

Lecture 14 Force of an utterance: speech acts

1. Oxford and Cambridge, 1930s-1950s: **ordinary language philosophy**
(J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*) → J. Searle

‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ L. Wittgenstein, 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, §43.

Language games Departure from truth conditions

Now associated with **meaning eliminativism**: ‘computing directly the contextual sense which an expression assumes on a particular occasion of use on the basis of the contextual senses which that expression had on previous occasions of use – without ever abstracting, or needing to abstract, “the” linguistic meaning of the expression type’. (Recanati 2005: 189)

Speech act theory is a radical form of **contextualism**:

‘Without contextual modulation, no proposition could be expressed – that is the gist of contextualism’ (Recanati 2005: 180)

speech act (vs. proposition); language use (vs. formal methods of truth-conditional semantics)

‘How are you?’
‘Enjoy yourself.’
‘Don’t touch it!’

Examples of ‘doing things with words’: to convey information; to request information; to give orders; to make requests; to make threats; to give warnings; to give advice

2. J. L. Austin (1962): constatives vs. performatives
performative verb (*request, warn, declare*) ‘I hereby pronounce you husband and wife.’

? ‘France is hexagonal.’

? ‘I state I am to blame.’

felicity/infelicity (vs. truth/falsity)

A speech act is infelicitous (‘unhappy’) when the conditions are not met for its appropriateness (cf. marriage ceremony). Felicity conditions – e.g. baptizing a child requires necessary authority and circumstances.

Felicity conditions for a promise:

- (1) there has to be a sentence used with the content of the promise (**propositional content condition**);
- (2) the promise must be (a) about the event beneficial to the addressee, otherwise it would be a warning or threat: ‘If you do it again, I promise I will hit you.’ and (b) about the event that is not going to happen anyway (**preparatory conditions**);
- (3) the promiser must have an intention to make a promise (**sincerity condition**);
- (4) the promiser must have the awareness of putting him/herself under an obligation to perform the action (**essential condition**).

Felicity conditions for questioning:

- (1) The speaker does not know the truth about the state of affairs.
- (2) The speaker wants to know the truth about the state of affairs.
- (3) The speaker believes that the hearer may be able to supply the information about the state of affairs that he/she wants.

J. L. Austin (1962) → types of speech acts: **locutionary**, the act of speaking, **illocutionary**, the act of declaring a fact, asking, etc., and **perlocutionary**, persuading the addressee, exerting influence on the audience. **Illocutionary force** and **perlocutionary effect**

‘Shoot her!’

locution: the act of saying ‘Shoot her’ and meaning shoot by ‘shoot’ and her by ‘her’.

illocution: the act of urging, advising, ordering the addressee to shoot her.

perlocution: the act of persuading, making the addressee shoot her.

What is a perlocution in one culture can be an illocution in another.

3. Searle and Vanderveken: **illocutionary logic**

F(P) illocutionary force F (I promise) and propositional content P (I will do it)

‘I do not promise to do it.’ $\neg F(P)$

‘I promise not to do it.’ $F(\neg P)$

4. Searle’s Speech Act Theory: classification

assertives (a.k.a. representatives) (stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, claiming, reporting, ...; **word-to-world direction of fit**);

directives (ordering, commanding, requesting, advising, recommending, ...; **world-to-word direction of fit**);

commissives (promising, vowing, offering, ...; **world-to-word direction of fit**);

expressives (congratulating, thanking, pardoning, blaming, praising, condoling, ...; **no direction of fit**);

declarations (excommunicating, resigning, dismissing, christening, naming, appointing, sentencing, ...; **world-to word & word-to-world direction of fit**).

The number of categories of speech acts is arbitrary.

one verb – two speech acts:

‘She advised us that we have passed the exam.’ (representative)

‘She advised us to do it.’ (directive)

Searle: Differences in illocutionary verbs are not a sure guide to differences in illocutionary acts: cf. ‘I warn you...’, ‘I promise ...’.

5. Against classification:

For many speech acts, the recognition of their category membership is not necessary in communication: ‘The weather will be warmer tomorrow.’ (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 245). Predicting, asserting, hypothesizing, suggesting, claiming, denying, warning or threatening.

vs. *institutional speech acts* that have to be identified in order to be performed: bidding in bridge, declaring war, promising or thanking.

