

Extending Pagin's Gambit

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In chess, a gambit amounts to a series of moves in the opening of the game focused on baiting your opponent into taking one of your pieces; while they think they have progressed against you, your sacrifice actually places you in a more advantageous position. Peter Pagin plays a gambit contra commitment-based accounts (CBAs) of assertion; he presents an objection to CBAs at their face value to get a more precise understanding of assertion, though not without costs to how we approach speech act theory.

CBAs claim that assertion just means overtly taking up certain discursive commitments in relation to the assertion's propositional content p . The primary features CBAs expect of an assertion include (1) an utterance that p and (2) some pragmatic force the act of asserting brings to bear on p and/or the conversation. These accounts nicely capture how assertions help orient normative relationships between people and the world.

Pagin's argument against CBAs of assertion targets the second feature. It begins contra explicit performatives, speech acts that bring something about merely by their recitation. Simple examples of performatives include marriages and christenings: a priest brings a marriage into existence by simply uttering, "I now pronounce you married"; or a ship captain christens a new boat by smashing the bottle against the bow and uttering, "I name thee, 'The Oro Jackson.'" Pagin specifically invokes performatives which

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accomplish all pragmatic ends of a given speech act without ever actually uttering the act. He believes that “it will be possible to perform the act by means of an explicit performative, since performing the act by means of describing it does not change the act content, i.e. does not change what is *communicated*” (37, emphasis added). Using Robert Brandom’s theories as a paradigmatic CBA, Pagin’s reading of CBAs renders the following assertion and performative assertion as having the same pragmatic ends:

(1) I assert that the sky is blue.

(1-P) I hereby take responsibility for the justification of the sky’s being blue, and endorse all hearers of this utterance to defer to my authority for their justification of the sky’s being blue.

However, he argues that assertions like (1) clearly distinguish themselves from performative assertions like (1-P) on three accounts. First, (1-P) is logically compatible with a negated (1), which would be impossible if they were truly interchangeable (9). Second, he acknowledges that, if (1-P) were an assertion, we would think it indirect at best, yet no theories of indirect assertion properly handle performatives. Third, performatives do not integrate inferentially with other assertions (9). Performative assertions, therefore, do not fit basic assumptions about assertions, so any account supporting this false equivalence does not accurately describe assertion.

Pagin clearly raises strong concerns against CBAs, but it comes at the steep cost of losing an effective description of assertion’s pragmatic role, like sacrificing a rook to get closer to checkmate. Nevertheless, Pagin’s Gambit also reveals a more foundational concern that carries to CBAs of any speech act. I argue that performative variants of speech acts fail at replicating the act because performatives have a distinct pragmatic structure from other speech acts, thereby changing the act fundamentally when performed. Thus, performatives cannot truly represent any speech acts, and any account that affords the performance of speech acts—like CBAs—faces serious concerns.

In what follows, I consider a way in which CBA theorists might attempt to provisionally respond to Pagin’s Gambit by relegating it to concern only assertion. I then use this provisional response as a launching point for my argument, where I present a method of using changes in available conversational “moves” to highlight shifts in the underlying pragmatic structure. I employ this method on four elementary speech acts, reveal the exact fundamental differences between performatives and all

other speech acts, and thereby demonstrate the Gambit's application to theoretically every speech act. After showing some of the foundational differences between performatives and other speech acts, I end by verifying that none of the primary counterarguments to Pagin's Gambit survive this expansion beyond assertion.

1. A Virus and a Quarantine

The core of CBAs' failings lies in their attempt to describe assertion purely in terms of its social and pragmatic effects and how this allows for one to "assert" via performatives. However, Pagin demonstrates how these performative assertions fall short of what common accounts expect of assertions. Even so, certain CBAs face a more pressing version of Pagin's Gambit because of how they treat assertion's relation to other speech acts. Some CBA theorists have fallen for what Nuel Belnap coins "the declarative fallacy", assuming, like Brandom does, that "asserting is the fundamental speech act" (Belnap 1; Brandom 173). To Brandom and others, all speech acts are reducible to sayings or descriptions of normative space, meaning one could perform any speech act by asserting the current state of normative space and how that act would alter it (Brandom 172–173). They take care to specifically describe one as *asserting* changes in normative space, not *performing* the speech acts, but the next step should still be clear.

