Einführung in die Pragmatik und Diskurs: Speech Acts

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Let's get started.

Speech Act Theory

Motto:

Utterances *do things*.
Sometimes, they even *change the (state of the) world*.
Deixis, presuppositions, and implicatures make it abundantly clear
that a purely truth-conditional analysis of sentence meaning has
severe limitations in what it can capture.

What utterances do = speech acts

Speech acts are another central phenomenon that any pragmatic
theory (i.e., theory of language use) must account for.

Lecture Plan

- Historical Background
- Austin's Theory of Speech Acts ("Thesis")
- Searle's Classification of Speech Acts
- The Performative Hypothesis ("Antithesis")
- The Literal Force Hypothesis and its Problems
- Idiom Theory
- Inference Theory
- Context-Change Theory

Basic reading:
Levinson 1983, Chapter 5; Jurafsky and Martin 2000, Chapter 19;
Davis: Chapter 15

Historical Background

- **Logical Positivism** (1930s): A sentence is only meaningful iff it can be verified (i.e. tested for truth and falsity).
- **Wittgenstein 1958:** "Meaning is use": Utterances are only explicable in relation to the activities, or language-games, where they participate.
- **Austin 1962**: *How to do things with words*:
  "The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which we are engaged in elucidating" Sets out to demolish the view of language that makes truth-conditions central to language understanding. Rather, see what acts are performed by utterances.

Austin's Argumentation

Argues that truth-conditions are NOT central to language understanding. Rather language use is. Utterances not only *say* things, they *do* things.

Austin's Argumentation:

1. Distinction between *constatives* (Konstativen) (sentences used to make true/false statements) and *performatives* (Performativen) (sentences that change the state of the world) on the basis of linguistic form.

2. Performatives cannot be false, but they can *fail to do things* when their *felicity conditions* (Gelingensbedingungen) are not fulfilled. Note: constatives also have felicity conditions!

3. Performatives are not a special class of sentences. Some sentences explicitly performative, others can be implicitly so.

4. The dichotomy between constatives and performatives does not really exist. Rather, they are each a special case of a set of **illocutionary acts** (illokutionäre Akte).

Constative vs. Performative Sentences

Constatives: used to make true/false statements or assertions

(1) Schnee ist grün. Snow is green.

Performatives: used to *change* the world. Performatives are ordinary declarative sentences which are not used with any intention of making true or false statements. (They are not true/false.)

(2) Ich wette mit dir, daß es morgen regnet. I bet you 50 pence it will rain tomorrow.

(3) Ich entschuldige mich. I apologize.

(4) Ich erhebe Einspruch. I object.

(5) Ich vermache dir meinen Rembrandt. I bequeath to you my Rembrandt.

(6) Ich warne dich! I warn you.

(7) Ich taufe dieses Schiff auf den Namen „Anna". I christen this ship the Anna.

(8) Hiermit erkläre ich Sansibar den Krieg. I hereby declare war on Zanzibar.

Felicity conditions for performatives

Gelingensbedingungen (felicity conditions): the conditions that must be fulfilled for a performative sentence to succeed.

(9) Ich erkläre Sie hiermit zu Mann und Frau.
I hereby declare you man and wife.

Felicity conditions for performatives

Gelingensbedingungen (felicity conditions): the conditions that must be fulfilled for a performative sentence to succeed.

(10)   Ich erkläre Sie hiermit zu Mann und Frau.
       I hereby declare you man and wife.

A.   (i) There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect (e.g., wedding, declaring war, christening, betting, etc.).
     (ii) The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure (e.g., wedding: priest + bride + groom + witnesses; war declaration: head of state).

B.   The procedure must be executed
     (i) correctly (e.g., right words) and (ii) completely (e.g., bet-uptake).

C.   Often (i) the persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified then the relevant parties must so do (e.g., carry out marriage, go to war, pay a bet).

When felicity conditions are not fulfilled, performatives can go wrong, i.e. **fail to do things**.
Violations of felicity conditions are of two types:

- violations of A and B: **misfires** (Versager)
  = intended actions do not occur
- violations of C: **abuses** (Missbräuche)
  = sentence uttered insincerely

Explicit vs. Implicit Performatives

Explicit Performatives have a specific linguistic structure, i.e. the **Performative Normal Form (PNF)**: 1st person singular, present tense, allows "hereby", "performative" main verb, etc.

