

# Stalnaker's Assertion and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 2.0211

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## §1 Introduction

 ITTGENSTEIN'S *TRACTATUS* REMAINS, one hundred years after its first appearance, a central text in the philosophy of language, philosophy of logic, metaphysics and meta-philosophy. Although there was an extraordinary development of each of these fields in the last century, there are some seeds and insights in that work that make it always rewarding going through the text again. But, as any reader realizes, this task is not easy all the time since Wittgenstein is frequently obscure, and even now we are not quite sure about what exactly he means in many passages. One of them is 2.0211, in which he seems to give an argument for the existence of what he called one paragraph earlier (2.021) the "substance of the world". There is little agreement, even among scholars, about what exactly this "substance" is, and what exactly the argument is supposed to be.

There is a classical picture attributed to (Morris, 1938) of the study of language as threefold: *syntax* is the study of the relation between signs; *semantics* is the study of the relation between signs and the world (i.e., signs and their meanings); and *pragmatics* is the study of the relation between speakers and signs. Many people normally see the three fields as independent from each other.

Stalnaker's theory of assertion first formulated in (Stalnaker, 1978) and that gave rise to the so-called *two-dimensional semantics*<sup>1</sup> might be seen as belonging to the field of pragmatics. The driving question behind Stalnaker's essay is: what is the point of making an assertion? The question clearly belongs to the pragmatics of utterances of sentences (for sentences are the most common linguistic expressions for assertions; utterances of other expressions alone, such as names and predicates, would not normally be appropriate for assertions). But the essence of an assertion, in Stalnaker's

<sup>1</sup> Later developed by (Evans, 1979), (Davies and Humberstone, 1980), (Chalmers, 1996), (Lewis, 1997) and (Jackson, 1998), among others.

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analysis, is to make a pragmatic move in the context of a conversation, which involves both speaker and an audience. And, as we shall see, this move must be in accordance with some constraints (otherwise the conversation is pointless), and these constraints impose some restrictions on the propositional content expressed. But once we are clear about this point, we can see that some other things related to the structure and content of an assertion must be in place for that point to be reached and, as a side-effect, this theory casts light on some parts of the semantics. So, we get some insight into the structure of the relation between signs and the world.

This is perhaps quite alien to the spirit of the *Tractatus*, at least from the perspective of Morris' division above, since Wittgenstein talks of propositions (and, with them, of states of affairs, facts, objects, etc.) in a quite abstract way with no interest for the use that speakers can make of these notions in ordinary communication (at least in the standard interpretation). But the fact is that understanding the point of an assertion can perhaps lead to a better understanding of some of Wittgenstein's cryptic remarks.

Stalnaker identifies one particular principle of rational communication governing assertions and traces it back to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 2.0211, but does not explain how exactly the principle relates to the passage. A better understanding of this relation can lead to some clarification of Wittgenstein's point. Or so I shall argue in what follows. I shall first review Stalnaker's model of assertion and the principles of rational communication. Then I shall apply it as a guide for the understanding of Wittgenstein's passage.

## §2. Context Set and Assertions

Assertions take place in the context of conversations; they usually involve the utterance of a sentence with a propositional content by a speaker, and are directed to an audience. In any conversation, there are a number of propositions that are assumed as true both by the speaker and the audience. That is to say, there is no assertion made in isolation, in a vacuum, so to speak. We can, using the Carnapian picture of intensions, represent each proposition as a function from possible worlds into the set of corresponding extension (truth-values). Alternatively, we can think of a proposition as a set of possible worlds (i.e., the worlds in which it is true). If we have two propositions  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  as the sets  $W_1$  and  $W_2$  of possible worlds, respectively, then we can understand the conjunction  $P_1 \wedge P_2$  as the set  $W_1 \cap W_2$ . If  $P_1$  is assumed as true in the conversation, both the speaker and the audience assume that  $W_1$  is the set of possible worlds compatible with everything that was said so far. If both  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are assumed as true, then the set of possible worlds compatible with everything that was

said so far (or the "live options", as Stalnaker puts it) is the set of worlds in which both  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are true, namely  $W_1 \cap W_2$ . More generally, if  $\{P_i\}$  is the set of propositions assumed as true in a conversation, then  $\cap \{W_i\}$  (where each  $W_i$  is the set corresponding to the proposition  $P_i$ ) is the set of possible worlds compatible with everything that is assumed. Stalnaker calls the latter the *context set*.

