

# *Indicative mood, assertoric force and relevance\**

MARK JARY

---

## **Abstract**

This paper considers the relation between assertoric force and the indicative mood in the light of Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory. It is argued that use of the indicative mood results in assertoric force if the proposition expressed is presented as relevant to an individual in its own right. The extent to which the indicative can be thought of as a natural-language equivalent of Frege's assertion sign is also discussed.

## **1 Introduction**

'Assertion' is a term used quite freely in linguistics to denote a basic speech act or speech-act category with two key characteristics: it commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed and it has the function of informing the hearer of that proposition (note that there is a third feature implicit in these: an asserted proposition is one which is explicitly communicated). The issue I want to address in this paper is how that speech act is related to linguistic form. Some authors, notably Dummett (1981; 1993), have claimed that the indicative mood, when used in a main clause, marks assertion, while others have seen the relationship between indicative mood and assertion as more problematic, with the fact that the use of a main-clause indicative does not necessarily result in assertoric force even leading some to deny that the two are in any way linked (Davidson 1979/2001; Recanati 1987). Contrary to these authors, I take the view that assertoric force and indicative mood are indeed related. Unlike Dummett, however, I do not claim that the indicative is itself a sign of assertion. Rather, I aim to show how the information it encodes can either result in assertoric commitment or not, depending on contextual considerations. I will also discuss the extent to which the indicative can be thought of as a natural-language equivalent to Frege's assertion sign.

---

\*I would like to thank Robyn Carston for her help with this. The paper has also benefited from the comments of members of the audience at UCL Phonetics and Linguistics Department's PhD Day, and at the 2004 Joint SPP and ESPP Conference in Barcelona.

## 2 Interpreting the indicative mood

In order to explain the different possible interpretations of the indicative mood, we need to answer three questions:

- Q1: What are the conditions under which use of the indicative mood results in assertion?
- Q2: What are the conditions under which use of the indicative mood does not result in assertion?
- Q3: What contribution to interpretation does the indicative mood make in each of these cases?

Our aim will be for the answer to question 3 to be the same regardless of whether or not the force of the utterance is assertoric. Moreover, we want it to be the same regardless of whether the indicative is embedded or not. Thus we want to give a unified account of the contribution made by all instances of the indicative – embedded or not, assertoric or not. So, we want to explain why (1) has the characteristics of an assertion while B’s response in (3) does not; why (2), as a contribution to a discussion of CS Lewis’s Narnia books, does not commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed;<sup>1</sup> how the subordinate clause in A’s comment in (3) could convey assertoric force despite its being embedded (contrast this with (4), where the embedded indicative is not asserted). And in all of our explanations, we want the contribution made by the indicative mood to be the same.

- (1) The train leaves at 5:30
- (2) The children didn’t go through a broom-cupboard, they went through a wardrobe
- (3) A: I insist that Peter is innocent  
B: (ironically) Oh yeah. He’s innocent
- (4) Peter thinks Jane is innocent

We will show how the notion of relevance developed by Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995) can be used to develop an account of the indicative that meets these conditions. What we will suggest is that the indicative mood opens up the possibility of the proposition expressed by that clause serving as a premise in the

---

<sup>1</sup> You might want to argue that (2) is an assertion, albeit about the content of a cultural artefact rather than directly about the world. If that is the case, then consider the telling of a fiction for the first time: there is no commitment to truth but the indicative is the predominant mood.

derivation of the speaker's intended cognitive effects. In other words, a proposition expressed by an indicative clause is potentially **relevant in its own right**, regardless of whether it is freestanding or embedded. As we will see, this potentiality distinguishes the indicative from the other moods.

In order to explain just what relevance in its own right is, we need first to examine the notion of relevance and highlight the features of this notion that are most pertinent to our present concerns. Sperber & Wilson define relevance first as a formal notion, then as a cognitive notion. Formally, a context is defined as a set of propositions. This is linked to a deductive device which performs inferences on the propositions contained in the context. A proposition added to a context is relevant in that context if it results contextual effects. These can be either implications, cancellations, strengthenings or weakenings, but to simplify matters we will consider only contextual implications here. So, if the new proposition, when processed by the deductive device in combination with contextual propositions, results in non-trivial implications,<sup>2</sup> then it is relevant in that context. The degree to which it is relevant depends on the number of contextual implications it has.

On this view of a context, a proposition is relevant *in its own right* if it plays a direct role in the derivation of contextual effects. If we consider a very simple context containing only the initial premise in (5), the addition of the second premise will have the effect of enabling the derivation of the conclusion 'The party will take off'. In this context, the second premise 'Peter is coming' is relevant in its own right. In (6) the second premise itself contains a proposition ('Mary's dress looks nice'). However, in deriving the conclusion, only the complex proposition in which this is embedded plays a direct role and is relevant in its own right. The embedded proposition, although playing a crucial role in the meaning of the whole, is not directly involved in the derivation of contextual effects. It is not, in other words, relevant in its own right.

