

# Assertions and Assessments

## CS4900 -- Technology and Transformation

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Fall 2004

The five categories of speech acts are assertions, assessments, requests, promises, and declarations. These notes focus on the first two categories.

### Assertions

Assertions are claims about what is observable in the world. They are capable of being witnessed and the witnesses can classify them as true or false. Logical propositions and statements of fact are common instances. Examples:

- The cup is on the table.
- Bob received an award for his work.
- Alice stood at the doorway.

These are all assertions because they can be either true or false and they can be witnessed by observers. Note that statements about your internal state, such as

- I am happy.
- I have a stomach ache.
- She crammed knowledge into her head.

are not assertions by this definition; while they may be true for the speaker, there is no way another observer can verify them.

A subtle but important aspect of an assertion is that it is accompanied by a commitment from the speaker to stand behind the truth of the claim and to take the consequences if it is not true. This underlying commitment is why assertions qualify as acts of speech.

## **Assessments**

Assessments are evaluations, judgments, or opinions about the world. They are claims made by the speaker, but unlike assertions they cannot be verified by witnesses. The second set of three statements listed above qualify as assessments by this definition.

Many people do not distinguish between assertions and assessments, a confusion that leads to misunderstandings and miscommunications. You have seen this all too often when someone claims their opinion is a fact; they will often persist with their claim even when you point out that it is only an opinion. A stereotypical example is:

"My candidate is the best qualified for president."

"That's just your opinion."

"No, it's a fact."

An example that might occur in a team is

"We should do so-and-so."

"Why?"

"Because I have more experience than you and I know from my long years of experience that it is so."

The speaker acts as if his experience is an observable fact that trumps anything the other person might say.

Like assertions, assessments are accompanied by commitments from the speaker. This time the commitment is to stand behind the assessment, to take responsibility for it, and to deal with consequences that may follow when people act on the assessment.

Assertions seek to establish what is so in the world. Assessments seek to prepare people for action.

## **Grounded or Ungrounded**

Some assessments are weak and unconvincing; others are strong and compelling. What makes the difference? We use the terms ungrounded and grounded to distinguish the two cases.

A grounded assessment is an assessment accompanied by a list of assertions that support the assessment. The purpose of grounding is to convince someone else to accept the assessment. Accepting the assessment is a prelude for action. One is unlikely to act on an assessment one does not accept.

Two conditions must be met for list of assertions to be sufficient to convince another to accept an assessment: the assertions must be in the same domain as the assessment (relevancy); and the assertions must satisfy criteria of acceptability imposed by the listener (sufficiency). Relevant assertions sufficient to meet the listener's standards are often characterized by the listener as concrete, direct, and specific. Here is an example where an assessment fails to persuade the listener because the assertions are not relevant:

"I think you should choose me as the team leader for the new software project."

"Why?"

"I am very smart. My IQ was measured at 160."

"Why else?"

"I work hard. I got A's on all homework assignments in college."

"Why else?"

"I am a leader. I was chosen as captain of my football team."

"Sorry."

And here is an example where the grounding is relevant but is not sufficient to convince the listener:

"I think you should choose me as the team leader for the new software project."

"Why?"

"I was team leader for three other projects, all of which delivered on time, within budget, and satisfied the customer."

"How big were the systems you built?"

"Each one was about 10,000 lines of code."

"Sorry, but the system we are trying to build will have over 1,000,000 lines of code. You do not have experience with such large systems."

A grounded assessment, therefore, requires considerable care on the part of the speaker, who must provide relevant assertions that meet the criteria of the listener. Here is an example of such a careful speaker:

"I'd like you to lead my new software team."

"Why me?"

"I have watched you lead three other teams in which your teams delivered on time, within budget, and satisfied the customer. I was impressed."

"How big is the system you want me to build?"

"It's over 1,000,000 lines of code."

"Sorry, I can't help you. I have experience only with systems up to 10,000 lines of code. Large systems are a different ball game and I don't have confidence I can deliver with my current level of experience."

To summarize: Assessments prepare for action. Grounded assessments are needed to move other people into action. The grounding is a set of assertions relevant to the claim that meet criteria set by the listener. Grounding an assessment, therefore, is an art of listening as well as speaking.

## **Grounding Assessments As a Practice**

Grounding assessments is a foundational competence of a professional and innovator. Without it, you will be unable to move people to action. A well-grounded assessment can be a powerful leadership move. The grounding supplies a basis for your listeners to feel that the situation demands action and that the action you call for has tolerable risk and acceptable return.

Even though you supply grounding for your assessment, some listeners will accept the assessment and others will not. To some, your assertions are sufficient; to others, not. The difference is that listeners do not share the same standards of acceptance. Therefore, in the face of disagreement, a good question to ask is, "What standards do I need to meet, and what new assertions do you require, before you will accept my assessment?"