The purpose of each assertion, at each stage in a conversation, is to be a proposal for reducing the context set at that stage. If accepted, the speaker and the audience move to another context set that is a proper set of the previous one. E.g., if we are in conversation and the only propositions assumed as true are that Wittgenstein is Austrian and that Russell is British, then the context set includes all possible worlds in which both Wittgenstein is Austrian and Russell is British. Among these options there are worlds in which Frege is German and worlds in which Frege is not German (because we are not so far assuming anything about Frege's nationality). If now I add to the conversation the assertion that Frege is German, and if my audience accepts that, we reduce the context set excluding all worlds in which Frege is not German, so only worlds in which Frege is German remain in the set. We can go on in the conversation adding assertions that Quine is American, Descartes is French, etc., each time reducing more and more the context set. And this can work as an *explication* (again, in the Carnapian sense) of forming representations about the world. As Stalnaker would later say, quoting from (Jackson 2001),

As Frank Jackson puts it (2001, p. 617), "to represent is to make a division into what accords with, and what does not accord with, how things are being represented as being." A proposition — the content of a representation — can be modelled, according to this picture, by the set of possible situations that are the way the world is being said to be (Stalnaker 2004, p. 300).

And the point of an assertion, at a certain point in a conversation, is to be a proposal for excluding from the context set those possible worlds that are incompatible with the representation (content of the assertion).

A conversation can, hence, be understood as a dynamic pragmatic process by means of which speaker and audience progressively reduce the context set. Ideally, if the participants in a conversation could make all relevant assertions in a coherent way and, if these were all accepted, we would, at the end, have the context set reduced to one single world, which is the world the participants believe to be the actual one.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This picture can be more complex if, as it sometimes happens in a conversation, the participants have different sets of presuppositions. But if there is cooperation between speaker and audience, these sets can be adjusted along the conversation so as to become "*close enough* to being non-defective if the

Stalnaker sees this process as governed by three principles (that he takes to be fairly obvious):

1. A proposition asserted is always true in some but not in all of the possible worlds in the context set.
2. Any assertive utterance should express a proposition, relative to each possible world in the context set, and that proposition should have a truth-value in each possible world in the context set.
3. The same proposition is expressed relative to each possible world in the context set. (Stalnaker 1978, p. 88)

As already said, these principles are described by Stalnaker as “principles of rational communication”, and are very much in the same spirit as Grice’s conversational maxims. I.e., in the same way that, in a conversation, speakers tend to assume (and assume that the audience also assume) the maxim of quality, quantity, relevance, etc., in a rational conversation speakers observe (and assume that the audience also observes) the three principles above.

Let’s try to get a clearer understanding of each of them. One has to keep in mind that Stalnaker (and the two-dimensional semantics that he inaugurates) considers propositions as having two kinds of interaction with possible worlds. First, and in accordance with the Carnapian model, a proposition is evaluated as true or false in possible worlds (or is a function that has possible worlds as argument and truth-values as values). But also, especially if the linguistic expression has context-sensitive elements, the proposition itself will depend on the possible world in which the assertion is made. I.e., if the linguistic expression involves an indexical or a natural kind term such as in

(1) He is Neymar

(2) Water is  $H_2O$

divergences do not affect the issues that actually arise in the course of the conversation” (Stalnaker 1978, p. 85). It can also be more complicated if we are reporting, by means of assertions, the beliefs of someone else because it might not be clear which context set is the relevant one, whether our context set, or the context set of that person. For the purposes of this paper, however, we may overlook these possible complications and assume that there is always one single context set backing any assertion.

