation, his argument is essentially complete.

What exactly is the train of thought here? Casalegno has manoeuvred the assertibilist into a position when – for any S that admits of no conclusive verification – appeal needs to be made to the meaning of its negation in order to characterize S’s assertibility conditions. Why it should follow that “negation has no single meaning”? I think it likely that the train of thought is this. If we need to appeal to an understanding of the negation of S in order to characterize the meaning of S, then we have to think of the meaning of the negation as *prior* to that of S in the order of understanding – the order in which understanding may be acquired. So, when we ask how the meaning of the negation of S is to be learned, it appears to follow that it cannot be learned as a function of the meaning of S – since that is not yet known – and so must somehow be explained as it were non-compositionally. So then, since this goes for every S in the relevant class, there will be nothing to ground any common meaning for negation throughout its range of application.

Maybe Casalegno had something like that in mind and if he did, we might wonder whether an assertibilist might try to respond to the final move – to the conclusion that negation has no uniform meaning – by invoking a concept of negation that is first explained in application to those sentences that are conclusively decidable, which are outside the cope of Casalegno’s argument. But we can finesse that issue. The real critical edge of the argument comes not with the claim that assertibilism cannot assign any uniform meaning to negation, but with the charge that, for each S, it is committed – “absurdly” – to regarding the meaning of the negation of S as prior to that of S in the order of understanding and hence as requiring “to be learnt anew for each sentence S”.

If this is right, the assumption I want to flag is the assumption about order of understanding: that the conceptual materials that are configured in a theorem that specifies the meaning of a sentence have to be available to a thinker in advance of and independently of his possessing an understanding of that sentence. Casalegno unmistakably takes the assertibilist to be obligated to give some kind of *constructive* account of what “appropriate circumstances” are. The theorist simply has not done the job unless he has associated each meaningful declarative sentence not just with certain intuitively correct conditions C of warranted assertion but with – the needed extra – a specification of the circumstances under which it is appropriate to respond to C by regarding S as warrantably assertible. He has supplied the theorist

with a reply: in effect, that conditions are appropriate just in case there is no overriding or neutralizing information to hand. But then his objection is not that this is not an *accurate* answer – though perhaps there are further objections in that direction that he could have developed – but that understanding what would be overriding and neutralizing information for C now turns out, in effect, to *pre-suppose* that the meaning of S's negation is already fixed, prior to that of S. The absurdity is supposed to attend that presupposition.

Where does this assumption come from? It might be supposed that it comes with the *prima facie* legitimate idea that theories of meaning should *explain* meanings. But if that is to be a legitimate demand, the relevant sense of “explain” cannot be: explain *ab initio*. The most that can reasonably be asked is that a theory systematically characterize what is known by someone who (already) understands an expression, not that it supply the means to *induce* an understanding of it. One famous effect of this shift is that any proscription on the use of an expression in characterizing its own semantics disappears. This was a point that was repeatedly made in the 1970s on behalf of homophonic truth-conditional semantics. But once it is on the table in the present context, it is not clear what legitimate complaint Casalegno can have against, e.g. a characterization of “appropriateness conditions” in terms that freely presuppose an understanding of the *negation* of the targeted sentence, whether or not that can be explained independently. There need be no implication that an understanding of the negation must come first, any more than there is an implication, in homophonic truth-conditional semantic theory, that a grasp of the thought expressed on the right-hand side of a T-theorem must precede an understanding of the meaning of the sentence mentioned on the left.

Did Casalegno confuse the two projects: that of explaining (as it were from scratch) what are the assertibility conditions of a sentence and that of characterizing the content of what is known when someone knows them. Or did he suppose that any worthwhile theory of meaning would have to aspire to the first? Maybe, and maybe, if so, he was in distinguished company. For it is a confusion, or an aspiration, that is prefigured in what Dummett seems, at least sometimes, to have intended by the requirement that theories of meaning should be “full-blooded” rather than modest.<sup>7</sup> Maybe it is right that assertibility-conditional semantics has certain special problems when viewed as a template for a theory conceived in the “full-blooded” way, and when full-bloodedness is so interpreted,<sup>8</sup> but the prior question is whether we should want anything to do with the project of semantic theory so conceived.

<sup>7</sup> See for example some of Dummett's (1975) remarks around pp. 101–104.

