

Bragging

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The fact that Wikipedia lists me as a notable alumnus of my college speaks ill of the reliability of crowd sourced information.
~ Tweet by @johnmoe

1. *Aim to impress*

The speech act of bragging has never been subjected to conceptual analysis. This paper fills that lacuna.¹ We argue that bragging is a special form of asserting. Specifically, a speaker brags just in case she aims to impress her addressee with something about herself by asserting something about herself.

Many speech acts characteristically aim at generating a particular type of mental state in the addressee. Assertion aims to generate belief. Promising aims to generate trust or reliance. Commands aim to generate intentions. We contend that bragging aims to generate the state of being impressed. It suffices for present purposes to characterize being impressed as a distinctive mental state, which we think is best construed as an emotion akin to awe, wonder and admiration. Our first claim, then, is that someone doesn't count as bragging if she isn't trying to impress her addressee.

Consider a case: your interlocutor tells you, 'I used to play fly-half for the Oxford rugby team.' Let's contextualize this conversational gambit. If you, like the speaker, are a rugby aficionado and realize that the fly-half position is arguably the most important on the team, then you are likely to be impressed. In many conversational settings, if the speaker makes this assertion, he is bragging. For instance, simply announcing it out of the blue to someone who knows a bit about rugby appears to be a boast. Likewise, if the speaker is responding to your mentioning that you play winger (arguably the easiest position to learn) in an amateur league, it

¹ We will use 'brag' and 'boast' synonymously.

would seem that he's bragging. However, if you've just told him that you feel nothing but contempt for sports and sportsmen, then unless he's simply clueless it would hardly seem that he's bragging. After all, he can't intend to do what he takes to be impossible, and it's likely that he thinks it's not possible to impress you with his sporting prowess. Perhaps he's telling you something about himself to test whether you can be friends. Perhaps he's purposefully outing himself to end the conversation. Perhaps he's engaged in special pleading on the part of his favorite sport. But one thing he's clearly not doing is bragging. In each case, he's asserting that he's accomplished something. In the original case but not the variants, he's also bragging. We think the best explanation of this difference is that bragging aims to impress.

Does he need to think that the thing that's meant to impress his addressee is or will be seen as good (morally, prudentially, or in some other way)? We think not. Consider Cool Hand Luke's claim that he can eat fifty eggs. Is it morally, prudentially, epistemically, or aesthetically good to have this capacity? No, but, it is an impressive feat. His claim to be able to eat fifty eggs is a boast. One can even brag about something that is or is likely to be perceived as negative (morally, prudentially, or in some other way). Imagine a university professor who preens about the fact that she's never, in her career, given an undergraduate paper a grade of A, let alone A+, because she is only willing to award such grades to papers that are publishable without revisions. She knows that her colleagues find this standard appalling but impressive. She is boasting.²

This provides an opportunity to distinguish between bragging and self-praise. They overlap extensively, but they doubly dissociate. You can engage in self-praise that isn't bragging if you don't intend your audience to be impressed with you. You can brag without engaging in self-praise if you don't intend your addressee to attribute responsibility to you. As Aristotle points out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5, praiseworthiness presupposes responsibility.

² What about people who (arguably) brag about their suffering and deprivation, such as the four Yorkshiremen in the famous Monty Python sketch? We think that many such cases are indirect brags because the speaker isn't just talking about how bad his childhood was but pointing out how far he's come from humble beginnings. It's relevant here that, in the Monty Python sketch, the Yorkshiremen are all very well dressed, drinking port, and smoking cigars. We further contend that many cases that don't fit this description involve the speaker bragging about how tough he is – how much suffering and pain he can survive. Further cases would have to be analyzed one at a time. We are here indebted to an anonymous referee.

Must the braggart be aware that what he's saying about himself is or might be deemed impressive? We think so. Imagine Clueless Carl, who is severely socially inept. He has no notion of what others find impressive. He also likes to talk about himself and his many accomplishments, such as "Last week, I met Johnny Depp on set of the movie he's making about me." From almost anyone but Carl, this would be a brag of obnoxious proportions. Carl is clueless of this fact. He has no idea what he said is impressive. Therefore, he doesn't intend to impress anyone, and so he didn't brag. If someone were unfamiliar with Carl's condition, she would think he is obviously bragging. If she is informed, however, she'll realize this fact.