then the proposition generated will depend on the possible world as well. E.g., if (1) is employed in a world  $w_1$  in which I am pointing at Neymar, then (assuming the standard Kaplanian view that a demonstrative like 'He', combined with a demonstration in a context, works as a directly referential term)<sup>3</sup> the proposition expressed is that Neymar is identical to Neymar (which is a necessary truth). Whereas if (1) is employed in a world  $w_2$  in which I am pointing at someone else, say, Mbappé, mistakenly thinking that I am pointing at Neymar, then the proposition expressed is that Mbappé is identical to Neymar, which is logically false. Concerning (2), if we assume the current orthodoxy regarding natural kind terms as context sensitive and as directly referential, then if it is employed in a world such as our actual world in which water is  $H_2O$ , the proposition expressed is that  $H_2O$  is  $H_2O$  (which is logically true), whereas if it is employed in a world such as Putnam's Twin Earth (in which the clear drinkable liquid filling lakes and rivers is  $XYZ$ ), then the proposition expressed is that  $XYZ$  is, which is logically false.<sup>4</sup>

How can we understand Principles (1)–(3) above? They follow very naturally if we keep in mind that the *illocutionary point* (to use Searle's terminology e.g., in (Searle 1979)), of assertions is to propose the exclusion of some possible worlds from the context set. Principle (1) can be seen to follow from the illocutionary point of asserting some proposition: the proposition asserted must be false in some possible worlds since the point of an assertion is to exclude some possible worlds from the context set, i.e., those worlds in which the proposition is false. If no world is excluded, everything remains as it was before, and assertion is empty and pointless. But the proposition cannot be false in every possible world. If we come to a point in which *all* worlds are excluded, there is no world compatible with everything that was said so far, and this is a sign that the conversation has turned irrational or inconsistent at some point. Principle (2) says that the proposition expressed in each context of utterance must be "complete" in the sense that, for each possible world  $w$ , it must be clear whether it is true or false in  $w$ . This also seems to follow from the illocutionary point of asserting: if the point is a proposal for excluding some possible worlds, the proposal must be complete (at least for the participants in the conversation) in the sense that, for each possible world, it must be clear whether it is excluded or whether it remains in the context set.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., (Kaplan 1977)

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., (Kripke 1980) and (Putnam 1975).

<sup>5</sup> This can also be seen as a consequence of the classical conception of proposition as essentially being true or false in every possible world.

Principle (3) is the most important for our purposes in this paper. It can also be seen as a consequence of the illocutionary point in the following sense: if we do not have the same content expressed in every possible world, we cannot know the content of an assertion *unless we (speaker and audience) know which world we are in*. But here we have another important pragmatic presupposition of any assertion (which also seems to be required by the illocutionary point), and it is that *we do not know which possible world we are in*. There is always, in a conversation, a bunch of possible worlds as alternatives for the world we are in (i.e., the context set), and the point of the conversation is to progressively trim down the alternatives, reducing the possibilities. Ideally, a conversation would lead to the exclusion of all but the actual world, but at this point the conversation has no point anymore (i.e., it brings no further contribution to our informational state). So, as a consequence of the pragmatic settings of a conversation, assertions must express the same content (i.e., the same proposition) in every possible world, and we must get this proposition without knowing which world we are in. (Again: if we know which world we are in, there is no point in making an assertion.) Let's take an example. It is easier to see the motivation in the first place if we take an utterance with no context-sensitive expression. Suppose that I assert in a conversation

(3) The president of the U.S. in 2021 decided to pull the troops out of Afghanistan

The sentence I used presumably contains no indexicals (let's leave aside for now the fact that the verb is tensed), no proper names (of persons; let's leave aside the fact that 'U.S.' and 'Afghanistan' are proper names) and no natural kind terms. Now we take this as a proposal to exclude from the context set at the corresponding stage of the conversation those worlds in which the president of the U.S. did not decide to pull the troops out of Afghanistan. This must be intelligible in a uniform way to all participants in the conversation, even to those that, for some reason (e.g., they lost track of the American politics before the 2020 election), do not know whether we are in a world  $w_1$  in which Joe Biden is the president of the U.S. in 2021 or in a world  $w_2$  in which Donald Trump is the president of the U.S. in 2021. So, the *proposition expressed* cannot depend on the world we are in.

