

Commitment and implicit assertion

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From bounds to meaning

Positions and bounds

In understanding conversational dynamics,
a **scoreboard** model has proved helpful.

Just as in sports, which moves are legal
depends on the current state of play.

One aspect of the scoreboard is each participant's **position**:
the assertions and denials they've made.

Example:

It's only appropriate to say "You're mistaken, I didn't eat it"
to someone who's asserted that you did eat it.

Positions are also useful for **hypotheticals**;
we need to track assertions and denials under supposition as well.

Example:

A: “We should take a day trip to Kapiti Island;
surely we’ll see a kiwi there”

B: “No we wouldn’t; kiwis are nocturnal”

We treat some positions as impossible.

- We don't take them seriously,
- we reinterpret or challenge speakers who seem to adopt them,
- we build reductio arguments from them,
- etc.

They are **out of bounds**.

From bounds to meaning

Meaning from bounds

These bounds can ground a theory of meaning.

Example:

Asserting	'Melbourne is bigger than Canberra'
and	'Canberra is bigger than Wagga Wagga'
while denying	'Melbourne is bigger than Wagga Wagga' is out of bounds.

This is what it is for transitivity to be part of the meaning of 'bigger'.

Being out of bounds is like
being queen,
being impolite,
being (racially) white.

It is a socially constructed status:
what **really has** the status depends on
what we **take to have** it.

Connecting meaning to social kinds
in this way helps explain:

the gradualness of linguistic change, and
the impossibility of certain kinds of error.

From bounds to meaning

Consequence from bounds

The bounds can also ground a theory of
multiple-conclusion consequence.

Restall (2005, etc):

A bunch of premises Γ entails a bunch of conclusions Δ
iff the position that asserts the Γ s and denies the Δ s
is out of bounds.

Example:

Asserting 'Melbourne is bigger than Canberra'
and 'Canberra is bigger than Wagga Wagga'
while denying 'Melbourne is bigger than Wagga Wagga'
is out of bounds.

So 'M is bigger than C' and 'C is bigger than W' together
entail 'M is bigger than W'.

So the bounds can ground theories of meaning and consequence.

Can they do more?

Commitment

What is it?

What is it for someone to be **committed** to a claim?

Speakers are committed to what they assert,
but not **only** to what they assert.

They are also committed to the consequences of what they assert.

Restall (2010) gives a bounds-based account:
it's about what speakers **must not do**.

Restall on commitment:

A speaker is committed to something iff
denying that thing would be out of bounds for them.

Someone who asserts 'Melbourne is bigger than Canberra' and 'Canberra is bigger than Wagga Wagga' is committed to 'Melbourne is bigger than Wagga Wagga'.

If they denied it, they would be out of bounds.

So long as it's out of bounds to assert and deny the same thing,
speakers are committed to what they assert.

If Restall's right about consequence,
speakers are committed to the consequences
of their assertions as well.

This avoids demanding too much:

It's ok for us not to actually infer everything we're committed to,
and it's ok if we can't offer justification.

Implicit assertion

What is it?

Another notion worth paying attention to is **implicit assertion**.

A speaker has implicitly asserted something when they **may as well** have actually asserted it, when an assertion of it would be redundant.

Positions have **options** open to them:
assertions and denials that can be added
without going out of bounds.

An act is redundant when it does not change these options.

Implicit assertion:

A position implicitly asserts something iff actually asserting it wouldn't change which assertions and denials would take the position out of bounds.

Asserting it wouldn't close off anything
that isn't already closed off.

Example:

Suppose asserting 'A and B' is in bounds iff asserting both A and B is.

Then asserting 'A and B' suffices for implicitly asserting A.

Implicit assertion

What do assertions do?

So which options does an assertion rule out?

Whatever rules constitute the meanings in play will answer this.

A question remains: are commitment and implicit assertion
always the same?

Assertion suffices for commitment, so implicit assertion must as well.
What about the other direction?

Restall claims that commitment suffices for implicit assertion.
The idea is that assertion **does no more** than ruling out denial.

But this is not so.

Being barred from denying something
does not mean a speaker may as well have asserted it.

Asserting *A* can do more than just rule out denying *A*.

Implicit assertion

Commitment without implicit assertion

Claim:

In a sorites series, asserting that one member has the vague property in question rules out denying that the next one does.

If commitment suffices for implicit assertion,
we fall prey to the sorites paradox.

Asserting that the first thing has the property
would rule out denying that the last thing does.

Another example:

This sentence is false.

It is out of bounds to assert this sentence,
and out of bounds to deny it.

So every position is committed to it.
If that meant implicit assertion,
every position would be out of bounds.

- Restall's conception of **bounds** lets us link social kinds to linguistic meaning.
- It gives us a conception of commitment more plausible (because less demanding) than Brandom's.
- Commitment does not suffice for implicit assertion; paradoxes (vagueness and liar) show the difference.