Consider briefly the difference between Clueless Carl and Shrewd Saul. Saul is also widely known to be socially inept. He often misses social cues. Other people are aware of his deficit, and tend to give him the benefit of the doubt. But Saul isn't entirely clueless. He misses less than he lets on, and he sometimes takes advantage of the fact that others give him the benefit of the doubt to get away with tactless comments and bragging. Basically, because Saul is a bit like Carl and knows that people know this, he exploits their forbearance. Because people don't like being exploited in this way, they may find it hard to believe that someone could be as clueless as Carl, but, we contend, if they were convinced, they would agree that he does not brag.

These considerations suggest that in bragging a speaker aims to produce in the addressee (and not necessarily in anyone else) the state of being impressed.

2. Impress by asserting

An obvious objection is that if bragging is aimed at producing the emotion of being impressed, then we are wrong to classify it as a kind of assertion. This objection fails because, on our account, bragging aims at producing both a belief *and* the state of being impressed. Schematically, we think that bragging = assertion + intent to impress. For the sake of simplicity in this short paper, we will develop the account in a Gricean framework. However, this account can be plugged into any framework in which assertion involves (perhaps among other things) the

intent to produce a belief in the addressee.³ In this framework, a speaker brags just in case by making utterance *u*:

- (1) she asserts that *p*,
- (2) she intends to produce in the addressee the belief that *p*,⁴ and
- (3) she intends the addressee's belief that *p* lead her to be impressed with the speaker.

In an early-Gricean (1957) framework, condition (2) is redundant because asserting that *p* is analyzed in terms of intending the addressee to believe that *p* because he recognizes the speaker's intention to get him so to believe. In his later work, Grice (1968, p. 230) argued that the speaker needs to intend "not that the hearer should believe something (though there will frequently be an ulterior intention to that effect), but that the hearer should *think that the utterer believes* something." For reasons that will become clear in the course of the paper, we think that bragging does require the intention to produce a belief, even if other assertions do not.

One might wonder why, given that we are working within a Gricean framework, we don't include reflexive conditions such as

- (4) she intends that the addressee should recognize the speaker's intention (3) and
- (5) she intends that the addressee should base her being impressed that *p* on her recognition of (3).

We take up these questions below. In this section, we defend the assertion-related conditions (1-2).

Does boasting really have to piggy-back on assertion? Consider a potential example of bragging by conventional implicature. A canonical example of conventional implicature is saying "X and Y" to implicate that X happened before Y. "I sat down and took off my shoes" suggests

³ Such views are fairly popular: see Grice (1957), Strawson (1964), and Bach & Harnich (1979, p. 41).

⁴ Does the braggart need to intend to *produce* the belief? If she does, then she can't brag to someone whom she takes to already have the belief in question. In other words, she couldn't brag by reminding (or trying to remind) her addressee of something impressive about herself. This kind of concern affects any account of assertion that involves the speaker's intention to produce a belief – an issue too large for us to consider in detail here. One potential way to circumvent the problem is to distinguish between occurrent and dispositional beliefs, then insist that the braggart must intend to produce an occurrent belief, even if she knows that the dispositional belief is already present.

that I sat down before removing my footwear, whereas “I took off my shoes and sat down” suggests the opposite. Suppose you’re talking to a youngish faculty member at a cocktail party, and she says, “I earned my doctorate and turned twenty-one.” This suggests that she already had a Ph.D. before most people start their graduate work – an impressive feat. Is she bragging? We think that, if she intends to impress you by getting you to form the belief that she earned her doctorate before she turned twenty-one, then she implicates the assertion and therefore implicates the brag. In other words, yes, she is bragging, but not directly.

One might think, though, that only condition (3) is truly necessary: as long as the addressee ends up being impressed with the speaker, the precise pathway is irrelevant. We think that cases one might be inclined to describe as non-assertive brags fall into just two categories: indirect assertions (and hence indirect brags susceptible to the same analysis as the doctorate case above) and non-brags.

For example: ‘I want to compete for another Iron Chef trophy, but my chances this time are terrible.’ Instead of directly asserting that she’s already won one Iron Chef trophy, the speaker presupposes it. Is she bragging? If by presupposing she indirectly asserts that she’s won and intends to impress, our account says that she indirectly brags. If she doesn’t indirectly assert (perhaps she thinks her addressee already knows that she’s won once), she isn’t. If expressing the desire to compete, regardless of whether she’s won already, seems like bragging (who would want to compete if they didn’t think they were very good indeed?), we give the same analysis. Either there’s an indirect assertion involved, or it isn’t a boast at all.