Something particularly interesting about Principle (3), at least as far as Stalnaker's two-dimensional semantics goes, is not so much its normative content, but the potential violations of it (which appear to be widespread in language, since a great many times we do have indexicals and natural kind terms as part of the expression of the utterance), which lead to the interesting phenomenon of *diagonalization* in

communication. I.e., in utterances such as (1) or (2) above containing such terms, the proposition expressed does depend on the world we are in, and we have to consider that the speaker means not properly the proposition expressed in  $w$  (this would be either a necessarily true proposition if the world of the utterance is  $w_1$  or a necessarily false if the world of the utterance is  $w_2$ ), but the *diagonal* proposition, i.e., the proposition that is true in  $w_1$  and false in  $w_2$ . I shall not go into the details of the diagonal proposition or the explanatory use that Stalnaker makes of it; in this paper I am interested only in the *norm* whose violation leads to the idea of the diagonal proposition (i.e., Principle (3)).<sup>6</sup>

### §3 Assertions and *Tractatus* 2.0211

I now turn to the *Tractatus*. As already said, Stalnaker sees Principle (3) as an echo of

2.0211 If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

The passage seems to be meant as an argument, but in terms of *substance of the world*, which is classically understood as a metaphysical notion. However, it is not clear what Wittgenstein means by it, and there is little agreement among scholars about the correct reading of the argument.<sup>7</sup> In the next paragraph Wittgenstein complements (and adds further perplexity):

2.0212 It would then be impossible to form a picture of the world (true or false).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Stalnaker's use of diagonalization as explanatory strategy, see (Stalnaker 2004) and Ruffino (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> See (Zalabardo 2015, pp. 243–254) for some of the conflicting interpretations of 2.0211. Many scholars interpret the passage as advancing what Zalabardo calls the *empty name* argument, i.e., if a name having the corresponding object in a world depends on which world we are in, then the fact that a sentence has sense would be a contingency: in some worlds it has a sense, and in some worlds it doesn't. Zalabardo himself does not recommend this reading. See also (Fogelin 1987) for an interpretation in terms of simple vs. complex objects, which also seems to be untenable. The point is that any interpretation that sees the truth of a proposition as a condition for a sentence *having sense* would seem to conflict with

3.24 [...]A complex can only be given by its description, and this will either be right or wrong. The proposition in which there is mention of a complex, if this does not exist, becomes not nonsense but simply false.

He seems to suggest that picturing the world requires *a particular metaphysics*, which seems *prima facie* without a clear motivation (and perhaps implausible).<sup>8</sup> We can find an echo of this claim, but hardly a clearer explanation of it, in:

4.221 It is obvious that in analysing propositions we must arrive at elementary propositions consisting of names in immediate combination.

Despite Wittgenstein mentioning it as “obvious”, no convincing reason is presented for the claim that our analysis of any proposition must reach elementary propositions consisting entirely of simple, unanalysable names. Moreover, this doesn’t seem to square with Wittgenstein’s recognition, in some passages, that the elementary propositions might be replaced, in a complete description of the world, by purely quantified propositions (with no names in the corresponding sentences):

5.526 One can describe the world completely by completely generalized propositions, i.e. without from the outset co-ordinating any name with a definite object. In order then to arrive at the customary way of expression we need simply say after an expression “there is one and only one x, which ....”: and this x is a.

One should not expect that a completely generalized proposition such as the one mentioned in the passage is somehow further analysable. At least this is what he indicates in the “Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway”:

If you had any unanalysable proposition in which particular names and relations occurred (and *unanalysable* proposition = one in which only fundamental symbols = ones not capable of *definition* occur) then you always can form from it a proposition of the form  $(\exists x, y, R)$ , which though it contains no particular names and relations, is unanalysable (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 111).

