pragmatics and discourse

speech acts
or
can you pass me the salt?

magdalena wolska

magda@coli.uni-sb.de

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what (among others) we do in the process of speaking:

aspire a consonant
construct a clause
insult a stranger
start a war . . .

$\rightarrow$ pre-theoretical speech "acts"

theory of *speech acts*:

some acts can be characterized by their formal features (e.g. imperative ==
request, "Hi!" == greeting) $\rightarrow$ conventional aspect
with other acts, the achievment cannot be linked to conventions (e.g. "Oh, I love
roses" == thank you) $\rightarrow$ speaker's intention, hearer's recognition thereof given
the circumstances

key observation:

with words we *do things*

<div style="text-align:center">Can you pass me the salt?</div>

(some) utterances can even *change the state of the world*

<div style="text-align:center">I christen this ship the Joseph Stalin.</div>

speech acts: what utterances do

purely truth-conditional analysis? (of deixis? implicatures? . . .)

plan for today

- Austin's theory of speech acts ("Thesis")
- Searle's classification of speech acts
- the Performative Hypothesis ("Antithesis")
- the Literal Force Hypothesis
- Idiom Theory
- Inference Theory
- Context-Change Theory

bit of history

- **'30 logical positivism**: sentence is meaningful iff it can be verified (i.e. tested for truth and falsity).

- **Wittgenstein 1958:** "meaning is use": utterances can be only exaplained in relation to the activities, or language-games, in which 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"

  $\rightarrow$ radical departure from viewing language mainly in terms of truth-conditions; focus on what acts are performed by way of words

Austin's "Pragmatic Thesis"

Austin considers utterances like "I christen this ship the Joseph Stalin" or "I now pronounce you man and wife"

they seem to be *doing* something, rather than merely *saying* something

such sentences Austing dubbes **performatives** in contrast to **constatives**

observe:

1. performatives cannot be false, but they can *fail to do things* when their **felicity conditions** are not fulfilled

2. performatives are not a special class of sentences – some sentences are explicitly performative, others can be implicitly so

performative/constative dichotomy does not really exist – both are special cases of **illocutionary acts**

constatives vs. performatives

constatives: utterances used to make true/false statements or assertions

    (1)   The snow is green.

performatives utterances used to *change* the world

performative are ordinary declarative sentences which are not used with any intention of making true or false statements → they are not true/false

    (2)   I declare war on Liliput.
    (3)   I apologise.
    (4)   I object.

how can things go wrong? constatives fail when they are false

failed performatives?

    not false, but rather improper, unsuccessful → **infelicitous**

Felicity Conditions → conditions that must be fulfilled for a performative to succeed

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

B. the procedure must be executed
    (i) correctly (e.g., using the right words) and (ii) completely (according to conventional expectations)

C. (i) persons involved must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, the relevant parties must follow the rules of conduct

if conditions not fulfilled performatives may **fail to do things**

categories of infelicities:

- misinvocations, which disallow a purported act (see A. above)

- misexecutions, in which the act is impaired by errors or omissions (see B.)

- abuses, where the act succeeds, but participants do not have the expected thoughts and feelings (C.i.)

examples of violations of FCs:

spouse to spouse in a society without divorce: "I hereby divorce you"

random individual saying the words of the marriage ceremony

a clergyman baptising a baby with a wrong name; welcoming someone and addressing the wrong person

A: Wilt thou have the woman to thy wedded wife ... so long as you shall live?
B: ??? Mhm.

A: I bet you 6 pence it will rain
B. Oh, rain would be great!

advise somebody to do something when aware that this is not to her advantage; sentence a defendant guilty knowing he is not

place a bet without intending to pay it off; to promise to do something with no intention to do it; "paper marriage"

the performative formula

explicit performatives have a specific linguistic structure → **normal form** (NF) performatives: 1st pers. sing., present tense, allows "hereby", "performative" main verb etc.

(5) I (hereby) warn you.