(11) Ich warne Sie (hiermit). I (hereby) warn you.

(12) ??Ich schlage jetzt hiermit die Eier schaumig. (no performative verb)

Implicit Performatives: However, a sentence that does not have all (or any) features of PNF can nevertheless function as a performative. Examples:

(13) *Sie sind hiermit gewarnt!*   (not 1. Person Sg.)

(14) *Achtung!*   (no PNF features)

(15) *Du wirst dir noch die Finger verbrennen!* (no PNF features)

On the other hand, a sentence in performative NF need not be used as a performative at all:

(16) A: *How do you get me to throw all these parties?*

B: *I promise to come.* (=PNF, but not a performative)

≈ I get you to throw all these parties by promising that I will come.

Conclusion: performatives are not a special class of sentences; rather the term "performative" designates a **function** that any utterance can have.

Performative **and** Constative

Final problems with the constative/performative distinction:

1. An utterance can be both constative ("truth-bearer") and performative ("action-performer"):

(17) Da kommt ein Gewitter! A storm is coming!

As Constative: Prediction (i.e. true or false)

As Performative: Warning etc.

2. Constatives and performatives are both subject to felicity conditions

(18) Ich vermache dir meinen Rembrandt.

infelicitous if speaker has no Rembrandt

(19) Johns Kinder sind glücklich.

infelicitous if John has no children (due to presupposition failure)

When felicity conditions do not hold, one can argue that these sentences are neither true nor false, just inappropriate.

Performative **and** Constative

3. Just like there are degrees of felicity, one can argue that there are degrees of truth and falsity. e.g.,

(20)   France is hexagonal.

(21)   Oxford is 60 km from London.

Summary:

- One and the same sentence can be both constative and performative
- Constatives and performatives are both subject to felicity conditions
- Both felicity (which characterises performatives) and truth (which characterises constatives) are gradual matters

Conclusion: Constatives and performatives are not necessarily disjoint phenomena.

All utterances have both a (propositional) **meaning** (they say things) and a **force** (they do things). A theory should clarify in what ways, by uttering sentences, one might be said to be performing actions.

Speech Act Types

Austin distinguishes three kinds of acts an utterance simultaneously performs:

Locutionary Act/Lokutionärer Akt: The utterance of a sentence with a particular sense and reference.
(e.g., *I will come back.*)

Illocutionary Act/Illokutionärer Akt: the making of a statement, offer, promise etc. in uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional force associated with it.
(e.g., a promise, or a threat etc.)

Perlocutionary Act/Perlokutionärer Akt: bringing about effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterances.
(e.g., making hearer happy, angry, or scared etc.)

In practice, the term **speech act** has come to refer exclusively to the illocutionary act.

Searles further development of Speech Act Theory

- relates illocutionary force to Grice's communicative intention (Bedeutung-nn)
- felicity conditions are not only dimensions along which an expression can go wrong, but also serve to distinguish different kinds of illocutionary forces
- classification of speech acts

Felicity conditions (according to Searle)

- propositional content, preparatory preconditions, conditions on sincerity, essential condition
- *Ich verspreche, dass ich morgen vorbeikomme*
    1. The speaker said (prop. content) he would perform a future action.
    2. S intends to come   (sincerity)
    3. S believes he can do it   (preparatory)
    4. S thinks he wouldn't do it anyway, under normal conditions (preparatory)
    5. S thinks that H wants him to come   (preparatory)
    6. S intends to obligate himself to come by uttering U (essential)
    7. Both S and H understand U
    8. They are both conscious, normal human beings
    9. They find themselves in a normal situation (e.g. not acting in a play)

Searle's Classification of Speech Acts

Searle groups illocutionary acts into five basic kinds:

- **Representatives:** commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed propositions (e.g. asserting, concluding)
- **Directives:** attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something (e.g. request, question)
- **Commissives:** commit the speaker to some future course of action (e.g. promise, offer, threat)
- **Expressives:** express a psychological state (e.g. thanks, apologies, welcome, congratulation)
- **Declarations:** effect changes in the institutional state of affairs (e.g., declaring war, christening)

Speech Act Theory: Summary

- All utterances serve to express propositions and to perform actions
- Illocutionary speech acts cannot be explained by truth conditions
- The (illocutionary) speech act is associated **by convention** with the form of the utterance In English the normal form for illocutionary speech acts is *I (hereby) V_p you (that) S* where V_p is a performative verb conjugated in the simple present indicative active
- Illocutionary force is specified by a set of felicity conditions which may be classified (cf. Searle) as propositional content conditions, preparatory conditions (real-world prerequisites), sincerity conditions, and the essential condition.
- Felicity conditions specify how the context has to be in order for an utterance to perform the type of act it is conventionally associated with.