<sup>8</sup> Equally cryptic are glosses of this passage such as Anscombe’s: “[T]he simple objects are presented as something demanded by the nature of language at 2.021, 2.0211” (Anscombe 1959, p. 29). We are left in the dark as to “the nature of language”, and why it *requires* “simple objects”. Pears thinks that the reason why a sentence having sense cannot depend on a proposition being true is that the truth conditions are *ineffable*, i.e., no other sense could say what the sense conditions are, and this stems from Wittgenstein’s view on the limits of language (Pears 1987, p. 71). But this explanation forces us to see 2.0211 as an idiosyncrasy on Wittgenstein’s part, for why should we believe that the sense conditions cannot be spelled out by other sentences?

So, reaching a bedrock of simple names standing for simple objects is not something that is strictly required from the logic of language, since we can in principle construct language not in the "customary way of expression".

How could we know anything about the substance of the world? It cannot be through *experience* (as, e.g., Berkeley would say that we know the mental substance by being aware of our own mental experiences, or Russell would say that we can have acquaintance with our own minds by being conscious of our acquaintance with sense data). For

2.024 Substance is what exists independently of what is the case.

Experience can only be of what is the case. It cannot be a matter of *logic* either. At least if we take him to hold, in the *Tractatus*, the same view expressed six years earlier in the *Notebooks*:

*Is it, A PRIORI, clear that in analysing we must arrive at simple components —is this, e.g., involved in the concept of analysis—, or is analysis ad infinitum possible? —Or is there in the end even a third possibility? [...]*

And nothing seems to speak against infinite divisibility (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 62).

Despite there being no *a priori* requirement that analysis be finite, Wittgenstein reports a kind of compulsion to consider it as finite, without being clear about where the compulsion comes from, and whether it is justified:

*And it keeps on forcing itself upon us that there is some simple indivisible, an element of being, in brief a thing.*

It does not go against our feeling, that we cannot analyse PROPOSITIONS so far as to mention the elements by name; no, we feel that the WORLD must consist of elements (*ibid.*).

Some scholars (e.g., (Fogelin 1987, p. 14)) interpret Wittgenstein's remark as a statement that simple names and simple objects must be the result of analysis of sentences and propositions for, otherwise, the analysis would be infinite, and no definite sense could be expressed by an infinitely complex proposition. But we get no ultimate explanation of why a definite sense would require finiteness of analysis. Why would it be incoherent to assume that propositions can be intelligible *and* infinitely

complex? E.g., Leibniz classically holds the view that contingent propositions have an infinite analysis and are, nevertheless, intelligible (although our finite minds cannot carry on the complete analysis; only God's mind can do it).

As I see it, we can explore Stalnaker's account of assertion to elucidate this obscure aspect of Wittgenstein's theory of pictures and substance. It turns out to be not an idiosyncrasy, but to be an almost trivial feature of the activity of *picturing the world* understood as *dividing the field of possibilities into what is and what is not compatible with the intended picture*. If in order to know what is expressed by a sentence (or, perhaps, by an utterance of a sentence) we need to know which world we are in, then we need some sort of description of *this* world. But this description can only be through other assertions, the understanding of which, in turn, would require that we know which world we are in, and so on indefinitely. So the whole "game" of asserting cannot get started unless one and the same proposition is expressed in all possible worlds. If picturing the world is possible, we need to assume that the proposition expressed by an assertion is a "stable" one, i.e., that it is unique and intelligible independently of the world we are in. (It is not, of course, independent of the totality of possible worlds that we are considering, since each proposition is a function that has the totality of worlds as domain).<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in the case of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, if *S* expressing a certain sense requires the truth of a proposition *P* (read: the sense of *S* depends on which world the latter is expressed), we cannot simply produce a sentence *S\** that informs which world we are in, because the proposition expressed by *S\** also depends on the world we are in (and we would have to know that in order to understand what *S\** says), and so on. Hence, we cannot even start the representation of the world by means of a picture (sentence). But this is in contrast with the fact that we do seem to make pictures of the world (2.1, 2.11, 2.12). Asserting or denying facts is, as Russell puts it in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, "the essential business of language".

Under this reading, "substance" has primarily a semantic connotation. That there is a substance is just another way of saying that the sense of propositions is one and the same in every possible world.<sup>10</sup> That means that in every such world we must have the same basic components, with the same possibilities of combinations. This does not

<sup>9</sup> Again, utterances that contain context-sensitive expressions and that, apparently, would express different propositions in different worlds must be treated separately: since there is a clear violation of Stalnaker's Principle (3), they must be reinterpreted as expressing the diagonal proposition in all possible worlds.

