Notes on Speech Acts

Jean Mark Gawron

San Diego State

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Austin (1962)

A theory based on Communicative Acts

1. How to do things with words
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3. Utterances as actions with the purpose of achieving a goal
4. There are other “action types” besides assertion (constatives)
Performatives vs. Constatives

1. I (hereby) christen this ship the *Titanic*!
2. Thank you, Gawain.
3. I promise you I will give you a chocolate!
4. I promise you a chocolate!
5. I promise you she will never bother you again.
6. I promised you I would give you a chocolate.
7. John promises you he will give a chocolate.
### Austin’s insight

All utterances execute multiple actions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acts of speaking</th>
<th>Act type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utterances</td>
<td>locutionary</td>
<td>uttering sounds, using words in conformity with grammar, referring to individuals of actions, . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in speaking</td>
<td>illocutionary</td>
<td>christening, promising, requesting, ordering . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preliminary typology

Verdictives acts that consist of delivering a finding, e.g., acquit, hold (as a matter of law), read something as, etc.

Exercitives acts of giving a decision for or against a course of action, e.g., appoint, dismiss, order, sentence, etc. (You should also feel free to use McCawley’s subclass advisories, as in you are hereby advised to resign.)

Commissives acts whose point is to commit the speaker to a course of action, e.g., contract, give one’s word, declare one’s intention, etc. Offers, acceptances of offers.

Behabitives expressions of attitudes toward the conduct or attributes of others, e.g., apologize, thank, congratulate, welcome, praise, censure, . . .

Expositives acts of expounding of views, conducting of arguments, and clarifying, e.g., deny, inform, concede, refer, assert (?), explain(?) . . .
### Searle (1969)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)</th>
<th>F(p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Propositional content</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFID</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prop</td>
<td>I promise that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will come</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- I promise not to come.
- I do not promise to come.
Felicity conditions/constitutive rules I

Only constatives may be true or false. Of the drunk who smashes a bottle against a docked ship and proclaims, “I hereby christen you the Joseph Stalin” we may say, “The christening was infelicitous.” Felicity involves conditions on F, p, S (speaker), and H (Hearer), and utterance (U).

Promise

- p predicates some future act A of S
- H must prefer S’s doing A to his not doing A
- A is not something S would do anyway in the normal course of events
- S must intend to do A
- U counts as the undertaking of an obligation by S to do A.
The Hypothesis

Surface: John is bald.

\[
\text{[performative} \uparrow \text{deletion]} \\
\text{D-structure: I assert } [s \text{ John is bald. }] \\
\]

1. # John is bald, but I don’t believe it. (Moore’s paradox)
2. John was bald, but I did not believe John was bald.
3. (I promise you) I will give you chocolate.
4. Frankly, your shirt and I don’t go together.
5. What did everyone bring to the party?
6. If you you want cookies, there are some on the counter.
Performadox (Boër and Lycan 1980)

1. Truth-conditions
   - (Frankly), I’m cold.
   - I tell you frankly: I’m cold.

2. I applaud your courage.
The phenomenon

- Can you close the window?
- I’m cold.
- Is Julia at home? (Clark 1979)
  1. Yes (Taking the literal meaning **seriously**)
  2. I’ll get her. (The opposite)
  3. Yes. I’ll get her. (OK, too!)
Stefanowitsch (2003)

- The form goes with one meaning
- The actual conventionalized meaning is motivated but not entirely predictable.
- It’s a construction!

Distributional Arguments

1. *Please*
2. Politeness modals (*would*)
3. Conditionals (*Since . . . *)
Questions easy & hard 1

- Is it definitional of illocutionary acts that they may always be expressed in a conventional manner? That there is always a performative verb/ (I hereby warn you . . . )

- Christenings may be infelicitous for a variety of reasons. Can constatives be infelicitous? If this is a confused question, say so. If now, how can constatives be infelicitous? Was this something Austin discussed?

- Given an example of how a non-constative speech requires (for felicity) that there be some correspondence between the words and the facts.

- Is *betting* a speech act? Why?

- Is *protesting* a speech act? Why?

- Can there be performatives whose subject is not I? Examples?
A claim made by many writers (Morgan 1978) is that indirect speech acts may be conventionalized or not. Explain a bit. What is a good test for distinguishing?

Birner talks about *explicit* versus *implicit* speech acts. Explain.
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