

Lecture 10: Speech Acts

Elizabeth Coppock

Introduction to Pragmatics, Summer Semester 2012, HHU

1 Performatives

What kind of thing is the meaning of a sentence?

- Truth conditions? This view allows us to account for entailments (and presuppositions, if we allow truth conditions to be undefined), but it is problematic, because it leaves out other important aspects of meaning.
- Implications, including entailments, presuppositions, conversational implicatures, and conventional implicatures? Problem: In some cases it doesn't really make sense to ask what its implications are.

For **performatives** (Austin, 1961, 1962), the primary purpose is to perform some type of act and thereby change the world, rather than to describe the world (as **constatives** do).

Examples of performatives:

- In a wedding: "I do." or "I now pronounce you man and wife."
- Blessing by a priest: "Bless you, my child."
- Christening: "I hereby christen you *Maria*."
- Betting: "I see your 10 and raise you 5."
- At the beginning of an event: "Let the games begin!"
- Taking an oath: "I, ..., do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

These utterances *do* something, e.g. to give somebody a name, or cause two people to become married.

Performatives cannot be disagreed with (*Das stimmt nicht*):

- (1)
 - a. Ich wette mit dir, dass es morgen regnet.
 - b. Ich entschuldige mich.
 - c. Ich erhebe Einspruch.
 - d. Ich gebe mein Wort.
 - e. Ich vermache mein Haus meinem Bruder.
 - f. Ich gebe dir eine Warnung.

But still, they can be used somehow "incorrectly". Example (Austin, 1962):

- (2) A drunk man picks up a bottle and smashes it on a nearby ship, saying:
"I christen this ship the Joseph Stalin."

This does not cause the ship to become named *the Joseph Stalin*. This example is not *false*, but it is *infelicitous*.

(If I were to *describe* this event by saying, "The passerby christened the ship," then I would be saying something false.)

Three broad categories of infelicities:

- Misinvocations, which disallow a purported act.
 - Example: Marriages can only be performed by someone who has the legal right to perform marriages.¹ Even in the context of a wedding, it would be a misinvocation for me to utter "I now pronounce you man and wife" because I lack the credentials. (I could, however, get ordained online in a matter of minutes with the Universal Life Church,² which was established to circumvent this problem.)
- Misexecutions, in which the act is vitiated [spoiled; ruined] by errors or omissions
 - Example: Barack Obama's inauguration speech, January 2009. He was supposed to say:

¹Minnesota state law: "Marriages may be solemnized throughout the state by a judge of a court of record, a retired judge of a court of record, a court administrator, a retired court administrator with the approval of the chief judge of the judicial district, a former court commissioner who is employed by the court system or is acting pursuant to an order of the chief judge of the commissioner's judicial district, the residential school administrators of the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf and the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, a licensed or ordained minister of any religious denomination, or by any mode recognized in section 517.18.... Ministers of any religious denomination, before they are authorized to solemnize a marriage, shall file a copy of their credentials of license or ordination with the court administrator of the district court of a county in this state, who shall record the same and give a certificate thereof. The place where the credentials are recorded shall be endorsed upon and recorded with each certificate of marriage granted by a minister."

²<http://www.themonastery.org/>

I... do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will **faithfully** execute the office of president of the United States and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

But the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, who administered the oath, gave him the oath to repeat with *faithfully* in the wrong place:

I... do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will execute the office of president of the United States **faithfully** and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

The next day, he took the oath again, just to be safe.³

- Abuses, where the act succeeds, but the participants do not have the ordinary and expected thoughts and feelings associated with the happy [felicitous] performance of such an act.

– Example: “fake apologies” as described in the following news story.⁴

Mustachioed jerk Geraldo Rivera issued a non-apology today for his comments about the Trayvon Martin tragedy, made last week on Fox & Friends. At the time, Rivera said that the hoodie the unarmed teen was wearing was just as responsible for his death as George Zimmerman, the man who shot him.

In a letter to Politico, Rivera wrote, “by putting responsibility on what kids wear instead of how people react to them I have obscured the main point that someone shot and killed an unarmed teenager.”

But he also said, “I apologize to anyone offended by what one prominent black conservative called my ‘very practical and potentially life-saving campaign urging black and Hispanic parents not to let their children go around wearing hoodies,’” quoting a story from the National Review.