One might demur, claiming that in some cases the speaker intends to impress her addressee directly, without any mediating belief or other mental state. How, we ask, is it possible to end up in a state of being impressed with X without taking some predicate to be true of X? You might not be able to articulate what you’re impressed by. You might get it wrong. But it seems to us preposterous that you can be in such an emotional state without some belief-like attitude implicitly grounding it. ‘I don’t know what it is about X, but I find X impressive.’ That sounds fine. ‘Nothing about X is impressive, but X is impressive.’ This won’t do.

Another way of arriving at the conclusion that bragging essentially involves assertion is to consider the fact that bragging, like garden variety assertion, is governed by a truth norm. A boast is defective if its content is false. This is why one can lose a boasting contest by making a

less impressive boast than one's opponent *or* by boasting falsely. It's also why jokes about braggarts often turn on the braggart saying something patently false.

3. *If you've got it, flaunt it*

We have now argued for two necessary conditions on bragging. First, the bragger must aim to produce in her addressee the emotional state of being impressed. Second, she must aim to produce this emotional state via the belief produced by asserting. We now argue that both the belief and the emotion must involve being impressed with something about the speaker. This is a natural extension of our previous argument that one is never simply impressed with X; one is always impressed with something about X.

Consider two cases of bragging and non-bragging that both aim to produce the emotion of being impressed by way of belief. In the first, an Oxbridge philosopher by the name of P. U. claims to be smarter than almost all of his own colleagues, as well as the Nobel Laureate psychologist Daniel Kahneman. In the second, Q. V. claims that David Lewis was the smartest philosopher of the twentieth century. What distinguishes P. U. from Q. V.? It seems clear that the former is bragging while the latter is not. Both are trying to impress their addressees by getting them to believe something. The crucial difference is that P. U. is trying to get his addressee to believe something *about P. U.*, which will in turn lead the addressee to be impressed *with P. U.* By contrast, Q. V. is trying to get his addressee to believe something *about Lewis*, which will in turn lead the addressee to be impressed *with Lewis*. More precisely, the structure of bragging is to make an assertion aimed at getting the addressee to believe that the speaker has property *P*, and thereby to be impressed by the speaker's having *P*.

So far, we have rested content with an intuitive notion of what counts as being *about the speaker*. We are not in a position to give a full account of this concept, but we can say that we understand it capaciously. You can clearly brag about your traits and skills. 'I'm courageous,' would traditionally count as a boast, as would, 'I'm a chess grandmaster.' You can also brag about your achievements. 'I've summated Annapurna,' is a boast. It's also clear that people can and do brag about their group identities. 'I'm a Rothschild,' can be a boast, as can 'Canada is the world's greatest hockey power,' when spoken by a Canadian. This might seem odd, since it's no

achievement to be born into a particular family or nation, but people clearly do brag about these things. An analysis of bragging fails if it doesn't recognize this fact.

You can brag about your traits, skills and group identities; it's clear that you can also brag about your possessions. 'I own a Bugatti,' is a boast, as is, 'I'm all about conspicuous consumption.' Again, it might be distasteful, bourgeois, philistine, or immoral to boast in this way, but the question whether it's permissible to boast is distinct from the question whether it's possible.

It might seem at this point that, on our account, there's nothing you can't in principle brag about. In fact, we are sympathetic to this idea. We want to suggest that it doesn't matter whether the thing bragged about is in any fundamental way associated with the speaker. Instead, what matters is that the speaker takes the addressee to associate the bragged-about thing with the speaker (and potentially be impressed by it). If I think that you think that the identity of my great-great-grandfather is sufficiently associated with me, I can brag about my ancestry. If I think that you think that my astrological sign is sufficiently associated with me, I can brag about my zodiac. If I think that you think that the accomplishments of my acquaintances are sufficiently associated with me, I can brag by name-dropping about whom I've met. What matters is the speaker's construal of what the addressee associates with the speaker. Given sociological facts about what people tend to associate with each other, traits, skills, achievements, group identities and possessions can all conventionally be bragged about. Were these sociological facts to change, the opportunities to brag would also change.