If Pagin's Gambit holds for assertion, then any CBA positing assertion as the single fundamental speech act risks contaminating every other speech act. Pagin has no issue with performative forms of "social" speech acts, but if any speech act reduces to standard assertions, then we can safely transform it into a performative assertion. With all speech acts reducible to assertions, CBAs' affording the transformation of assertions into performative assertions, and Pagin's Gambit evincing the objectionable nature of performative assertions, CBAs only face stronger reasons for opposition.

Rather than abandon the CBA project as a whole, one might then feel pressure to opt out of this somewhat monistic approach to speech act theory and into a pluralistic approach with multiple, equally fundamental speech acts. A prime candidate for such an account is Quill Kukla's and Mark Lance's, as presented in *Yo and Lo: The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*, because (i) it is already fully developed, internally consistent, and quite robust, and (ii) they explicitly build their theory out of the traditions set by Brandom, Sellars, and the like, making it a natural antidote to this threat of a "performance virus."

As Kukla and Lance describe, speech acts are inherently functional. For inputs, they read in normative standings, i.e., positions in normative space. The speech act then outputs changes to that normative space, often via accommodation. Furthermore, these inputs and outputs can be agent-neutral or agent-relative, meaning the acts either become indexed to a kind or individual or remain unindexed; inputs focus more on who has license to utter that specific act, while outputs focus on who the act targets. Kukla and Lance consequently derive fundamental speech acts from the combinations of input and output agent-neutrality and -relativity.

As relevant examples of Kukla's and Lance's theory of speech acts, consider their conceptualization of the pragmatic structure of assertions and performatives. They believe assertion has agent-neutral inputs and outputs, meaning one requires no particular normative standing to assert, and assertions are not indexed to anyone. An asserter is certainly more believable if they hold some relevant epistemic licensure, but generally, anyone can successfully assert anything. Additionally, the speaker might direct an assertion at or make it about someone, but neither of these are agent-relative in the sense Kukla and Lance mean, since assertions do not affect changes in another's normative standing.

Compare this to performatives, which Kukla and Lance describe as having agent-relative inputs and agent-neutral outputs. Performatives require a certain normative position to perform a certain act, but the act, once performed, generates democratic knowledge of shifts in normative space. For example, only particular ecclesiastical leaders can marry the Joneses, but once the priest utters, "I now pronounce you married," it becomes common knowledge that the Joneses are married (Kukla and Lance 87–94). Again, the act definitively involves the Joneses, but Kukla and Lance argue the results remain agent-neutral because the primary pragmatic force of that act consists in the priest altering normative space so that everyone must now treat the Joneses as married, including the Joneses themselves.

With this functional interpretation of speech acts, Kukla and Lance provide a more systematized way of understanding license and commitment and extend those ideas to all speech acts. A pluralist CBA like this might not resolve Pagin's Gambit, but it at least quarantines that objection back to assertion. By having multiple fundamental speech acts, each carrying its own distinct pragmatic structure, nothing reduces to assertion as some CBA theorists describe since one cannot simply assert changes to normative space without the proper license. So while Pagin could offer additional arguments for why the gambit applies to imperatives, observatives, and so on, he no longer gets the gamut of speech acts for free since none but assertion have proven victims of the gambit.

2. Extending Pagin's Gambit

In what follows, I offer additional arguments for why Pagin's Gambit holds for the entire gamut of speech acts. Though pluralistic CBAs like Kukla's and Lance's might reframe the gambit as applying only to assertion, I believe the issue lies not in anything unique to assertion, but in CBAs holistically. I demonstrate how CBAs do not offer sufficient conditions for adequate accounts of any speech act, as CBAs make no requirement on how one takes on the relevant commitments.