- (5) If Peter comes, the party will take off  
Peter is coming  
 The party will take off
- (6) If Peter tells Mary that her dress looks nice, she'll dance with him  
Peter is telling Mary that her dress looks nice  
 Mary will dance with him

---

<sup>2</sup> 'A set of assumptions **P** *logically and non-trivially implies* an assumption Q if and only if, when **P** is the set of initial theses in a derivation involving only elimination rules, Q belongs to the set of final theses' (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 97)

In cognitive terms, a context is a set of assumptions about the world held by an individual. Contextual effects in this type of context can be termed cognitive effects. Such effects can be either beneficial or detrimental to the individual depending on whether or not they improve her representation of the world. Effects which have a beneficial effect are termed **positive cognitive effects**. Assumptions and stimuli which result in positive cognitive effects are not only relevant in a context but also **relevant to an individual** (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 263-265).

This type of cognitive context will consist in propositional forms which, by virtue of their unembedded format, will be treated by the cognitive system as true. Hence they are termed 'factual assumptions' (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 74-75). However, factual assumptions can have further propositional forms embedded within them. These will constitute, among other things, representations of fictions and of other people's views of the world. These will not necessarily be treated as true by the cognitive system.

Humans therefore have two basic types of context available to them. Those formed by a subset of the factual assumptions available to them we can call 'factual contexts'. Any other type of context available to an individual must be made up of propositional forms embedded in factual assumptions, and so we can call these 'embedded contexts'.

The proposal I am making is that when a proposition is expressed by a clause in the indicative mood it is marked as potentially relevant in either a factual context accessible to the hearer or in an embedded context accessible to him. Let's consider the examples we looked at earlier.

(1) is presented as relevant in a factual context. (2) is presented as relevant in the context of the hearer's assumptions about the content of CS Lewis's Narnia books, which is an embedded context. In (3) the embedded indicative in A's utterance is presented as relevant in a factual context accessible to the hearer, even though the proposition itself is embedded. Whereas in B's utterance, the same proposition is presented as relevant in a different context: i.e. an embedded context representing the world-view of someone B regards as a fool.

In those cases where the proposition is presented as relevant in a factual context, the speaker will be committed to the truth of the proposition she expresses. In strict, formal terms, there is no requirement that a set of propositions in a context be true and hence no requirement that relevant additions to that context be true. But when the context consists in a subset of assumptions that constitute an individual's representation of the world, the function of the propositional forms in that context (i.e. to contribute towards a representation of the world) requires that they be true. Consequently, for a new proposition to be relevant in that context, it must also be true, for if it is false then it is likely to lead to false contextual implications and thus result in negative cognitive effects by having a detrimental impact on the

individual's representation of the world. We can therefore account for the assertoric force of (1) and the embedded clause in A's utterance in (3) by noting that in both cases the proposition expressed has been presented as relevant in a context where only true propositions are likely to be relevant.

Consider now example (2). Although there is no commitment to truth in this case, there is commitment of a kind. The commitment is to consistency: when we claim that a proposition is relevant in *any* context, embedded or otherwise, we necessarily claim that its addition to that context will result in a consistent set of propositions. If the context is factual, then the consistency aims at truth-preservation. If it is not, then consistency in itself is enough. Even ironic utterances of indicative clauses, such as B's response in (3), carry this commitment to consistency. Indeed, this need for consistency is sometimes exploited in irony, as in (3)', where, by conjoining the disputed proposition with an absurd one, B indicates that the only context in which the first proposition could be relevant, and therefore consistent, is one in which the second is also consistent:

(3)' B: Oh yeah. He's innocent and I'm Mother Theresa's love child

Before we go on to look at how this account might be challenged, I should sum up the story so far. We can account for the assertoric force of utterances of indicative clauses in terms of relevance: assertoric force follows if a proposition expressed by an indicative clause is presented as relevant in a context made up of a subset of the hearer's factual assumptions. However, if it is presented as relevant in an embedded context then all that follows is a commitment to consistency with other members of that set. There is no commitment to truth, though this is not to say that such a context cannot aim at truth. This would be the case, for example, if it expressed a conjecture. The point is that the function of the indicative mood – to mark the proposition expressed as potentially relevant in its own right – is the same whether the context aims at truth preservation or not.

Let us now consider some data that might prove problematic for this account:

- (7) Peter doesn't believe that Santa Claus exists anymore
- (8) I'm glad that you're here
- (9) You've had your hair cut

In (7) the subordinate clause, though indicative, is clearly not presented as relevant in a context made up of assumptions representing Peter's view of the world. Rather, the speaker's intention is to indicate that this is not relevant in any accessible context. Factives such as (8) are generally acceptable only if the proposition

expressed by the indicative subordinate clause is already part of the common ground, and hence it cannot contribute directly to the relevance of the utterance.<sup>3</sup> Propositions such as those embedded in (7) and (8) contribute to the relevance of an utterance indirectly, not in their own right, even though they are expressed by a clause in the indicative mood.