BUT utterances that do not have the NF of a performative can nevertheless be performative → **implicit performatives**:

(6)   *You are hereby warned.*   (not 1.p.sg.)

(7)   *Watch out!*   (none of NF characteristics)

(8)   *You are going to burn your hands.*

AND a sentence in performative NF need not be used as a performative at all:

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

      B: *I promise to come*

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

Performative !and! Constative Utterances

Final problems with the distinction between constatives and performatives:

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

  (10) A storm is coming.

2. Constatives and performatives are both subject to felicity conditions When felicity conditions do not obtain, one can argue these sentences are neither true nor false, just inappropriate (cf. presupposition failure!)

3. Both felicity and truth are gradual matters e.g.,

  (11) France is hexagonal.

Conclusion: Constatives and performatives are not necessarily disjoint phenomena

Theory of Speech Acts

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: The utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference.
(e.g., *I will come back.*)

Illocutionary act: 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: 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.

Follow-up

- Searle's work
- work relating ilocutionary force to Grice's communicative intention

Searle's Classification of Speech Acts

- **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

1. All utterances serve to express propositions and to perform actions
2. The (illocutionary) speech act is associated **by convention** with the form of the utterance
3. 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
4. Illocutionary force is specified by a set of felicity conditions which may be classified (cf. Searle):
   - preparatory conditions: real-world prerequisites
   - propositional content conditions
   - sincerity conditions: restriction on beliefs, feelings and intentions of Speaker
5. 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.

Illocutionary force is an aspect of meaning that cannot be explained in terms of T or F. It indicates what the addressee is to do with the proposition expressed by the sentence (e.g. believe it, make it true) and must therefore be explained by a **theory of action** (not a theory of truth-conditional meaning).

"Semantic Antithesis"

P&D SS07 speech acts

The Performative Hypothesis

- Lakoff 1972, Saddock 1977 (Generative Semantics): negate Austin and Searle's position.

- No need for a special theory of illocutionary force because the phenomena are assimilable to standard theories of syntax and semantics.

- Reduction of illocutionary force to matters of truth and falsity.

PH: "The deep structure of a sentence corresponds to the performative normal form."

(12)   The snow is green.
(12′)   I state (that) the snow is green.

- Hence every sentence has illocutionary force (transformation does not affect meaning)

- Felicity conditions on speech acts are simply part of the meaning of the performative verb.

- A performative sentence is true simply by virtue of being felicitously said.

The Performative hypothesis

The PH is justifiable on independent grounds, as it captures a number of syntactic generalisations. For example:

"Performative" adverbs argument: adverbs modifying performative clauses can appear in sentences without such overt performative clauses.

(13) a. Frankly, I prefer white meat.
      b. I tell you frankly, I prefer white meat.
(14) a. What's for lunch, because I'm very hungry.
      b. What's for lunch? I ask you because I'm very hungry.

On the other hand, the PH has various problems.

Problems for the PH

1. Performatives do not always refer to the speaker:

(15) **The company** hereby undertakes to replace any product that fails to please.

2. The performative clause is not always the highest matrix clause.

(16) We regret that the company is forced to **hereby request** you to tender your resignation.

3. Some sentences involve more than one illocutionary force, e.g., an assertion and a question:

(17) Does Jon, who could never learn calculus, intend to do PhD in Math?

(18) Wittgenstein was an Oxford philosopher, wasn't he?

Semantic Problems for the PH

1. Interpretation of assertions as performatives:

(19)   I state that snow is green.

(20)   Snow is green.

By the PH, (19) is true, and (20) has (19) as deep structure. Since transformations preserve meaning, (19) and (20) should have the same meaning i.e. (20) should be true – which is clearly wrong.

2. Distribution of performative adverbs:
Some can **only** modify **explicit** performatives.

(21)   a. I hereby order you to eat.
        b. ??? Hereby eat!

Summary

- The Performative Hypothesis as it was formulated in the 70's 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**

Literal Force Hypothesis (LFH)

Both "Thesis" and "Antethesis" share the view that illocutionary force is built into 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 namely, ordering (or requesting), questioning and stating.