To begin, Mark Jary agrees with Pagin about assertions and performatives, but attempts to further clarify their pragmatic differences. He reasons that assertions directly perform some action—with that action relating to whatever account of assertion one prefers—whereas performative assertions merely show the completion of that action. Using Robert Stalnaker's language of a common ground, Jary posits that “for every assertion that *P*, it is a fact that *P* has been asserted, and this latter fact will be added to the common ground regardless of whether the assertion is accepted,” but the proposition itself must still *be accepted* (212). Conversely, performatives require no acceptance, as they directly add propositional content to the common ground via accommodation; the speaker describes their assertion of *p*, making it a fact that *p* was asserted and accepted. Thus, Jary believes one cannot assert with performatives because:

[A] felicitous assertion can fail to result in its content being added to the common ground . . . They require acceptance before they can become the basis for co-ordinated behavior. Explicit performatives require no such acceptance: they are unavoidable context changers. (212)

Jary is arguing that something about performatives changes available options for response or moves in the conversation. To demonstrate the Extended Gambit, I build on this idea by illustrating how any transformation from a standard speech act to its performative variant alters the available conversational moves. This change occurs because of a shift in the underlying pragmatic structure of the speech act. I accomplish all of this with the following four cases, and then generalize to all speech acts.

2.1 Imperatives

Let us temporarily put assertions aside and look at imperatives. Taking the Kuklan–Lancian approach, imperatives have relative inputs and relative outputs, meaning commands require specific normative standings to acceptably utter and generate targeted changes to normative space. Kukla

and Lance believe the specific changes to normative space that imperatives make are generating an obligation in the target and holding the target to that obligation (109–111). Thus, a CBA theorist would conclude the following two sentences are pragmatically equivalent:

(2) Take out the trash.

(2-P) I hereby create in you an obligation to see to it that the trash is taken out and call upon you to fulfill that obligation.

To both (2) and (2-P), one might reasonably respond, “No,” yet this response addresses different things when directed at the imperative versus the performative imperative. For (2), “No” rejects the command itself, refusing to answer the call to take out the trash. For (2-P), “No” rejects the act of instituting the command, as in “No, you do not create any such obligations or make any such call.” Rejecting performative imperatives, then, aims at the *performance*, not the *content*; i.e., the rejector does not refuse the call itself, but disputes whether the speaker has succeeded in showing their performance of that call.

Kukla and Lance’s description of the pragmatic structure of performatives provides grounding for these differences in conversational moves. Remember that they describe performatives as having agent-relative inputs and agent-neutral outputs, so moving from (2) to (2-P) warrants a change in the available responses because the speech act’s output is no longer agent-relative and indexed to a particular commandee. While only the commanded person can really reject *their* uptake of the relevant obligations, anyone can dispute the successful showing of the command.

Some might counter that another conversant could intercede on behalf of the target, making both (2) and (2-P) rejectable by anyone and collapsing the apparent difference in available responses. To refute this, consider the example of a stranger at a grocery store commanding a random young child,

(3) Grab me one of those oranges!

and the child’s parent responding,

(3’) You don’t know my child. You can’t tell them what to do.

Here, imperatives appear less agent-relative than Kukla and Lance portray, as the parent rejects the stranger’s command on behalf of their child, even though the stranger clearly directs the command solely at the child. However, I argue the parent merely furnishes reasons for the

child to reject the command by challenging the stranger's standing to command; regardless of what their parent says, the child can still choose to grab an orange or not.

With that said, a performed version of the situation would afford different conversational moves because of this change in output type.

(3-P): I hereby create in you an obligation to see to it that you bring me an orange and call upon you to fulfill that obligation.

(3-P'): You do not create any obligations for my child.

Though the parent could still respond with practically the same utterance as (3'), (3-P') phrases the rejection differently to highlight the variation in available moves. In (3-P'), the parent rejects the stranger's attempt at creating any obligations, denying not the command itself, but the action of creating the command. Performatives do not index the option to deny the showing of a command to an agent in the same way they do not index any other pragmatic effects to an agent.