Geraldo Rivera isn't *lying* here but he is being *insincere*.

We should be able to characterize the meaning in a way that explains why something goes wrong in these cases. Our theory should be able to explain not just when sentences are true and when they are false, but also when they are felicitous and when they are infelicitous.

2 Illocutionary acts

Does the existence of performatives imply that we need a new conception of meaning? Meaning as ‘potential to produce an effect in the world’, for example?

³http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/obama_inauguration/7843881.stm

⁴http://www.mediabistro.com/prnewser/35828-geraldo-rivera-hoodie-trayvon-martin_b35828

The existence of performatives alone is not a completely convincing argument for this. As Strawson (1971) points out, these bets, blessings, christenings, and vows ordinarily take place in highly formal, ritualistic, or ceremonial situations such as ship launchings and weddings. They seem to be the exception rather than the rule. One could even argue that the act of bidding in bridge, for example, is part of the institution of bridge, and does not even belong to the institution of (ordinary) language (Warnock 1973, Urmson 1977).

The question hinges on how generally meaning relates to action. Austin (1962) argues that performatives are not unique; whenever we speak, even when we are describing the world, we are performing actions. These come in three varieties:

- **locutionary acts:** acts of speaking, e.g. using the word “the”
- **illocutionary acts:** acts done **in** speaking, e.g. christening, marrying, asserting, stating, ordering, requesting
- **perlocutionary acts:** acts achieved **by** speaking, e.g. causing people to refer to a ship as the Joseph Stalin or producing the belief that two people should be considered man and wife

Example from Austin (1962): “Shoot her!”

- Act A (Locution): He said to me “Shoot her!” meaning by *shoot* “shoot” and referring by *her* to “her”.
- Act B (Illocution): He urged (or advised, ordered, etc.) me to shoot her.
- Act C (Perlocution): He persuaded me to shoot her.

Perlocutionary acts are not part of meaning. So we can ignore them (as long as we can tell that they are really perlocutionary acts, and not illocutionary acts).

Many locutionary acts are not part of meaning either, like uttering a certain phoneme. We can ignore those too.

Some locutionary acts are part of meaning. Austin distinguishes between the locutionary **meaning** and the illocutionary **force** of an utterance. The act of referring to a certain individual, for example, is a locutionary act. This has to do with meaning.

The (illocutionary) **force** of an utterance corresponds to the type of illocutionary act performed. The force of an utterance is indicated by the performative verb in an explicit performative. E.g. *I order you to shoot her* is an explicit performative, and its force is indicated by the verb *order*; it performs the illocutionary act of ordering.

3 Clause types and force

There are three main clause types: *declaratives*, *interrogatives*, and *imperatives*. Each clause type can be used to perform a variety of illocutionary acts.

3.1 Declaratives

Typically, a declarative sentence is used to make an assertion:

- (3) The exam is on July 27th.

But a declarative sentence can be used to perform other types of speech acts as well.

For example: **Explicit performatives**, which typically “I (hereby) VERB X”, where VERB is in the present tense and the active voice.

- (4) I hereby promise to do the dishes.
(5) I hereby request a leave of absence.
(6) I hereby bet you \$1000 that it will rain tomorrow.

The verb makes explicit exactly what type of act is being performed (promising, requesting, betting).

“Some of the English verbs denoting illocutionary acts are *state*, *describe*, *assert*, *warn*, *remark*, *comment*, *command*, *order*, *request*, *criticize*, *apologize*, *censure*, *approve*, *welcome*, *promise*, *object*, *demand*, and *argue*. Austin claimed there were over a thousand such expressions in English.” (Searle, 1969, 23).

There seem to be some explicit performatives that do not take this form:

- (7) You are fired.
(8) The court finds you guilty.
So performativity is not crucially tied to the performative formula.
Note that there are certain performatives that *cannot* take this form:
(9) *I fire you.
(10) #I hereby threaten to kick you.

So it is not an entirely straightforward matter to make a performative explicit, although Searle (1969) claims that it is always possible.

When the force of an utterance is indicated in the sentence, the part of the sentence that indicates the force is what Searle (1969) called an **illocutionary force indicating device** (IFID).