People will not willingly follow your call for action when all you offer is an ungrounded assessment. You can sometimes invoke your authority or a threat to get their compliance, but compliance is not the same as acceptance. Moreover, if you are in the habit of offering mostly ungrounded assessments, you will gain a reputation for being "flaky", "insubstantial", "airy", "not to be taken seriously," etc. Such a reputation can be very hard to shake.

Here is a simple exercise for practicing making assertions, which are part of grounded assessments. It is called the detective exercise.

Put a set of objects on a table. Write down a description of what you see on the table. Ask other people in your group to do the same. When everyone is done, each person takes a turn and reads his statement; the others critique by saying which statements were assertions and which were assessments. When many people first try this, they discover that half their statements contain assessments. For example, you might say, "The pen was placed neatly near the pad," instead of "the pen was laid parallel to the edge of the pad about 2 inches away on the left." It takes real practice and discipline to write down only assertions about what you see on the table.

An exercise for practicing the speaking of grounded assessments is to speak a grounded assessment of a claim "I am competent at X." Speak for no more than 2 minutes to a group, and get their immediate feedback about whether they accept your claim. Many people are stunned to discover they cannot speak about themselves in ways that convince listeners they are competent.

## **Characterizations**

Characterizations are a special case of assessments that are worthy of mention because of insidious effects. A characterization is a claim that we make about another person (or ourselves) about some quality or aspect that we say is permanently part of their makeup.

For example, we might say that another person is smart, or agile, or flaky. We might say of ourselves, "I was never good at math, I can't learn the math needed for this project."

The problem with these characterizations is that we often don't limit them to a specific domain where we can ground them, and we often don't examine the grounding. We wind up treating other people and ourselves as permanently trapped with certain capabilities or shortcomings. We deny the other person, or ourselves, the chance to learn something new or to change. We think they are always the same, and that is that.

It is well documented that most people have a higher opinion of their own capabilities than others do. They have inflated self-characterizations. The Educational Testing Service, for example, once found that 70% of people taking SAT and GRE exams believed themselves to be better than average. These ungrounded, inflated characterizations can lead to failures when a project you thought you can do is beyond your actual capabilities. Rather than learning from

the experience by re-evaluating your characterization, you blame it on external factors. Thus you remain trapped in your characterization and cannot change.

Your unexamined self-characterizations can hold you back from learning new things, or growing in competence. If you say you are bad at math, and therefore you never try to do math, you may miss important opportunities. Similarly, your unexamined characterizations of other people can prejudice your interactions with them and interfere with their growth and learning.

So whenever you find yourself saying "So-and-so is this way," or "I am this way," ask about the grounding and the domain. In what domain is the person (or yourself) this way? Is that the same domain as I am now concerned with? What is the grounding for my assessment? Have I branded the person (or myself) with an opinion that cannot be substantiated?

As the team leader, you will sooner or later have to make assessments about the performance of people who report to you. Can you provide the grounding for your assessment to the satisfaction of the other person? Can they see why you are saying it? Have you avoided characterizations? If the person needs to learn something new, can you point him in the proper direction?

### **Permission to Make Assessments**

We discussed early that as leaders and innovators we need to make well grounded assessments to persuade others to act in the ways we recommend. There is, unfortunately, another side to this: in many domains we are all too often ready to act on other people's assessments even if they are ungrounded and irrelevant to our concerns and courses of action!

For example, someone you hardly know can walk up and say that your clothing is not appropriate for the setting you are in. You immediately react by becoming embarrassed and apologetic, and you may go buy some better clothes. This happens to many of us as an automatic reaction. We seldom ask whether the assessment given us is relevant or grounded. It does not occur to us that we could say (at least to ourselves) that we have not given permission for the other to make the assessment, and therefore we are not obliged to act on it.

The same can happen with an unsolicited positive assessment. The other person can say very nice things about you, and you

become ready to accept any request from them, even if the request is not relevant to anything you're currently committed to.

Thus a tendency to accept and act on unsolicited, ungrounded assessments, be they positive or negative, leaves us open to manipulation. Here again, the practice of noticing that an assessment has been made and looking for its relevance and grounding, can save you a lot of grief, distraction, and wasted effort.

Your power to declare that you have not given someone else permission to assess you must be exercised carefully. If you told your boss or commanding officer they do not have your permission to assess you, you are inviting an unpleasant punishment. The same is true of your spouse or your teachers. In many relationships, you have given prior consent to receiving assessments, and you need to respect this.

As a speaker, if you are not sure that permission is present to give assessments, it is wise to ask the other person. "I have an assessment I'd like to share; are you open?" If they say no, drop it with a simple thank-you.