- **Opposing position (Lakoff 1972, Saddock 1977):** no need for a special theory of illocutionary force because these phenomena can be described with standard theories of syntax and semantics
- PH: The deep structure of a sentences corresponds to the performative normal form.

(22)   Schnee ist grün. The snow is green.

(23)   Ich behaupte hiermit, dass Schnee grün ist. I state (that) the snow is green.

- Felicity conditions on speech acts are just part of the meaning of the performative verb.
- A performative sentence is true simply by virtue of being felicitously said.

What the PH can explain:

Why certain performative adverbs can appear in sentences without explicit performative clauses:

(24) Ehrlich, ich trinke lieber Tee. Honestly, I'd rather have tea.

(25) Wie spät ist es, weil ich um 8 gehen muss. What's the time, because I've got to go out at eight?

Semantic problem for the PH:

(26) Die Welt ist eine Scheibe. The Earth is flat.

(27) Ich behaupte, dass die Welt eine Scheibe ist.
       I state that the Earth is flat.

By the PH, sentence 1 is true and has sentence 2 as its deep structure. If that's so, both sentences should have the same truth conditions, which is clearly wrong.

- The Performative Hypothesis as it was formulated in the 70s has many problems, which make it untenable
- On the other hand, both PH and the speech act theory make the problematic assumption of **Literal Force Hypothesis (LFH)**

Literal Force Hypothesis (LFH)

Both the PH and the approach of Austin and Searle share the view that illocutionary force is built into the sentence form: **Literal Force Hypothesis**

(i) Explicit performatives have the force named by the performative verb in the matrix clause.

(ii) The three major sentence types in English (imperative, interrogative, and declarative) have the forces traditionally associated with them (ordering/requesting, questioning, and stating)

Literal Force Hypothesis

- Proponents of the PH are committed to the LFH since by PH, (i) (from previous slide) is assumed and (ii) (same) derives from the fact that the three sentence types are reflexes/realizations of the underlying performative verbs of requesting, asking, and asserting.
- Austin and Searle are also committed to the LFH in that they both assume a conventional link between sentence form and sentence force.
- However, there are problems with the LFH ...

Problem 1. There are many sentences that fail to have (exactly) the force predicted by the LFH, and which therefore violate this hypothesis.

(28) Kannst du mir das Salz reichen? Can you pass me the salt?

(29) Komm, setz dich doch! Come sit down!

A possible answer: an utterance always has the literal force predicted by the LFH - **direct speech act**; but it may also have some other illocutionary force - **indirect speech act**.

Direct and Indirect Speechacts

Examples

(30) Mach bitte die Tür zu! (Imp)
Direct speech act: Request to shut the door.

There are many other possible forms which have various direct speech acts, but all have the request to shut the door as an indirect speech act:

(31) Ich möchte, dass du die Tür schließt. (Decl)

(32) Ich wäre dir sehr dankbar, wenn du die Tür schließen würdest. (Decl)

(33) Are you able by any chance to close the door? (Int)

(34) Would you close the door? (Int)

(35) Won't you close the door? (Int)

(36) Hast du die Tür vergessen? (Int)

(37) Wie wäre es mit etwas weniger Durchzug? (Int)

(38) Nun, Julia, was tun große Leute, wenn sie hereinkommen? (Int)

In day-to-day speech, most usages are indirect.

Problem 2. Some distributional regularities depend on illocutionary force, independently of whether this force is realized as a direct or indirect speech act.

Example:

The word "please" occurs in preverbal position in direct and indirect requests, but not in non-requests.

(39) a. Please shut the door.
   b. I want you to please shut the door.
   c. Would you please shut the door?
   d. ?? The sun please rises in the West.

