

## Sincerely Saying What You Don't Believe Again

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### ABSTRACT

Cappelen and Lepore (2005) argue that “[s]peakers need not believe everything they sincerely say.” I argue that their latest (2006a) defence of this claim proposes a problematic principle that does not yield their surprising conclusion.

### I. Introduction

According to Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 202), “[s]peakers need not believe everything they sincerely say.” For instance:

If Justine bought the picture, and if Justine is French, and Jack utters the sentence ‘Justine bought the picture,’ there are contexts in which one would say something true by saying *that Jack said that a French woman bought the picture*, even though Jack doesn’t know that Justine is French. (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, 202, original italics)

In such a case, the speech act content of Jack’s utterance includes the proposition that a French woman bought the picture. According to Cappelen and Lepore, this is among what Jack “asserted, claimed, stated, etc.” (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, 199), even though Jack does not know – and need not even believe – that Justine is French. Indeed, if Jack is incredibly unworldly, he might not even *understand* what he supposedly sincerely says.<sup>1</sup>

This view is clearly controversial. Among other things, it is in tension with conceptions of assertion that emphasize speakers’ *responsibility* for what they assert, as well as with those according to which to assert is to express a belief (even if, as in insincere assertion, it is a belief you do not have).<sup>2</sup> Controversial claims

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<sup>1</sup> Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 3, fn. 3) are officially neutral as to whether the semantic content of a sentence (whose context-sensitive constituents have been saturated) is a proposition or truth conditions. I assume the same goes for speech act content. Talk of propositions should thus be understood as an expository convenience. (It is a question, however, whether replying to the problems raised below might require Cappelen and Lepore to abandon this neutrality.) In addition, I follow Cappelen and Lepore in drawing no distinctions among saying, asserting, stating, etc. (and no distinctions among the *reporting* of what is said, asserted, stated, etc.). This is controversial, but I am being concessive.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Brandom (1994) and Bach (2004), respectively. Cf. Cappelen and Lepore (2006b, 1033). The claim that speakers cannot sincerely say what they don’t believe

require defence. In what follows, I argue that Cappelen and Lepore fail to provide one. In particular, there is a large lacuna left by their most recent attempt to clarify their argument.

The problem has broader ramifications for Cappelen and Lepore's views. The claim that speakers can sincerely say what they do not believe is just one of an ensemble of claims that constitutes Cappelen and Lepore's 'speech act pluralism'. Others include that, in any utterance, a speaker asserts indefinitely many propositions, and that among these is always the *semantic* content of the utterance (cf. Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, chap. 13). Whatever the merits of these claims themselves, the lacuna identified here affects as well the parallel arguments Cappelen and Lepore offer for them. More generally, we are left without an understanding of Cappelen and Lepore's basis for assigning propositions to speech act content.

## II. *Two principles connecting reports and speech act content*

Cappelen and Lepore claim to arrive at their views by taking clear cases at face value:

We are naive about speech act content; we take our nontheoretic beliefs and intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, etc. at face value (unless given overwhelming reason to do otherwise) (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, 191).

In practice, this is supposed to involve judging the accuracy of indirect speech reports concerning the utterance at issue, as in the case of Jack's utterance above: roughly, if someone accurately reports that someone says something, then that is (at least part of) what they said.

However, their methodology is in fact far from clear. Just what is it, on their view, to take "our nontheoretic intuitions and beliefs about what speakers say, assert, claim, etc. at face value"? The issue, it turns out, is complicated by a distinction that Cappelen and Lepore themselves take pains to emphasize – that between semantic content and speech act content, albeit now applied to indirect speech reports in particular.

In Gross (2006), I suggested that perhaps Cappelen and Lepore rely on something like the following principle:

requires some hedging for reasons unrelated to the present discussion – for instance to accommodate cases in which the speaker has a false belief about what a word means (cf. Gross, 2006). Note that these are *recherché* cases, whereas Cappelen and Lepore maintain that, on any occasion of utterance, a speaker can sincerely assert *indefinitely many* propositions that she does not believe.

[PRIN] If A utters 'P', B utters about A's utterance 'A said that Q', and speakers judge B's report accurate, then the proposition semantically expressed by 'Q' is part of the speech act content of A's utterance.

