Assertion, Retraction, and Communication
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1. Reductionism vs. anti-reductionism about retraction
For sure we sometimes take things back.
- Is that something we always do by way of some other familiar kind of speech act?
  - (Asserting the negation, asserting that the previous speech act was bad in some respect, apologizing for the past speech act, etc.)
- Or do we do it by way of a *sui generis* speech act of *retraction*, which is just a separate item on the catalog of speech acts?

2. Norms-first and effects-first ways of theorizing about speech acts
You haven't fully characterized a speech act until you've characterized:
- The (speaker-side) norms governing its use
- Its characteristic effects (on contexts and on particular audience members)

One approach: Characterize the speaker-side norms first, read off the effects.
- Effects are just the predictable effects of everybody recognizing that you've performed a speech act whose use is governed by those norms.

Another approach: Characterize the effects first, read off the speaker-side norms.
- Norm is just something like, *make sure it's a good idea to bring about those effects*.

Lewis in "Languages and Language" is almost a norms-firster.
- The norm governing assertions of "It's snowing in Baltimore" is to only do it if it's snowing in Baltimore. Then if you recognize I've done something governed by that norm, and you trust me to be doing my bit abiding by the norms, you'll update with *that it's snowing in Baltimore*.

There's an effects-first view that it's very natural to have right after you read "Assertion".
- Characteristic effect of assertions of "It's snowing in Baltimore" is to update the common ground with the proposition *that it's snowing in Baltimore*. Because it's got that effect, you should only assert "It's snowing in Baltimore" when it's a good idea to so update the CG. To a first approximation: only when it's snowing in Baltimore.

Task for anti-reductionists about retraction:
- Give a characterization of retraction in whatever terms you think we should characterize speech acts in, that:
  - Individuates it from all the other kinds of speech acts you might try to reduce it to
  - Delivers a kind of speech act it'd be useful to have available, and that's well suited to play the role actual retractions actually play

3. Concerns (ok, complaints) about norms-of-use-first stories
What norms of use are going to do is identify a production condition for a speech act.
- Characterizing the norm governing A is going to be a matter of identifying the right condition C such that the norm says that performing A is licensed when C is satisfied.
- Effects are going to be effects of recognizing speakers performed an action with a certain production condition.
- Effects that are easy to generate are all informational updates (of hearers' doxastic states, and downstream of conversational CG) with the proposition that the production condition is satisfied.
- If characterizations of assertion and retraction both have this form, looks like retractions will bring about effects that aren't interestingly different in kind from the effects of assertions.
- Both just in the business of adding more information.

Even if you don't think what fundamentally differentiates retractions from assertions is their effects, you should still want a story that tells, at the end of the day, a satisfying and adequate-to-the-phenomena story about effects.
- And it's hard to see how to do this when the derived effects of assertion and retraction look so much of a muchness.
- (For example, hard to see how you're going to get any effects that look like *taking back*.)

(Additional worry: Maybe they walk closer together than this – danger that for each retraction, there'll be an assertion with the same production condition.)
(Response: Assertion's governed by a *may* norm, retraction by a *must* norm.)
(Reply: Not so clear we should really think so – no corresponding asymmetry in ATC conversational obligations and permissions.)

There is a lot more to say about all this.

4. Sui generis retraction in an effects-first framework is easy
A straightforward story about what retraction does:
- The characteristic effect of retraction is to unwind the characteristic effect of the target speech act.
  - Taking the question off the stack
  - Taking the item off the to-do list
  - Unwinding the obligation

- Really clear that those reversing/unwinding effects are importantly different from the effects of asking more questions, issuing more commands, making more promises, etc.
  - And clear why a tool that had this kind of effect would be a useful one to have on hand.

What about assertion?
- A first thought:
  - The characteristic effect of asserting P is to impose an intersective update of the context set with P.
  - Retracting an assertion of P unwinds that intersective update, so that P is no longer presupposed.

- Something nice about this effect of retraction: It's clearly different from the effect of any assertion. (It's a CS-expanding effect, not a CS-contracting one.)

5. Getting leverage on stories about assertion by way of retraction
That first thought isn't right.
- For sure on the first natural reading – retraction adds back in the worlds eliminated by the intersective update – it's very bad.
- OK only in the case where no new information has been incorporated between assertion and retraction.
- Thinking about retraction provides a reason to look for a different story about the characteristic effect of assertion – if we want a story about assertion that plays nicely with an unwinding account of retraction, that'll put some pressure on the kind of account of assertion we give.

Another (familiar) motivation for moving away from first thought:
- The proposal-y nature of assertion.