Given that we have only said that the indicative mood marks a proposition as *potentially* relevant in its own right, we can account for these cases by saying that they are cases in which the potentiality is not fulfilled. However, the more recourse we make to this caveat, the weaker and less interesting our claim becomes. Our case is strengthened, though, by the fact that in cases such as (7) and (8), where the semantics of the *embedding* clause precludes the proposition expressed by the *embedded* clause from being relevant in its own right, languages with a subjunctive mood often use this here. Consider the Spanish translations (7)' and (8)':

(7)' Pedro ya no cree que Papá Noel exista (SUBJ)

(8)' Me alegro de que estés (SUBJ) aquí

Moreover, the Spanish subjunctive is also used to achieve backgrounding effects, which is another way a proposition can contribute to the relevance of an utterance indirectly, i.e. not in its own right (see Jary 2002 for detailed discussion).

As a possible counter-example to our claims, (9) is somewhat different: it is truth-committing, but we may balk at calling it an assertion due to its lack of informativeness. The hearer clearly knows he has had his hair cut and the speaker's comment to this effect cannot therefore have been intended to be relevant in its own right in the context of the hearer's factual assumptions. This apparent lack of an informative function means that intuitions about whether to class this as an assertion are not clear-cut. We can explain this by noting that (9) is intended to contribute to relevance in a context consisting of the hearer's representation of the speaker's world-view. It is, therefore, presented as relevant in its own right in an embedded context, not a factual context. That this context is a representation of the speaker's own world-view means that the speaker commits herself to the truth of the proposition expressed. What she doesn't do, however, is claim relevance in a factual context.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cases such as (8) have been analysed by a number of authors as involving a causal relationship between the proposition expressed by the subordinate clause and the emotional state in the matrix clause (Bosque 1990; Heim 1992; Quer 1998). In the terms of this paper, this would mean that the relevance of the utterance lies in the meaning of the complex causal proposition expressed by the whole sentence (i.e. 'I am happy because you are here' rather than by the individual propositions it expresses (i.e. 'I am happy' and 'You are here'))

The case for the indicative marking the proposition expressed as potentially relevant in its own right is strengthened by the fact that none of the other moods allows this possibility. That is to say, only indicatives are potentially relevant in their own right. It might be objected that imperatives, as cases of a non-indicative main clause, are a counter example to this. However, in an utterance such as (10)a, the speaker is not presenting the proposition (10)b as relevant in its own right, but rather the complex proposition (10)c (Carston 2002).

- (10) a. Eat your dinner!  
 b. That the hearer eat his dinner  
 c. The speaker wants [that the hearer eat his dinner]

In short, then, our claim that the indicative marks the proposition expressed as potentially relevant in its own right receives support from the fact that in cases where this potential is precluded by the semantics of an embedding clause we often find non-indicative translations in other languages, and by the fact that this potential is generally missing in non-indicatives.

We say ‘generally’ here because there are some examples where the subjunctive is used in situations where we would want to say that the proposition is relevant in its own right in an embedded context. Consider the following examples:

- (11) Hans sagte, daß Paul einen Brief geschrieben hat/habe (German)  
 Hans said that Paul a letter written has+IND/has+SUBJ  
 ‘Hans said that Paul has written a letter’
- (12) Hans glaubt, daß er krank ist/sei (German)  
 Hans thinks that he ill be+IND/be+SUBJ  
 ‘Hans thinks that he is ill’
- (13) Gianni crede che Mario ha/abbia mangiato troppo (Italian)  
 Gianni believes that Mario has+IND/has+SUBJ too.much  
 ‘Gianni thinks that Mario has eaten too much’

Taken from Giorgi & Pianesi (1997: 199 & fn.195), (11) to (13) are cases where the speaker would generally be taken to be presenting the proposition expressed by the object clause as relevant in the context of a representation of the beliefs of the subject of the embedding clause. However, in contrast to what is predicted by the current account, a subjunctive clause is sometimes found. What seems to be happening in these cases is that the subjunctive is chosen when the speaker wishes to distance herself from the proposition expressed from the subordinate clause. On our terms, what she is doing is indicating that she is not presenting the proposition expressed as relevant in an accessible factual context. Thus in these languages (and in these linguistic contexts) the subjunctive appears to function as a signal that there

is an accessible context in which the proposition expressed is not relevant in its own right.<sup>4</sup>

Having considered these possible counter examples, we can end this section by explicitly answering the three questions we asked at the start of this paper:

- A1: Use of the indicative mood results in assertoric commitment when the proposition expressed is presented as relevant in its own right in a factual context.
- A2: The indicative mood does not result in assertoric commitment when it is presented as relevant in its own right in an embedded context, or when the potential to be relevant in its own right is not fulfilled.
- A3: In each of these cases, the contribution made by the indicative mood is to signal that the proposition expressed is potentially relevant in its own right, though that this potentiality is not fulfilled can be linguistically indicated (as in (8) and (9)).