Favoring this interpretation is the fact that, *if* [PRIN] were true and its antecedent could be appropriately satisfied, the principle would indeed yield Cappelen and Lepore's surprising conclusion that speakers can sincerely say what they do not believe. However, it is not clear that [PRIN] is both true and such that its antecedent can be appropriately satisfied. As I argue in Gross (2006), the third clause of the antecedent is ambiguous between two readings, depending on whether what is at issue are speakers' judgments concerning the report's semantic content or speakers' judgments concerning its speech act content. If the former, Cappelen and Lepore have supplied no reason to think that the antecedent is satisfied in cases that would yield their surprising conclusion: as they themselves emphasize, speakers are not good at tracking and assessing semantic content. If the latter, the principle is itself dubious: for example, if a teacher utters 'Everyone in my intro class this year passed', and a student reports this by uttering 'The professor said that everyone passed', it would follow, by Cappelen and Lepore's own lights, that the *teacher* had said something that entailed that everyone in the universe passed. However, *antecedent* to accepting Cappelen and Lepore's views, no one would so much as entertain the idea that what the teacher says in uttering 'Everyone in my intro class this year passed' has such far-flung consequences. In Gross (2006), I presented this as an objection to Cappelen and Lepore's argument. However, if a less problematic understanding of their methodology were available, the objection would instead count against an ascription to Cappelen and Lepore of [PRIN].

Cappelen and Lepore (2006a) have now responded that indeed they did not intend their argument to rely on [PRIN] but rather on a principle I will label [CAP-LEP]:

[CAP-LEP] If A utters 'P', B utters about A's utterance 'A said that Q', and speakers judge what B said [i.e., some salient aspect of the report's *speech act* content] accurate, then we have evidence that the proposition saliently asserted by the complement clause of that report is part of the speech act content of A's utterance. (Cappelen and Lepore, 2006, 72, numbering of clauses omitted)

The most significant difference between [PRIN] and [CAP-LEP] is the substitution of 'the proposition saliently asserted' for 'the proposition semantically expressed' in the principle's consequent. Cappelen and Lepore remark that, as far as they can tell, my objections to [PRIN], which they do not question, do not apply to [CAP-LEP]. That is correct. But [CAP-LEP] has problems of its own.

### *III. Problems with Cappelen and Lepore's principle*

First, and most obviously, the principle is unclear. Asserting is something speakers do. *Unembedded* sentences can be said to assert, on at least some occasions, in a

derivative way: if a speaker asserts that P in or by uttering a sentence S, there is no harm in allowing that S (on that occasion) asserts that P. What, however, of an embedded clause? What is meant by: the proposition saliently asserted by ‘that Q’ in an utterance of ‘A said that Q’? It’s not the proposition *semantically* expressed by ‘Q’: this would return us to the second reading of [PRIN], which it’s precisely the point of [CAP-LEP] to avoid.

Furthermore, it is not clear that what is meant by “the proposition saliently asserted by ‘that Q’” can be cashed out in such a way that there *is* such a proposition in the cases that Cappelen and Lepore use to support their surprising conclusion. On some views, reports at least sometimes do not place propositions in speech act content, but rather merely provide *partial* characterizations of such propositions – and at least some of Cappelen and Lepore’s cases are candidates. Consider the case of Jack’s utterance of ‘Justine bought the picture’, supposing that the way B reports what Jack said is by uttering ‘Jack said that a French woman bought the picture’.<sup>3</sup> On one view, the salient proposition reported by B’s utterance of ‘Jack said that a French woman bought the picture’ would be that Jack said of a particular French woman that she bought the picture, where this reports that the speech act content of *Jack’s* utterance included a singular proposition that is here partially specified.<sup>4</sup> If this is right, then the complement clause of B’s utterance does not (in any obvious sense) assert a proposition, and so [CAP-LEP] cannot be used to reach Cappelen and Lepore’s surprising conclusion.

To press this worry further, one would have to develop and commit oneself to an account of attitudes and their ascriptions. However, this applies as well to Cappelen and Lepore if they wish to show that [CAP-LEP] can be cashed out while avoiding the worry. Indeed, arguably they bear the greater burden, because it is they who mean to be advancing an argument for a controversial claim. One point worth making here is that it would not suffice to reply that, even if the complement clause fails to *assert* a proposition in such cases, still it indicates one (at least in the context of the report). For, at least in the example above, there is every reason to think that the proposition indicated is one that Jack *believes*, contrary to Cappelen and Lepore’s surprising conclusion. This leads to the final, and most important, problem with [CAP-LEP].

