On Assertion: Truth, Norms and the Problems of Discourse Theory

Yuan-Chung Cheng[*]

Abstract

This paper investigates the general concept of assertion, i.e. the formal structure shared by the family of the concepts of assertion. I argue that this concept elucidates the problem of discourse theory, and the method used to construct such concept is also conducive to analyzing the general concept of norm. The analysis adopts the reconstructed speech act theory and the explanatory principle of meaning to outline three types of theories of assertion, including object theory, intention theory, and institution theory. Both object theory and intention theory presuppose what it means to claim the truth of a propositional content without further explanation. Consequently it is difficult to explain the meaning of assertions as speech acts. On the other hand, assertions are interpreted by the institution theory as verification games. Propositional content constitutes the verification rules of these games, and the outcomes of the verifications determine the results of the games, i.e. the truth or falsehood of assertions. The institution theory covers various ways of playing assertion games and is on this account adequate for the general concept of assertion. This paper will conclude with two theses through the perspective of institution theory. First, the concept of assertion in discourse theory is a specific kind of institution theory. It is burdened with moral elements and deviated from the general concept of assertion. Thus, the universality of the moral norms that the discourse theory aims to justify will be reduced. Second, the general concept of norm is not a type of propositional content but a type of speech act similar to assertions.

[*] Postdoctoral Fellow, College of Law, National Taiwan University; Doctor of Law, University of Kiel.
E-mail: yuanchungcheng@outlook.com