Two puzzles for the LFH

1. How to relate linguistic form to illocutionary force?
2. How to explain why sentences can show syntactic reflexes (syntaktisch Merkmale) of their indirect forces?

Two proposed solutions:

- Idiom theory
- Inference theory

Alternative to LFH: Context-Change-Theory

Idiom theory (Sadock 1974; Green 1975)

Idiom: Fixed expressions whose meaning is not (or at least partly not) derivable from the meaning of their parts; meaning is not compositional.

Example:
Ins Gras beißen is an idiom for *sterben*.

Main idea of idiom theory: All linguistic forms that perform indirect speech acts are in fact idioms.

Example:
Könntest du VP? is an idiom with the meaning
Ich bitte dich zu VP!

Advantages of idiom theory

- Explains the rigid format of some indirect speech acts, e.g. the request *Can you VP?* is okay, *Are you able to VP?* is not so good

- Some forms are difficult to interpret literally e.g. *Could you VP?*

- Explains some of the distributional reactions imposed by force: if indirect speech acts are idioms for the corresponding direct speech act, they have the same underlying structure.

Problems of idiom theory

- Both the literal and idiomatic readings might be available simultaneously:

  (40) A: Can you please lift that bag for me?
       B: Sure I can. Here you are.

- From the argument that idiom theory provides an explanation for distributional phenomena it follows that for every grammatical reflex of indirect force, there must be an idiom, but then the lexicon would need to be infinite, e.g.

  (41) I'd like you to please X.
       May I remind you to please X.
       Would you mind if I was to ask you to please X.
       I am sorry that I have to tell you to please X.

- Idioms introduce ambiguity: is the literal or the figurative meaning intended? How is the intended reading determined?
  $\rightarrow$ Inference theory

Various theories, similar postulates:

- The literal meaning and force of an utterance is computed by and available to the participants.
- For an utterance to be an indirect speech act, there must be an **inference trigger**, i.e. some indication that the literal meaning/force is inadequate given the current context.
- Rules of inference are used to derive the indirect force from the literal meaning/force plus the context
- Pragmatically sensitive rules govern the distribution of e.g. "please" in both direct and indirect speech acts.

Gordon and Lakoff's Inference theory

- Literal meaning and force are computed using PH
- ISA occurs when literal force is blocked by context
- To state or question the felicity conditions of a given speech act suffices to indirectly perform this speech act

Example:

Ich hätte gerne ein Eis states a sincerity condition for a request (i.e. S must want what S requests). Hence the indirect speech act performed is a request.

cf. *Könntest du mir ein Eis kaufen*

Context-Change Theories

- Basic ideas:
  - Reject the notion of "literal force" (LFH)
  - Concentrate on explaining how a given form is mapped onto some force (SA) in a context.

  Determining SA is then a pragmatic problem and has no direct and simple correlation with sentence-form and meaning.

- Advantage of avoiding "literal force":
  May I remind you that P?
  Literal force: Request for permission to remind. This makes no sense as uttering the sentence immediately achivese the reminding.

Context-Change Theories

- Consistent with the general use of the three basic sentence types **Example:**
  Imperatives are rarely actually used as requests or commands
    - Instruktionen z.B. Rezepte: *Stirr continously!*
    - Angebote z.B. *Nimm dir einen Keks!*
    - Willkommen heißen z.B. *Komm doch rein!*
    - Wünsche z.B. *Komm gesund wieder!*

Context-Change Theories

Hamblin 71, Ballmer 78, Stalnaker 78 and Gazdar 81

- The illocutionary force of a sentence is modelled in terms of its effect on the context.
- A context is a set of propositions describing the beliefs, the knowledge etc of the discourse participants.
- Speech acts are viewed as operations on contexts, i.e. functions from contexts to contexts.

Assertion that p maps a context where the speaker S is not committed to p into a context where S is committed to p.

Promise that p maps a context where the speaker S is not committed to bringing about the state of affairs described in p into a context where S is so committed.

Order that p maps a context where H is not required by S to bring about the state of affairs described by p into one in which H is so required.

Advantage: formalizable!

Conclusions

- Every utterance has an illocutionary force (performs a speech act): it brings about a context change.
- The illocutionary force of an utterance is determined not by form alone but by a complex interaction between form and context.

Wittgenstein: there are as many speech acts as there are roles in the indefinite variety of language games that humans can invent.