4. I don't mean to brag, but...

Thus far, we've argued that a speaker brags when and only when she makes an assertion about herself in order to produce in her addressee a belief that will in turn lead the addressee to be impressed with something about the speaker. Something needn't be in any way good to be impressive to the addressee, nor need it be impressive to anyone else. Its connection with the speaker can be tenuous, provided that the speaker takes the addressee to associate it with her. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss the conditions under which it's possible to cancel a brag

while still making the related assertion, which leads us to conclude with a few remarks on the recent neologism ‘humblebrag’.⁵

It’s of course possible to make a non-bragging assertion that would, in some contexts, constitute a brag. ‘I used to play fly-half for Oxford,’ is an example we’ve already seen. What makes the difference, on our account, is condition (3): whether the speaker also intends her addressee to be impressed with something about her because they come to believe something about her. The speaker’s communicative intentions are determinative. If this is right, it’s not possible to brag by accident, since – even if you end up impressing your addressee unintentionally – you wouldn’t meet the necessary conditions for bragging. Nevertheless, simply denying that you meant to brag after engaging in egregious self-aggrandizement seems suspect – the braggart’s version of Moore’s paradox. Compare the more familiar example of an indirect speech act (Searle 1975) in which the speaker performs one speech act by performing another: I can request a beer by asking whether you have any beer. But I can cancel the implied request by prefacing my question with, ‘I don’t want a beer, but...’ Canceling the brag while making the assertion doesn’t seem to work so well. ‘I’m not trying to impress you by saying this, but I am a genius.’ Yeah, right.

Why is it especially hard to cancel a boast? This question can be answered by distinguishing between two distinct but interlocking aspects of communication: *meaning*, which is determined by the speaker who must nevertheless take into account how the addressee is likely to interpret her utterance, and *interpretation*, which is determined by the addressee who must nevertheless take into account what the speaker is likely to have meant by her utterance. An utterance succeeds to the extent that what the speaker means is identical to what the addressee interprets. What’s odoriferous about at least some attempts to assert-without-bragging is that, even if the speaker really doesn’t aim to impress, she makes bizarre if not quite inconsistent

⁵ Naturally, since bragging as such has not been subjected to conceptual analysis, humblebragging hasn’t either. Here’s a rough-and-ready definition from the website www.urbandictionary.com: “When you, usually consciously, try to get away with bragging about yourself by couching it in a phony show of humility.” It has also been discussed for a popular audience by Harris Wittels in *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty* (2012), where he characterizes this type of speech act as a brag that is “ever-so-thinly disguised as transparent humility.”

demands on the addressee's interpretation of her utterance. The addressee is meant to believe something impressive about the speaker but not meant to be impressed. Additionally, the speaker draws attention to the fact that the content of her assertion could be considered impressive.

We thus revert to the familiar point that you can't intend what you take to be impossible. The question, then, is whether it's possible to intend your audience to believe that you're a genius because you say so, to pay attention to the fact that this would ordinarily be impressive, and yet not to be impressed. There are cases in which this is possible, but the vast majority of the time it's not. With something less conventionally impressive than genius, the cancellation is more likely to work. What the speaker needs is an 'out.' She needs to be able to point to some aim other than impressing her addressee that she thinks the addressee will consider plausible. For instance, the speaker is on an airliner with the addressee, and the pilots have been incapacitated. She says, 'Trust me. I'm a retired pilot.' She's trying to get her addressee to believe that she's competent to fly the airliner, but she doesn't care whether the addressee is impressed with her credentials and experience. She cares whether he trusts her.

Thus, one way to cancel the brag that would otherwise piggy-back on an assertion is to cancel the attempt to impress the addressee by providing an alternative purpose of the utterance ('Trust me; don't be impressed by me.') Another way to cancel the brag is to sever the connection between the impressive thing and the speaker. For instance, 'I'm a multi-millionaire, but all of my wealth is inherited.' Or, 'I'm a descendant of Charlemagne, not that that means anything about me.' In many cases, canceling the emotional component and canceling the connection to self are patently impossible, so any attempt to do either is doomed.

If the speaker knows that the addressee won't accept the disclaimer, then she can't cancel the brag. Consider the tweet we used as an epigraph, 'The fact that Wikipedia lists me as a notable alumnus of my college speaks ill of the reliability of crowd sourced information.' This is a paradigmatic humblebrag. What distinguishes it from straightforward bragging? The humblebragger, in addition to saying something about herself with the aim of getting her addressee to be impressed with her, tries to do so in such a way that the addressee doesn't realize that the speaker is trying to impress. This is usually done by saying something self-deprecating

while bragging. For instance, 'I'm not notable,' is paired with, 'I'm described as notable on Wikipedia.'