Thus, moving from an imperative to a performative imperative preserves the significance of who commands, but alters the pragmatic force by changing *who* can respond and *how* they can respond. For imperatives, only the target can truly accept or reject the command. For performative imperatives, anyone can accept or reject the showing of a commanding, making them distinct speech acts.

2.2 Vocatives

In uttering a vocative, the speaker calls out to another person. Kukla and Lance specifically claim, "In calling out 'Hello, Eli!' I recognize the fact that that person there is Eli, and I do so by calling upon him to recognize that he has been properly recognized" (Kukla and Lance 138). Vocatives thereby require agent-relative standings and mete out agent-relative pragmatic force; it is significant that I am the one recognizing another's presence and calling out to her, and it would have particular pragmatic force for her to respond, rather than anyone else who happened to be in the area. With this conception of vocatives, we might reasonably formulate the following pair of sentences:

(4) Hey, Eli!

(4-P) I hereby recognize the presence of Eli and call upon him to respond in such a way that verifies he has been properly recognized.

I can distinguish the pragmatic force of my utterance of (4) from (4-P) in a like manner to that of imperatives: by analyzing what is and is not getting rejected. Eli's saying things like, "Go away," or "Do not talk to me though negative, would still count as appropriate responses and not true rejections of the vocative. These responses entail that my hail successfully individuated that particular target, and if the purpose of a vocative includes recognizing and calling for reciprocal recognition, then any response—whether positive or negative—still provides that reciprocal recognition. Similarly, one cannot even refuse the hail by ignoring it, since "to refuse a hail is already to recognize and acknowledge it as a hail in refusing it. We can refuse a hail only from someone whom we ultimately recognize as capable of addressing us" (Kukla and Lance 147). Thus, it is unclear how one might reject a vocative.

It is far less unclear how one might reject a performative vocative. Like with imperatives, one might easily reject the speaker's showing of their action. Should I hail Eli with (4-P), he (or really anyone) could reject it with something as simple as, "No, you don't." The change in pragmatic structure predicts this greater ease in rejecting. Like with imperatives, the movement from vocatives to performative vocatives sees a shift from agent-relative outputs to agent-neutral outputs. Vocatives target a particular person and attempt to elicit some kind of recognition from *that particular person*, so the only conversant with any normative responsibility to respond is *that particular person*. Alternatively, the performative vocative as a showing of a hail does not target any particular person, inciting no responsibility of acknowledgement in anybody and affording a response from anyone.

Once again, the distinction between a standard and performed speech act originates from the shift between agent-relative to agent-neutral outputs and the democratization of available responders and responses, like with imperatives.

2.3 Observatives

Up to this point, we have established a pattern of considering how performative and standard variants of a speech act afford different responses and hold unique pragmatic structures. Observatives give a bit more challenge on the latter of these two criteria because both observatives and performatives have the same pragmatic structure: agent-relative requirements of standing, and agent-neutral changes to normative space. Nevertheless, we find a distinction between the kind of agent-relative standing needed to utter these actions.

Kukla and Lance introduce the term *observative* “for any speech act a function of which is to *give expression* to a speaker’s *recognition* of . . . an empirical fact, object, or state of affairs in *observation*, and most paradigmatically in perception” (45–46). So an observative and performative observative pair might look something like the following:

(5) Lo, a rabbit!

(5-P) I hereby give expression to and commit myself to my own recognition of the presence of a rabbit.

They clarify that observatives require the specific agent-relative standing of perceptual entitlement; they expound, “My utterance, ‘Lo, a rabbit!’, may commit you to the belief that there is a rabbit present. You may even declare that the rabbit is present on the basis of this belief, without having managed to see it . . . But unless you see the bunny yourself, you are not entitled to utter ‘Lo, a rabbit!’” (48). Alternatively, they describe the agent-relativity of performatives as “[depending] on specificities of the normative position of their speaker, in the context of the social scenario in which the speech act occurs” (88). For the kinds of performatives Pagin, I, and others focus on, one does not need to occupy any special normative position, since showing the performance of an action requires nothing particularly unique. One must at least be able to take on normative commitments for oneself, and any competent speaker of language can do this. Thus, when someone utters a performative observative, the agent-relativity derives not from perceptual entitlement, but from the uniqueness of *that* speaker undertaking commitments for *herself*, regardless of whether she actually had the perceptual entitlement to ground those commitments.