### 3 Frege's assertion sign

Much of the discussion in the philosophical literature on assertion (Davidson 1979/2001; Dummett 1981, 1993; Geach 1965; Green 1997, 2000; Hare 1989; Recanati 1987) concerns whether the mere expression of a proposition in a certain format can thereby result in that proposition being asserted. And most of this discussion stems from Frege's insistence that in a perspicuous logical symbolism, thoughts judged as true should be marked as such, hence his assertion sign '|-'. The consensus is that in natural language there is no linguistic sign or format whose use thereby results in assertoric commitment regardless of contextual considerations (though there is debate about whether such a sign could, in principle, exist; see in particular Hare (1989) and Green (1997)). The point that generally undermines any hope of having a fail-safe indicator of assertoric force is that assertion always depends on speaker intention, and thus any form specified for assertion could always be used without the appropriate intention, as in irony or acting. Geach, however, suggests that there might be a correlate to assertoric force in the realm of thoughts: 'possibly a thought is assertoric in character unless it loses this character by occurring only as an element in a more complicated thought' (1965: 457). This is essentially the view we have put forward here: an individual is committed to any

---

<sup>4</sup> Clearly, more data is needed here. In particular, we need to know whether speakers obligatorily opt for the subjunctive when they themselves do not subscribe to the attributed belief, or whether they only opt for the subjunctive when there is a chance that they may be mistakenly attributed this belief if they do not explicitly distance themselves from it.

assumption he holds in an unembedded form. As thoughts are the stuff from which intentions are made, there can be no intention involved in the analysis of this species of thought and, as such, being held in this format is a fail-safe indicator of something akin to assertion.

That cognitive systems have a use for something akin to Frege's assertion sign is perhaps no surprise when we consider Frege's reasons for wanting such a marker, despite his insistence that psychology has no place in logic. As shown by both Green (2002) and Smith (2000), for Frege logic was not only a subject of study in its own right, but also a tool for the discovery of truths and the systemisation of knowledge. Given such a purpose, a means for distinguishing truths becomes very useful. The aim of a cognitive system (i.e. to develop a true representation of the world) is similar to the purpose to which Frege wished to put his logic, and thus we should expect to find in such a system a means of distinguishing thoughts judged as true.

So, the reason it might seem appealing to think of the indicative mood as a natural language equivalent of Frege's assertion sign is that only propositions expressed by this form can be candidates for addition to a context consisting of assumptions with assertoric character. But this is not to say that it is assertoric character which defines propositions expressed by this mood. Rather, they are defined by their potential to act as premises in deductions along with other members of a particular context, either embedded or factual. In other words, what distinguishes propositions expressed by clauses in the indicative mood is their potential to be relevant in their own right – a potential which propositions expressed by other forms do not have.

## References

- Bosque, I. (1990). Las bases gramaticales de la alternancias modal. Repaso y balance. *Indicativo y subjuntivo*. I. Bosque. Madrid, Taurus Universitaria.
- Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. (1979/2001). Moods and performances. *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*. Oxford, OUP: 109-121.
- Dummett, M. (1981). *Frege: Philosophy of language*. London, Duckworth.
- Dummett, M. (1993). Mood, force and convention. *The seas of language*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Geach, P. (1965). "Assertion." *The Philosophical Review* 74: 449-465.
- Giorgi, A. and F. Pianesi (1997). *Tense and aspect: From semantics to morphosyntax*. Oxford, OUP.
- Green, M. S. (1997). "On the autonomy of linguistic meaning." 106: 217-243.
- Green, M. S. (2000). "Illocutionary force and semantic content." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23: 435-473.
- Green, M. S. (2002). "The inferential significance of Frege's assertion sign." *Facta Philosophica* 4(2).
- Hare, R. (1989). "Some subatomic particles of logic." *Mind* 98: 23-37.
- Heim, I. (1992). "Presupposition projection and the semantics of attitude verbs." *Journal of Semantics* 9: 183-221.

- Jary, M. (2002). "Mood in relevance theory: A re-analysis focusing on the Spanish subjunctive." *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 14.
- Quer, J. (1998). *Mood at the interface*. The Hague, Holland Academic Graphics.
- Recanati, F. (1987). *Meaning and force: The pragmatics of performative utterances*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Smith, N. J. (2000). "Frege's judgement stroke." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 78: 153-175.
- Sperber, D. and D. Wilson (1986/1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford, Blackwell.