For example, in *I promise I will come*, the illocutionary force of the utterance is indicated by the matrix subject and verb, *I promise*.

The illocutionary force can also be signalled by clause type (e.g. interrogative, imperative), special morphemes, etc.

Indirect requests. Declaratives can also be used to make indirect requests, e.g. “It’s cold in here”: indirect request to shut the window. How many illocutionary acts are being performed here?

3.2 Imperatives

Imperatives can perform a wide variety of different types of illocutionary acts (Condoravdi and Lauer, 2012).

Directives:

- (11) Stand at attention! command
(12) Don’t touch the hot plate! warning
(13) Hand me the salt, please request
(14) Take these pills for a week advice
(15) Please, lend me the money! plea

Wish-type uses

- (16) Get well soon! well-wish
(17) Drop dead! curse
(18) Please don’t rain! absent wish

Permissions and invitations

- (19) Okay, go out and play permission/concession
(20) Have a cookie, if you like offer

(21) Come to dinner tonight, if you like invitation

Disinterested advice

(22) [Strangers in the streets of Palo Alto.]

A: Excuse me, how do I get to San Francisco?

B: Take the train the leaves from over there in 10 minutes [points to train station]

Things that imperatives can *never* do: Promise that their contents will become true.

(23) Be at the airport at noon!

Does not mean: He promised me that I would be at the airport at noon.

(24) Stay out of trouble!

Does not mean: He promised me that I would stay out of trouble.

3.3 Interrogatives

Interrogatives perform acts too. When you ask, “When is the make-up exam going to be?” you perform an illocutionary act of making a request for information.

Not all interrogatives are requests for information. When you ask, “Can you pass the salt?” you are not ultimately interested in whether or not the hearer is able to pass the salt; you are making a request for the salt. This is an example of an *indirect speech act*.

Other uses of questions (Condoravdi and Lauer, 2012):

(25) [On an exam:] What is the formula for sulphuric acid?

(26) [B does not stop complaining about how bad the movie was]

A: Well, who insisted that we see it?

(27) [A is desperately looking for her keys] B: Could they be in the car?

(28) Senator, should taxes be raised to balance the budget?

(29) And doesn't this line bisect each of these spaces?

3.4 Additional sentence types

In addition to the major sentence types (interrogative, declarative, imperative), there are minor sentence types. Here are some (examples from Sadock and Zwicky (1985)).

suggestions, a.k.a. hortatives

(30) How about getting me a beer?

(31) What about buying a new lamp for the living room table?

(32) Why not resign?

(33) Let's tour the island.

exclamatives⁵

(34) That's so tacky!

(35) She's such a good syntactician!

(36) How tacky that is!

(37) What a good syntactician she is!

(38) Boy, does he ever have beautiful legs!

(39) Wow, can he knit!

(40) I'm amazed at how tacky that is.

imprecatives/curses

(41) Screw/Fuck/Shit on you!

(42) May your house be demolished!

optatives

(43) Oh, if he only knew how much I loved him!

(44) If only I could fly!

In languages with **evidentials**, sentences include markings to indicate the source of the information. (See Murray (2010) for a detailed formal analysis of evidentials.) **reportatives**, for example, indicate that the speaker does not have direct evidence for his claim; rather it comes as a report.

It is claimed that German has reportatives: *sollen* and *wollen* (Ehrich 2001, cf. Faller 2006).

(45) Eine Zinssenkung soll unmittelbar bevorstehen.

'A reduction in interest rates is said to be imminent.'

(46) Matthäus will in Bayern sehr beliebt sein.

'Matthäus claims to be well liked in Bavaria.'

⁵Zanutini and Portner (2003) is a nice paper on exclamatives.

