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Assertion, Pattern Recognition and Epistemic Vigilance

Following Mitchell Green's suggestion that "assertion and its cognates are, or bound up with, social practices designed by cultural evolution to support reliable information transmission" (Green, in press), the question I shall be addressing in this paper is: how does assertion (leaving aside its cognates) actually support reliable information transmission? On the one hand, assertion most certainly lies at the core of social processes concerning the circulation of information and knowledge. On the other, the exchange and sharing of information and knowledge is a highly complex affair, which requires (at least) trust and vigilance. More specifically, as Dan Sperber and his colleagues (Sperber et al. 2010) have recently suggested, being able to trust and rely upon our interlocutors when exchanging or sharing information depends on a suite of mechanisms dedicated to epistemic vigilance which they believe all humans are endowed with.

My aim in this paper is to explore the role that assertion may play in relation to the monitoring activity carried out by these epistemic vigilance mechanisms, examining the relationship between the requirements posed by those mechanisms and the felicity conditions proper to assertion. To do so, I shall be using an Austin-based speech-act theoretical framework (Austin 1975; Sbisà, in press), which identifies speech act types on the basis of recognizable procedure patterns (Sbisà 2009; Witek 2015), and conceives the conventional effect of assertion as consisting of the production and transfer of knowledge (Labinaz, Sbisà 2017).

References

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