This distinction between the sources of standing reflects on the available conversational moves in terms of when and who can utter what. As argued above, observatives cannot be meaningfully re-uttered by another speaker without that speaker also having the same experience to observe. However, anyone can take up any commitments with performatives, regardless of whether the relevant experience was actually experienced. So while I could not utter (5) just because Smith did, I can still utter (5-P). Furthermore, Smith could easily refute my utterance of (5) by arguing that I could not have seen the rabbit, but he cannot as easily dispute my utterance of (5-P), since I only need the ability to take up my own commitments to be justified in uttering (5-P). Thus, the two speech acts remain distinct from each other because of their literal meanings and pragmatic forces, akin to what we found with imperatives and vocatives.

2.4 Assertion

We finally return to assertion. We have already discussed both Pagin's and Jary's reasons for believing that assertions are distinct speech acts from performative assertions, so the conversation here will focus more on how the pattern we have so far established explains these reasons.

Jary's thesis that assertions and performatives differ in saying p and showing a saying of p gets captured in the shift from assertion's agent-neutral inputs to performative's agent-relative inputs. While standard assertions remain entirely independent of the speaker, moving to performative assertions causes the claims made to become unique to and dependent upon the speaker. One's responses to an assertion are responses to the truth or falsity of an independent proposition, while one's responses to a performative assertion must relate, at least in part, to the claim's dependence upon the speaker. Thus, assertions consist in sayings of p because they communicate that propositional content without any strings attached, so to speak, whereas performative assertions consist in showings of sayings because speakers exercise their license to take commitments upon themselves, indexing the propositional content of the standard assertion to themselves via those commitments.

This explanation of the difference between assertions and performative assertions also captures Pagin's arguments against equating them. First, Pagin would say (1) and

- (6) The sky is not blue.

are logically incompatible with one another, yet (1-P) and (6) maintain compatibility. That compatibility derives from (1-P) and (6) having entirely different standing requirements for utterance, leading them to have functionally different outputs. Though still both agent-neutral, (6) asserts a fact about the world and (1-P) incurs a fact about one's unique normative status; since their outputs are of different kinds, (1-P) and (6) remain logically compatible. Second, Pagin holds that, should (1-P) count as any kind of real assertion, we ought to understand it as an indirect assertion, but no theory of indirect assertions accounts for it. I add that performatives result in the showing of an action, so nothing about them is indirect. In fact, performative assertions intentionally attempt to succeed as the most direct form of assertion. Third, Pagin proves that performative assertions cannot inferentially cohere with standard assertions. I advance that assertions inferentially integrate because of how their collective agent-neutrality requires no indexing of the propositions and allows speakers to communicate brute propositional content. Thus, performatives' agent-relative inputs disrupt that uniformity; assertions

afford generalizability in inference in a way performatives would ruin by introducing indexed contents.

We therefore comprehend Pagin's and Jary's distinctions between assertions and performative assertions as signals for this more fundamental issue of a clear difference in their pragmatic structures. Pagin highlights the most visible shortcomings of performative assertions, and Jary gives us an explanation of their distinct pragmatic forces, but both arguments find root in this shift between the act's structuring.

2.5 Outcomes of this View

Purveyors of CBAs face Pagin's Gambit not just for assertion, but for any speech act, whether they opt for a monistic or pluralistic approach to fundamental speech acts. Should they prefer a monistic approach, they confront Pagin's Gambit against assertion and the possibility of all other acts reducing to assertion. Should they prefer a pluralistic approach, they encounter Pagin's Gambit in a more basic—yet wide-reaching—form, with a pattern that applies to all speech acts.

Though I did not consider all possible speech acts here, I hope to have covered enough to make clear that pattern: a CBA implies that one could perform the relevant speech act by merely showing the uptake of the relevant commitments, yet I thoroughly demonstrate these showings (i.e., the performatives) to function distinctly separate from their original speech act, holding a different pragmatic structure and affording different potential responses. Performatives only require one's ability to take up commitments for oneself and cause democratic changes in normative space, so a performance of any speech act will always either alter the kind of license one needs or elicit different kinds of changes to normative space.