Here's another example, this one a tweet by American stage actor Steve Kazee responding to the *Daily News* comparing his appearance to that of Ricky Martin: 'Who wore it better? I mean it's @ricky_martin for gods sake. Of course he wears it better! I can't compete with that.' Kazee is bragging: he's drawing attention to the facts that he is starring in a Broadway show, that his appearance was remarked on positively in a major newspaper, and that he was compared to the heartthrob Ricky Martin. But he's trying to brag in such a way that his addressees don't realize that he aims to impress.

Humblebrags always do this. They're especially annoying because they implicitly challenge the addressee's competence. For a humblebrag to succeed, the addressee can't recognize that the speaker aims to impress. Thus, humblebragging always suggests or presupposes that the addressee isn't intelligent, sensitive, or savvy enough to see through the self-deprecation to the intention to impress.

We're finally in a position to return to our decision not to include in our analysis of bragging conditions (4) and (5). Condition (5) is a non-starter. Unless the speaker is embroiled in a boasting contest, she presumably wants her addressees to be impressed not because she means to impress them but because the content of her boast is impressive. 'Don't be impressed with me because I say so,' she'd say, 'Be impressed because I'm impressive!'

What about condition (5)? If this reflexive intention were necessary for bragging, then humblebragging as we've analysed it would be impossible, since the humblebragger would intend both that her addressee recognize that she intends to impress and that her addressee fail to recognize that she intends to impress. But maybe our account is wrong. Perhaps humblebragging isn't really bragging. Alternatively, perhaps humblebragging doesn't involve hiding one's intent to impress; perhaps the humblebragger intends to impress but also intends the addressee to make a character-level judgment that she isn't a bragger.

Neither of these suggestions strikes us as more plausible than our original theory. We suggest instead a three-way taxonomy of brags: (a) brazen brags, where the speaker intends the addressee to recognize that she's trying to impress, (b) humblebrags, where the speaker intends

the addressee to fail to recognize that she's trying to impress and (c) indifferent brags, where the speaker doesn't intend one way or the other.

5. *The problem with bragging*

We would be remiss to completely ignore the normative dimensions of bragging and its historical context. Bragging or being a braggart certainly has negative connotations. There is good reason for that, but it has not always been so.

Two historical reference points help here. Book 17 of *The Iliad* opens with an episode of competitive bragging or 'flyting' between Euphorbus, a Trojan, and Menelaus, an Achaean. Euphorbus brags about having killed Patroclus, to which Menelaus responds, "By father Jove, boasting is an ill thing. The pard is not more bold, nor the lion nor savage wild-boar, which is fiercest and most dauntless of all creatures, than are the proud sons of Panthous" (17.20-24). Two points are worth noting here. First, boasting is clearly condemned. So, even in the eighth century BCE, some instances of boasting were held in low regard. Second, we see a clear link between boasting and the boaster's emotion of pride, which appears to be the main reason boasting is held in disdain.

The second historical example is Beowulf's long boast (530ff) in the beer-hall before his encounter with Grendel. This speech-act is positively evaluated in the context of the epic. Does this show that at least some cultures have regarded bragging positively? Although one might regard Beowulf's speech as a demonstration of pride, Conquergood (1981) contends that bragging played an important and valuable social function in Anglo-Saxon English culture. In Beowulf's case, his extended boasting serves to rally the Danes after years of defeat by Grendel.

Christianity, with its elevation of humility to the status of a virtue, seems to have given bragging an especially bad conscience (which, to a large extent, hadn't yet infected the quasi-Christian bards who perpetuated the Beowulf epic). In his second epistle to the Corinthians (11:10-12:10), Paul inverts what seems to have been an institutionalized form of competitive boasting by bragging about his weaknesses. One might think that he is actually bragging about one of his virtues – humility. This would constitute an especially egregious and self-referential form of humble-bragging. Two millennia later, such bragging seems to be out of favor in much

of the English-speaking world. We leave it for further research to explore the apparent paradox of how, once humility becomes a normative ideal, one can boast by saying, “I am humble,” though this question has to some extent been addressed by Appiah (2011).⁶

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