6. [?]Indirect Speech Acts:

A: Let's go to the movies tonight.
B: I have to study for an exam.

'Can you pass the salt?'

'...the reason I can ask you to pass the salt by saying "Can you pass the salt?" but not by saying "Salt is made of sodium chloride" or "Salt is mined in the Tatra mountains" is that your ability to pass the salt is a preparatory condition for requesting you to pass the salt in a way that the other sentences are not related to requesting you to pass the salt.'

Searle (1975 in Martinich, ed. 1996: 176).

'The rubbish bin is full.'

'The battery's gone flat.'

'You are to leave tomorrow.'

clues: intonation, tone of voice, the presence of 'please', 'let's', power relationships, situational context

Q: Should we supplement the theory of speech acts with the theory of implicature?

**Literal Force Hypothesis:* Explicit performatives have the force assigned by the performative verb. Imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives have ordering, questioning, and stating associated with them by default. Otherwise, a SA is an ISA.

Idiom Theory: semantically equivalent forms are not compositionally analysed but are recorded whole in the lexicon ('Can you VP?', 'Would you VP?', 'I want you to VP.', 'Would you mind VP?' = 'I request you to VP.')

Arguments against the Idiom Theory:

-compositionality of meaning of ISAs

-comparability of meaning of ISAs across cultures

-the role of the literal meaning of the sentence in the overall meaning of the ISA:

A: 'Can you pass the salt?'

B: 'Yes, I can. Here you are.'

Context Theory: SAs as functions from contexts to contexts: an utterance is a contribution to the background assumptions. No ISA/DSA distinction

Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*: There are as many types of speech acts as there are roles in a 'language game'.

7. *Cross-cultural perspective:*

A: 'Can you pass the salt?'

B: 'Yes, I can. (Here you are.)'

A: 'It is a pretty coat.'

B: 'Oh, it's just an old rag.'

All classifications of speech acts are ethnocentric, culture-dependent.

Wierzbicka (1991:25): “From the outset, studies in speech acts have suffered from an astonishing ethnocentrism, and to a considerable degree they continue to do so.”

Polish: ‘I advise you: tell him the truth’ – direct, polite
 English: ‘If I were you I would tell him the truth.’ – indirect, polite
 ‘Why don’t you tell him the truth?’ – indirect, polite

‘I am very unhappy about that.’
 vs. ‘I am rather unhappy about that.’ (hedges & intensifiers)

It is contentious to speak about ‘logic of conversation’ (Grice 1975) and universal rules of politeness (Searle 1975).

8. *The history of speech acts:*

- Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* (on judgements)
- Thomas Reid, 1788, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Essay 5, *Of Morals*, ch. 6, ‘Of the Nature and Obligation of a Contract’ (on ‘social operations’: promising, asking, giving commands, refusing, or threatening, and ‘solitary acts’: judging, intending, deliberating, desiring) = a response to David Hume for whom speech acts, e.g. promising, are a form of a mental act, e.g. intending.
- Franz Brentano, 1874, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* → Edmund Husserl, 1900-1901, *Logical Investigations*. Meaning is a social phenomenon, established during the act of communication: ‘Sit down!’ = ‘Your sitting down is my current request.’
 → Munich phenomenologists: Adolf Reinach on promising, questioning, requesting, commanding, accusing, etc.; Alexander Pfander on questions, assertions, reports, thankings, recommendings, requests, warnings, promisings, invitings, summonings, incitements, prescribing, orders, decrees, prohibitions, commands, laws; Johannes Daubert on a proposition combined with an act → Anton Marty → Karl Bühler.

Suggested reading

Introductory:

Austin 1962
 Searle 1965, 1969, 1975, 1979a, 1989
 Jaszczolt 2002, ch 14
 Levinson 1983, ch 5
 Huang 2007, ch 4
 Mey 2001, ch 5
 Morris 2007, ch 12

Advanced/detailed:

Austin 1961
 Searle 1983
 Wittgenstein 1953
 Sperber and Wilson 1986, ch 4.10
 Dascal 1994
 Wierzbicka 1991, ch 2
 Searle and Vanderveken 1985 (very advanced)
 Vanderveken 1990a, b; 1991 (very advanced)
 Harnish 1990

On the history of speech acts:

Smith 1990
 Mulligan 1987