As they now stand, CBAs might capture the inherent sociality and normativity of language, but they also make the basic error of facilitating the uptake of any commitments in any way. The argument presented here does not, then, just furnish reasons against CBAs. It also provides strong theoretical justification for accounts of speech acts maintaining sensitivity to uniqueness. If specific pragmatic effects find grounding in specific pragmatic structures, then accurate accounts of any speech act must include features that ensure those effects are uniquely produced by those structures.

3. Objections

As an extension of Pagin's objection to Brandomian accounts of assertion, one might worry the argument presented here faces all the same concerns Pagin's original objection does. Surely, if we can extend Pagin's Gambit to all speech acts, then so could counterarguments to Pagin's Gambit apply in each case. Despite these appearances, even the most promising counterarguments either fail in their own right or cannot hold up to the extended Gambit.

Some scholars believe that CBAs of assertion fall victim to Pagin's Gambit because their list of commitments is insufficient. Neri Marsili and Mitchell Green write that most CBAs do not actually make any comment on the truth of the proposition, focusing only on one's commitments. They then believe that they can resolve Pagin's Gambit by adding "the truth of p " to the list of things one commits oneself to when asserting that p , as this bypasses Pagin's concerns about logical compatibility and inference (Marsili and Green 14–15). Fernando Hiller similarly pushes that the real commitment one makes when asserting is trustworthiness concerning p 's truth (Rudy Hiller). However, we understand that the issue with performativization has nothing to do with the actual commitments being undertaken and everything to do with the shift in pragmatic form. Expanding the list of commitments one must undertake, no matter how precise the commitments or long the list, cannot save CBAs from Pagin's objection since the Gambit concerns the deeper pragmatic roots.

In a separate work, Marsili also critiques Pagin's Gambit by arguing that assertion actually is social, giving a formulation of it that passes Pagin's three tests and follows his definition of "social" (2). While this might work for a localized variation of the argument, it immediately falls apart when we extend the Gambit. Here, I diverge from Pagin a little, as I think that a speech act's status as social or not social does not weigh on the acceptability of its performance. Pagin defines sociality as both having some pragmatic significance and communicating that significance, but part of the communication of that significance involves a certain pragmatic structure (2). Since the movement from standard to performative variants of speech acts changes that pragmatic structure and how people respond, one clearly changes not just the way the act communicates its social significance but also what the utterance inherently communicates. It therefore does not matter whether a speech act is social or not. Performatives remain an entirely different speech act that cannot sufficiently replicate the pragmatic effects of any other speech act.

4. Conclusion

One cannot perform any speech act via an explicit performative that describes the pragmatic force of that speech act because performatives qua speech acts have a distinct pragmatic structure—and source for that structure—that is completely different from any other speech act. We see this by how all speech acts considered have very different sets of potential responses following their utterance than do the performative variants. Thus, Pagin's Gambit extends to CBAs of any speech act, not just assertion, since this kind of account allows for equivocation of the act and its performative variant.

This argument raises strong objections to all accounts of speech acts relying solely on the commitments one takes up. Though I do believe pragmatic-forward speech act theories like Kukla and Lance's accurately capture core features of language—especially organizing and altering normative space—the argument presented here discourages an approach resting solely on pragmatics. This argument also comes at the cost of invalidating otherwise-paradigmatic utterances of the form “I assert that *p*” (or “I command that *p*”, “I observe that *p*”, and so on); many philosophers of language use these to clearly describe what speech act the speaker intended, yet utterances of this form fall victim to the extended Gambit. Nevertheless, the advantage gained from the Gambit is a more principled reason to hold multi-faceted accounts that do not focus only on pragmatics. Perhaps we can preserve CBAs' explanatory power and paradigmatic utterance forms with an account that tempers these pragmatic-forward explanations with syntactic or semantic requirements.

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