<sup>8</sup> The classical discussion of these issues is of course McDowell (1987). Lest there be any confusion, the point I am making is not that Casalegno presupposes that theories of meaning



7.

So how, after all this, should we estimate Casalegno's Problem of Non-conclusiveness? I think we should distinguish the problem from his development of it. The problem is explicit in the passage quoted in section 6: it is the unforeseeability, and perhaps impossibility, of a systematic characterization of the assertibility conditions of any sentence which allows only of non-conclusive justification – a sentence for which, as I suggested, any justifying information allows of overriding or neutralization. Casalegno's *development* of the problem, via the argument that there is no properly characterizing what it is for a condition, given as justifying the assertion of a sentence *S*, to be neutralized or overridden save in terms that somehow presuppose an anterior understanding of the negation of *S* – something he suggests leads to the absurdity that each negative sentence has to be explained independently – rests, I have suggested, on the dubious assumption that a theory of meaning should specify meanings in a fashion that reflects a possible order of acquisition of an understanding of the expression targeted in any particular case. But the problem is genuine enough, even if that development of it is questionable. The exact relationship needs detailed articulation, which I will not attempt here, but it seems very plausible that the essential defeasibility of the assertibility conditions of the kinds of statement that Casalegno is concerned with – their ineliminable liability to overriding and neutralization – is all of a piece with the holism of empirical justification that I cited earlier as influential in my own disenchantment with assertibilism. And that there is no specifying, once and for all, the entire range of conditions under which a given circumstance justifies the assertion of *S* is anyway a consequence of that holism.

8.

I conclude on a more personal note. I remarked at the beginning that the realism debates had moved past Dummett's simple assertibilist brand of semantic verificationism long before Casalegno's article was published in 2002, but that a dialectical context was provided for his discussion by the, then and now, ongoing

should be full-blooded but more: that he presupposes a certain, dubious interpretation of what that involves. My own impression is that, notwithstanding one or two enigmatic formulations, Dummett's considered conception of a full-blooded theory of meaning was that of a theory that is charged to explain the knowledge possessed (putatively) by speakers not in the sense of providing a route into sharing that knowledge – into acquiring the concepts that inform it – but in the sense of characterizing what it is to have it. It is the deficiency of modest (especially, homophonic) theories in the latter respect that was his target. One could agree with Dummett about that without thereby committing to any conception of a theory of meaning that would be subject to the kind of constraint that Casalegno's criticism tacitly presupposes – the notion that the conceptual apparatus deployed in characterizing a sentence's meaning should be graspable in advance of an understanding of that sentence.



deflationary proposals about meaning and content and by Brandom's inferentialism. When one reads, or re-reads his paper, it is clear that none of that seems to have mattered very much to Paolo. No mention is made either of the realism debates and the way they had developed since the 1970s or of other non truth-conditional approaches to semantics that were in the wind. The main body of the article is written as though the year was 1972 and the debates were configured as then. It is true that there are a couple of brief footnoted references to later work, but their impact on the course of the main discussion is at most minimal. In truth, the paper might seem to belong to a different period in the subject.

I think I know the explanation of this. I met Paolo only twice, though on one occasion – at a European Summer School in Florence in 2003 – we had several conversations and corresponded for a time afterwards. My recollection is of an intense and sparkling analytical intellect, combined with great shyness, a disproportionate modesty, but also a certain indifference to the professional philosophical milieu and its personalities – indeed, a kind of philosophical *amateurism*, in a good sense of that term. He did not care to engage the positions of particular contemporaries as such, merely because that was what was 'going down'; especially not the heroes of his time, where he feared engagement might be taken as presumptuous. His interest was simply in the ideas themselves, in pure philosophical possibility. It was thus of little importance to him how the debates were actually progressing, who had changed his/her mind, or whether a significant philosopher could be shown to be wrong about something. Rather, 'verificationism', in the form of assertibilism, was simply an important thought about meaning and understanding whose difficulties, he believed, were underappreciated. That was enough. It did not really matter to him who supported the thought, or when, or how the discussion of it had proceeded in the literature. If these tendencies led him to be, in a certain sense, 'unscholarly', they were undoubtedly a great part of his charm. I would like to have known him better. His early death deprived analytical philosophy in Continental Europe of one of its most gifted practitioners.

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