4 Usage conditions

What does it mean for something to be a promise? Searle (1969) says:

- Normal input and output conditions obtain (e.g., conditions for intelligible speaking and understanding).
- S expresses the proposition that p in the utterance of T.
- In expressing that p, S predicates a future act A of S. ('Act' is to be understood broadly. It is necessary that the act be both in the future and actually performed by S. Searle claims that it is not possible to promise that someone else will do some action A.)
- H would prefer S's doing A to his not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A. (In part, this condition is to distinguish promises from threats.)
- It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events. (Otherwise, why promise?)
- S intends to do A. (This is what makes the promise **sincere**.)
- S intends that the utterance of T will place him under an obligation to do A. (In effect, this is the very essence of a promise.)
- S intends to produce in H the knowledge that the utterance of T is to count as placing S under an obligation to do A. S intends to produce that knowledge by means of the recognition of S's aforementioned intention, and he intends this intention to be recognized in virtue of (by means of) H's knowledge of the meaning of T.
- The semantical rules of the dialect spoken by S and H are such that T is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions 1–8 obtain.

All of these are required for the happy/felicitous performance of a promise. If all of the conditions are fulfilled, then the promise is felicitous; otherwise the utterance is infelicitous.

Violation of the sincerity condition: Mr. Pickwick is a Charles Dickens character who finds himself sued by his landlady for breach of promise after accidentally making her think that he was proposing to her:

"You'll think it very strange now", said the amiable Mr. Pickwick with a good humoured glance at his companion, "that I never consulted you about this matter, and never even mentioned it, till I sent your little boy out this morning, eh?"

Mrs. Bardell could only reply by a look. She had long worshipped Mr. Pickwick at a distance ...

"It'll save you a good deal of trouble, won't it?" said Mr. Pickwick.

'Oh, I never thought anything of the trouble, Sir,' replied Mrs. Bardell, '... but it is so kind of you, Mr. Pickwick, to have so much consideration for my loneliness.'

5 Indirect Speech Acts

An **indirect speech act** is "an act of speech where one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another" (Searle, 1975).

(47) Could you reach the salt?

(48) Student X: Let's go to the movies tonight.
Student Y: I have to study for an exam.

How is it that Y rejects X's proposal?

- X has made a proposal to Y which has made a statement to the proposal that he has to study for an exam.
- X assumes that Y is cooperating with the conversation and that his remark therefore is relevant.
- The relevant responses to a proposal are acceptance, rejection, counterproposal, further discussion etc.
- His literal utterance was not one of these, and was not a relevant response inference from steps 1-3.
- Because of this, he probably means more than he literally says. Assuming that his remark is relevant, his primary illocutionary act differ from the literal one.
- X knows that it takes a large amount of time to study for an exam relative to a single evening, and X knows that going to the movies usually takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening.
- Therefore, he probably cannot both go to the movies and study for an exam in one and the same evening.
- A preparatory condition on the acceptance of a proposal, or any other commissive is the ability to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (Y has to be able to make the action which is proposed by X)
- Therefore X knows that the thing that Y has said has the consequence that he probably cannot accept the proposal X made.
- Therefore his primary illocutionary point is probably to reject the proposal.

Types of indirect speech acts:

Group 1: sentences concerning Hearer's abilities to perform the act.

(49) Can you reach the salt?

(50) Could you be a little more quiet?

Group 2: sentences concerning the speakers wish or want that the hearer will do an act.

(51) I would like you to go now.

(52) I hope you will do it.

Group 3: sentences concerning the hearer doing an act

(53) Would you kindly get off my foot?

(54) Aren't you going to eat your cereal?

Group 4: sentences concerning hearers desire or willingness to do an act

(55) Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?

(56) Do you want to hand me that hammer over there on the table?

Group 5: sentences concerning reasons for doing an act

(57) You had better go now

(58) Why not stop here?

Group 6: sentences embedding one of these elements inside another; also, sentences embedding an explicit directive illocutionary verb inside one of these contexts.

(59) Would it be too much if I suggested that you could possibly make a little less noise?

(60) Might I ask you to take off your hat?

These sentences are *not* imperatives. Yet they have **directive force**; they are used as **requests**. How does this come about?

Searle says: These sentences are used with their literal meaning. So *Might I ask you to take off your hat?* is literally a request for information.

The directive force comes about through the kind of Gricean reasoning outlined above, producing a second illocutionary act.

Challenge for this view:

(61) Can you hand me that book on the top shelf?

vs.

(62) Is it the case that you at the present have the ability to hand me that book on the top shelf?

Why is the second one not usable as a request for the book?

Politeness. Why utter requests indirectly? It seems to be more polite than using an imperative. Why would that be?