Put aside difficulties *understanding* what [CAP-LEP] says, and suppose that [CAP-LEP] is true and its antecedent appropriately satisfied. Still, [CAP-LEP] – unlike [PRIN] under parallel suppositions – lacks the merit of yielding Cappelen

<sup>3</sup> Cappelen and Lepore do not explicitly say *how*, in their case, the reporter says that Jack said that a French woman bought the picture – in particular, whether he does so by uttering ‘Jack said that a French woman bought the picture.’ But that they have this in mind is strongly suggested by their surrounding cases (cf. the introduction of the “moronic clown” example in Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, 192).

<sup>4</sup> See Recanati (1993, 380–381), albeit on belief ascriptions. Also, cf. Bach (1997).

and Lepore's surprising conclusion. To conclude in some case that A has sincerely said what she does not believe, we need reason to think that, in an accurate report, the proposition saliently "asserted" by 'that Q' – granting now that there is one – is a proposition that A does not believe. However, Cappelen and Lepore present no argument for this.<sup>5</sup> [CAP-LEP] does not help, because it *provides no further information about the content of the proposition saliently asserted by the complement clause*: lacking such information, it provides no reason to think that this proposition is one the speaker does not believe. Nor is it clear how to augment the cases Cappelen and Lepore discuss to yield the surprising conclusion. In particular, they provide no reply to someone who would claim that the very fact that A does not believe that R is reason to think that, *insofar as B's report is accurate*, the report's salient speech act content was not that A said that R.

Consider again B's report of Jack's utterance. For this case to support the surprising conclusion, given [CAP-LEP], Cappelen and Lepore need it to be the case that the proposition saliently asserted by B's report is true *and* that it ascribes to Jack the assertion (saying, etc.) of something he does not believe. Someone who holds, for example, that in sincerely asserting that P one expresses one's belief that P will deny that these two conditions can be met. Precisely because Jack does not believe that a French woman bought the picture, they will deny that this is among the propositions he asserted – and thus they will maintain that, *insofar as B's report is accurate*, *that a French woman bought the picture* is not the proposition saliently asserted in B's report to have been said by Jack. (They would allow, presumably, that Jack said *of* a French woman that she bought the painting. So, they may allow that this is part of – perhaps is the conversationally salient part of – the speech act content of B's report.)

Cappelen and Lepore of course deny that in sincerely asserting P one expresses one's belief that P. This is just an immediate consequence of their claim that speakers can sincerely say (assert, claim, etc.) what they do not believe. Likewise, they would reject *any* conception of assertion that precludes sincerely asserting what one does not believe. But I am not *defending* any such conception. I am asking what argument Cappelen and Lepore have provided *against* them; for this is what they present themselves as doing.

If [CAP-LEP], however one construes its talk of embedded clauses that assert, is not supplemented by arguments that establish what proposition *is* saliently asserted, an argument based upon it cannot yield Cappelen and Lepore's surprising

<sup>5</sup> Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 202) simply assert that it is possible accurately to report an utterance of 'Justine bought the picture' so as to ascribe the speech act content *that a French woman bought the picture*. The closest they come to an argument is by implicitly adverting to the fact that a reporter could utter 'Jack said that a French woman bought the picture' and thereby say something true. But what we are looking for is something that would close the gap between this observation and the surprising conclusion.

conclusion that speakers sincerely say what they do not believe. Indeed, it was precisely to avoid such a worry that I suggested that [PRIN] might lie behind their claims, because it at least makes an effort to specify, on the basis of the sentence that the reporter utters, *what* she might be saying about the original utterance.

#### IV. Conclusion

Alluding to the Wittgensteinian slogan that “nothing is hidden”, Cappelen and Lepore inform us that there is a reason why they are naïve about speech act content and thus adopt their “face value” methodology:

Speech act content isn’t deeply hidden somewhere, where only a theorist can excavate it. That would undermine its purpose. What speakers say, claim, assert, etc., is what we hear when we listen to them. It is what we respond to, question, laugh at, take seriously, ignore, agree or disagree with. It is not concealed; it is not something requiring an investigation to uncover (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, 191).

If, however, my animadversions have any merit, there must be something wrong either with this picture or with Cappelen and Lepore’s attempt to apply it. Perhaps, although speakers need not carry out a theoretical investigation in order to appropriately and intelligently deploy and respond to speech act content, more digging is required of a theorist’s reflective account of what speakers manage so well.\*

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