Proponents of the PH are committed to the LFH since by PH, (i) is assumed and (ii) derives from the fact that imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives are reflexes of the corresponding 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.

But, the LFH has problems . . .

LFH: Problems

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

(22)   Can you pass me the salt?

(23)   Come to see the exhibition!

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 (ISA)**.

Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

(24)   Please shut the door!   (Imp)
       Direct speech act: request to shut the door.

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

(25)   I want you to close the door.   (Decl)
       I'd be much obliged if you could close the door.   (Decl)
(26)   Can you close the door?   (Int)
(27)   Would you mind closing the door?   (Int)
(28)   Did you forget the door?   (Int)
(29)   How about a bit less breeze?   (Int)
(30)   Pete, what do big people do when they come in?   (Int)

Caveat: Many forms to realize a form; most usages indirect!

LFH: Problems

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

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

(31)   a. Please shut the door.
          b. I want you to please shut the door.
          c. Would you please shut the door?
          d. How about a bit less breeze please?
          d. ?? The sun please rises in the West.

LFH: Conclusion

There are two puzzles for the LFH

1. How to relate form to force?
2. How to explain why sentences can bear syntactic reflexes of their indirect forces?

Three types of accounts proposed:

- Idiom theory
- Inference Theories
- Abandon LFH! $\rightarrow$ Context-change Theories

Idiom Theory

(Sadock 1974; Green 1975)

Forms that perform ISA are in fact idioms i.e. their meaning is not compositional e.g.

Can you VP? is an idiom meaning
I request you to VP!
in the same way that *to kick the bucket*
is an idiom meaning *to die*

Advantages of idiom theory

- Explains the rigid format of some ISA e.g. the request *Can you VP?* is ok, *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 restrictions imposed by force: if ISA are idioms for the corresponding direct SA, they have the same underlying structure.

Problems of Idiom Theory

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

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

- Whenever there is a grammatical reflex of indirect force, there must be an idiom but then the lexicon should be infinite (which is wrong) e.g.

  (33)   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. etc.

- Idioms introduce ambiguity: is the literal or the figurative meaning intended? How is the intended reading determined? Need inference theory.

Inference Theories

General postulates:

- The literal meaning and force of an utterance is computed by and available to the participants.

- For an utterance to be an ISA, 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 and the context

- Pragmatically sensitive rules govern the distribution of e.g. "please" in both direct and indirect SA.

Two approaches to where the inference principles come from:

- Gordon and Lakoff (1971, 1975)

- Searle (1972)

Inference Theories

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 FC of a given SA suffices to indirectly perform this SA

For example, *I want some more ice-cream* states a sincerity condition on request (i.e. S must want what S requests). Hence the ISA performed is a request.

Searle's Inference Theory

- Literal meaning and force handled by SA theory
- Inference triggering due to Grice's theory of conversational co-operation

- Inference principles based on conversational implicatures

Does not rely on FC. Assimilates ISA's to other phenomena where communicative intention and sentence-meaning differ, e.g., metaphor and irony.

Context-Change Theories

- A more radical approach to SA and ISA:
  - 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 achieves the reminding.

- Consistent with the general use of the three basic sentence types. E.g., the

literal interpretation of imperatives as commands and requests is irrelevant in most cases:

– Instructions (e.g., recipes: *Stirr continuously*)
– Offers e.g. *Have another drink!*
– Welcoming e.g. *Come in!*
– Wishes e.g. *Have a good time!*

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.

Formalizable!

Conclusion

- 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.

Beyond theories speech acts

- **Conversational Analysis:** Shows that the function an utterance performs is in large part due to the place it occupies within a specific conversation sequence.

- **Ethnography of speaking** (Cross-cultural study of language usage): Shows that the function an utterance performs is in large part due to the social situation in which the utterance takes place.

- **Computational Linguistics: Discourse and Dialog Modeling** Development of algorithms that capture generalizations about utterance functions in context, to support various NLP applications, e.g., dialogue systems.