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein says this in 3.23; he calls both theses a "postulate" ("*Forderung*").

mean, however, that the same objects effectively *exist* in all possible worlds. E.g., assuming that Venus could be one of the “simple” objects, there are possible worlds in which Venus does not exist, but this does not exclude Venus from the substance of the world. Suppose we say ‘Venus is not Mars’. The sentence expresses the same sense in our world and in all other worlds, even in those in which Venus does not exist. The substance is the common semantic basis with the same logical form in every possible world. A name (or simple expression) refers to the same object in every possible world, even in worlds in which the object does not exist.

The proposition expressed does not depend on another proposition being true, i.e., it does not depend on which possible world we are in. Hence, it must depend only on the substance of the world, which is something that all possible worlds have in common (2.024). Under the reading here suggested, whenever Wittgenstein talks of a “compound” and excludes the possibility that objects are of this form, what he means is that the meaning of parts of sentences cannot depend on the world we are in either, otherwise there is the infinite regress mentioned above and no picture (i.e., no assertion) is possible.

The reading here recommended is perhaps close to the way Black explains 2.0211:

The sense  $S_1$  would depend upon the truth of some other sentence  $S_2$  (affirming the existence of a complex apparently mentioned in  $S_1$ ) and the sense of  $S_2$  would depend on the truth of some other  $S_3$ , and so on without end. This would be a *vicious* regress: we could never know what the sense of a given  $S_1$  was without first, *per impossibile*, knowing an infinity of other propositions to be true (Black 1964, p. 60).

However, it remains unclear from Black’s explanation why the regress would be *vicious* (i.e., why couldn’t we understand propositions that depend on the truth of sentences in an infinite chain.) By applying Stalnaker’s pragmatic framework in terms of the point of making assertions we can see a clearer motivation for this view and bring it closer to our practice of asserting as picturing the world.

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### **Stalnaker's Assertion and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 2.0211**

In the *Tractatus* (Prop. 2.0211) Wittgenstein claims that a sentence expresses the same proposition in every possible world and, hence, which proposition is expressed cannot depend on how each world is (otherwise we have different propositions in each world). In this paper, I shall explore the interpretation of this thesis under the perspective of Stalnaker's (1978) theory of assertions as the reduction of the context set, i.e., the set of possible worlds compatible with the information gathered at a conversation. In Stalnaker's version, this principle follows from the explication of assertions as having the illocutionary point of excluding some possible worlds from the context set. If there is no unique instruction to exclude some worlds, then it is not clear which reduction is meant by the speaker. This might lead to a better understanding of (and motivation for) Wittgenstein's own version.

**Keywords:** Propositions · Possible Worlds · Assertion · Context Set · Stalnaker.

### **La afirmación de Stalnaker y 2.0211 del *Tractatus* de Wittgenstein**

En el *Tractatus* (Prop. 2.0211) Wittgenstein afirma que una oración expresa la misma proposición en todo mundo posible y, por consiguiente, cuál proposición es expresada no puede depender de cómo cada mundo es (si no es así, tenemos proposiciones diferentes en cada mundo). Exploraré en este trabajo la interpretación de esta tesis bajo la perspectiva de la teoría de afirmaciones como la reducción del conjunto de contexto de Stalnaker (1978), es decir, el conjunto de mundos posibles compatibles con la información obtenida en una conversación. En la versión de Stalnaker, este principio se sigue de la explicación de afirmaciones teniendo el punto ilocucionario de excluir algunos mundos posibles del conjunto de contexto. Si no hay ninguna

instrucción única para excluir algunos mundos, entonces no es claro a cuál reducción el hablante se refiere. Esto podría producir un mejor entendimiento de (y una motivación para) la versión del propio Wittgenstein.

**Palabras Clave:** Proposiciones · Mundos posibles · Afirmación · Conjunto de contexto · Stalnaker.

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