Alternative:
- The characteristic effect of assertion is to *propose* an intersective update to the CS.
  - Add a widget to your representation of context that tracks proposals on the table.
  - Direct, characteristic effect of assertion is to update the context with a proposal.
  - Sometimes the proposal's accepted, in which case the update happens and the proposal comes off the table.
  - (See e.g. Farkas and Bruce 2010 for a story of this kind.)

- Unwinding story about retraction will then be a story about unwinding proposals.

- Assertion puts a proposal on the table.
  - In the case of assertion & denial, get a conversational crisis (a la Farkas and Bruce)
    - Proposals made by different parties to conversation can't all be implemented.
    - No happy place for the conversation to go.
  - Retraction takes a proposal off the table, opens up a consistent way forward for the conversation.

- That looks great for retracting assertions made but not yet accepted.
  - For example, retracting in the face of rejection/denial.

- Not so great for retracting assertions further conversationally downstream.
    - Proposal's no longer available for removal after it's been implemented.

Another alternative:
- The characteristic effect of assertion is to *endorse a constraint* on the context.
    - Add a widget to your representation of context that tracks which constraints have been endorsed by which participants
    - That'll determine a class of possible evolutions of the context compatible with all the constraints on the table, much like F&B's projected set
    - Important feature of this story: The constraints endorsed are enduring, forward-looking constraints.
    - Constrain not just the transition that happens immediately post-assertion, but also the state of the context going forward.

- This plays nicely with an unwinding account of retraction.
    - Captures the proposal-y nature of assertion by leaving some distance between the characteristic effect and the update.
    - Replicates F&B style story about rejection and crisis.
        - Parties to the conversation have endorsed incompatible constraints, no place for the conversation to go that respects all the constraints on the table.
    - But the constraint remains available for unwinding after it's been accepted.
        - That gives us a nice uniform thing for retraction to unwind
    - Open and complicated question how lifting the constraint will change the CG.

- But that's good: Creates some theoretically desirable distance between retracting an assertion of P and expanding the CS to include some P worlds.
    - Manipulative courtroom retractions
    - Retractions in the face of license-to-assert objections
    - Duel-avoidance retractions

Other goodies:
- Explains asymmetry of badness/disruptiveness/aggressiveness between two ways of asserting contrary to presupposition.
    - Always disruptive to assert P in a conversation that presupposes not-P.
        - But two reasons we might have been presupposing not-P:
            - Not-P is part of assumed background knowledge we came in to the conversation with
            - Somebody asserted not-P earlier
        - Asserting P is worse in the second case.
    - Explanation:
        - In the second case, asserting P creates a conversational crisis.
            - Got constraints on the table that can't both be accommodated.
        - In the first case, no crisis.
            - An annoying presupposition-revision task, but no barriers to revising as called for.

Opens the way to a kind of neat story about epistemic modals
- Captures what's compelling about dynamic test semantics without being so weird, and captures a thing Steve Yablo said in 2006 or thereabouts that's been bugging me ever since.
    - Dynamic test semantics:
    - CCP for *might P*
        - sends the CS through unchanged if it contains some P worlds,
        - blows it up (returns the empty CS) if the input CS doesn't contain any P worlds.
    - Of course testy semanticists don't think what actually happens is conversational crash.
        - What actually happens is the CS gets revised to include some P-worlds.
        - But the way this happens is by way of a pragmatic repair in response to conversational brinkmanship.
    - The net predicted update looks pretty good, but the mechanism looks a little weird and bank-shot-y.

- Alternative: *might P* endorses a constraint that the CS include some P worlds.
    - Nice feature of this:
        - Predicts & explains a phenomenon Steve Yablo drew attention to way back in the early days of the epistemic modals frenzy.
            - *Might P*s serve as a sort of inoculation against or barrier to later assertions of not-P.
        - Get that on a constraint-y story about epistemic *might*

- Something this story about *might*s and inclusion-constraints draws attention to, but is independently motivated once you see it:
    - On a constraint-y story, you're going to want a mechanism for constraint-lifting that doesn't require explicit retraction.
    - See this for *might*s with e.g. "your keys might be on the dresser and they might not" (thanks Matt Mandelkern)
        - You're probably not expecting, or hoping, or intending, that the constraint that the CS include both some *keys in the dresser* worlds and some *keys not in the dresser* worlds be satisfied for very long.
        - And when I look in the dresser and tell you whether they're there or not, you don't need to explicitly retract in order for the CS to incorporate my assertion. No crisis!
        - Same thing happens with goat updates – don't always have to explicitly retract the assertion of P when not-P ostentatiously manifests itself in our environment in order for the CG to update.