But notice that some imperatives are more polite than corresponding non-imperatives:

(63) Come to the party!

(64) You can come to the party if you like.

References

Austin, J. L. (1961). Performative utterances. In *Philosophical Papers*, chapter 10. Oxford University Press.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Oxford University Press, London.

Condoravdi, C. and Lauer, S. (2012). Imperatives: Meaning and illocutionary force. In Piñón, C., editor, *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics 9*. Published online at <http://www.cssp.cnrs.fr>.

Ehrich, V. (2001). Was *nicht müssen* und *nicht können* (nicht) bedeuten können: Zum skopus der negation bei den modalverben des deutschen. In Müller, R. and Reis, M., editors, *Modalität und Modalverben im Deutschen*, volume 9, pages 149–176. Linguistische Berichte Sonderhefte.

Faller, M. (2006). Evidentiality above and below speech acts. [http:// semanticarchive.net/Archive/GZiZjBhO/](http://semanticarchive.net/Archive/GZiZjBhO/).

Murray, S. (2010). *Evidentiality and the Structure of Speech Acts*. PhD thesis, Rutgers.

Sadock, J. and Zwicky, A. (1985). Speech act distinctions in syntax. In Shopen, T., editor, *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, volume 3. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1975). Indirect speech acts. In Cole, P. and Morgan, J. L., editors, *Speech Acts*, volume 3 of *Syntax and Semantics*, pages 59–82. Academic Press, New York.

Zanuttini, R. and Portner, P. (2003). Exclamative clauses: At the syntax-semantics interface. *Language*, 3:39–81.

Types of illocutionary act

	<i>Request</i>	<i>Assert, state (that), affirm</i>	<i>Question¹</i>
Types of rule	Propositional content	Future act A of H .	Any proposition or propositional function.
	Preparatory	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> S does not know 'the answer', i.e., does not know if the proposition is true, or, in the case of the propositional function, does not know the information needed to complete the proposition truly (but see comment below¹). It is not obvious to both S and H that H will provide the information at that time without being asked.
Types of rule	Sincerity	S wants H to do A .	S wants this information.
	Essential	Counts as an attempt to get H to do A .	Counts as an attempt to elicit this information from H .

Comment:

Order and *command* have the additional preparatory rule that S must be in a position of authority over H . *Command* probably does not have the 'pragmatic' condition requiring non-obviousness. Furthermore in both, the authority relationship inflects the essential condition because the utterance counts as an attempt to get H to do A *in virtue of the authority of S over H*.

Unlike *argue* these do not seem to be essentially tied to attempting to convince. Thus "I am simply stating that p and not attempting to convince you" is acceptable, but "I am arguing that p and not attempting to convince you" sounds inconsistent.

There are two kinds of questions, (a) real questions, (b) exam questions. In real questions S wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, S wants to know if H knows.

	<i>Thank (for)</i>	<i>Advise</i>	<i>Warn</i>
Types of rule	Propositional content	Past act A done by H .	Future event or state, etc., E .
	Preparatory	A benefits S and S believes A benefits S .	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> H has some reason to believe A will benefit H. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events.
Types of rule	Sincerity	S feels grateful or appreciative for A .	S believes A will benefit H .
	Essential	Counts as an expression of gratitude or appreciation.	Counts as an undertaking to the effect that A is in H 's best interest.

Comment:

Sincerity and essential rules overlap. Thanking is just expressing gratitude in a way that, e.g., promising is not just expressing an intention.

Contrary to what one might suppose advice is not a species of requesting. It is interesting to compare "advise" with "urge", "advocate" and "recommend". Advising you is not trying to get you to do something in the sense that requesting is. Advising is more like telling you what is best for you.

Warning is like advising, rather than requesting. It is not, I think, necessarily an attempt to get you to take evasive action. Notice that the above account is of categorical not hypothetical warnings. Most warnings are probably hypothetical: "If you do not do X then Y will occur."

	<i>Greet</i>	<i>Congratulate</i>
Types of rule	Propositional content	None.
	Preparatory	S has just encountered (or been introduced to, etc.) H .
Types of rule	Sincerity	None.
	Essential	Counts as courteous recognition of H by S .

Comment:

¹ In the sense of "ask a question" not in the sense of "doubt".