

## Speech Acts – Harris et al. (2018)

**Speech Acts:** language isn't just about words, but also about actions.

J. L. Austin's (1962; 1970) classification:

- Illocutionary: the actions we perform by speaking, like asserting, requesting, commanding, and promising etc.
- Locutionary: mere utterances
- Perlocutionary: utterances that cause effects (?)

### Five Families Of Theories

#### 1. Conventionalism

J. L. Austin (1962; 1963; 1970): "Illocutionary acts are *conventional procedures* guided by *felicity conditions*, which are social conventions".

Acts need to be performed within the context of established customs, social institutions, or legal frameworks.

- e.g. officiating a marriage ceremony, christening a ship, and willing property

**Challenge:** conventionalism explains ritualized and institutionalized acts but struggles with basic communicative acts like asserting, asking questions, and making requests, which are universal across languages.

**Defense** (Searle (1969), Lepore & Stone (2015)): linguistic conventions, not social conventions, define acts like asserting and questioning.

**Further Challenge:** semantic underdetermination

- e.g. Can you lend me a hand tomorrow?

**Defense:**

- Lepore & Stone (2015): metaphorical and indirect speech should be reclassified as perlocutionary acts – "the speaker's goal is not to communicate a specific content, but merely to cause an open-ended chain of thoughts in the addressee" (?).
- Lepore & Stone (2015): complex interactions between discourse context and utterances are governed by conventions
- Speaker's intentions play a role in determining the meaning of an utterance

#### 2. Intentionalism

Paul Grice (1940s):

- Illocutionary act involves producing an utterance with a specific intention known as a communicative intention. Communicative intentions aim for the addressee to have a certain response and to recognize that this response is intended.

- Utterance is not necessarily linguistic in nature, but may include any observable behavior.

Success conditions for a speech act:

- To succeed in *performing* an illocutionary act requires merely producing an utterance with a communicative intention.
- To succeed in *communicating* via one's act requires that the addressee recognizes the intended response (?).
- *Producing* this response constitutes a further kind of perlocutionary success.

The intentionalist view doesn't apply to all illocutionary acts – certain acts require specific cultural or institutional conditions. However, intentionalists mainly focus on categories shared by all humans (unlike the “social” ones studied by Austin): assertions, directives, questions. Another strength of the approach is that “one can perform two speech acts addressed to two audiences with a single utterance because one can communicatively intend to affect two addressees in different ways at the same time.”

**Challenge:** any utterance can be used for any speech act with the right intentions, and linguistic conventions seem to play no role in governing the meanings of our utterances.

**Defense:** speakers are rational, and their intentions are constrained by their beliefs and linguistic conventions (?).

- if a speaker is delusional or irrational and produces an unconventional utterance, then communicative success depends on the addressee's ability to interpret.

### 3. Functionalism

A speech act is characterized by the effect that it is the act's purpose to have. But the purpose of an act may come from sources other than intention.

Millikan (1998): Certain speech acts acquire their purpose through a process similar to natural selection. Causing belief is the proper function (?) of assertions, established through past successes influencing belief.

- e.g. “a proper function of the imperative mood is to induce the action described, and a proper function of the indicative mood is to induce belief in the proposition expressed”

Related game-theoretic approach: Sender-receiver interaction eventually reaches equilibrium, where senders send signals that reliably produce advantageous responses in receivers. Such models have been used to study animal communication.

**Challenge:** Human communication has much greater flexibility than signaling models can account for, as humans often produce novel signals.

**Defense:** Combine intentionalist and functionalist theories, where the former accounts for human's rich cognitive capacities.

#### 4. Expressionism

Speech acts express a speaker's states of mind (as opposed to intentionalism, where speech acts are categorized based on states intended to be produced in addressees).

- e.g. Intentionalist will say that a speech act is an assertion, because it is performed with the intention to get addressee to form a belief – whereas an expressionist will say that an act is an assertions, because it is an expression of the speaker's belief

Green (2007b): Expressionism better connects speech acts to less controlled or voluntary expressions of thought (?).

Bar-On (2013): Expressionism better explains the evolution of human communicative behavior (from less sophisticated non-human communication to human communication).

Davis (1992): Expressionism can account for speech acts that lack an addressee.

"Several arguments for preferring expressionism over intentionalism rest on the premise that intentionalism over-intellectualizes the performance of speech acts by requiring speakers to have complex, higher-order thoughts. Some have doubted that such complex cognitive states are necessary for language use, or that they are present in many human language users." (?)

**Challenge:** Moore's paradox

- e.g. I have two hands, but I don't believe that I have two hands.
- e.g. Take the train, but I don't want you to take it.

#### 5. Normative theories

5.1. Speech acts are governed by norms.

Williamson (2000): Knowledge (=epistemic) norm is the constitutive norm of assertion. One must assert *p* only if one knows that *p*.

**Controversy:**

- whether norms of assertion should be formulated in terms of knowledge, belief, truth, or justification at all.
- whether the epistemic norm is constitutive. Other theories can define it differently.
  - e.g. an epistemic norm is governed by Gricean maxim of quality
- whether the normative account can be extended to other speech acts like questions, requests, and advice.

5.2. Speech acts enact norms – give rise to rights and obligations.

Brandom (1983; 1994; 2000): asserting p entitles participants in the conversation to make p-related inferences and responses, and commits the speaker to justify p.

MacFarlane (2011; 2014): asserting p is a public commitment to p's truth, as assessed in the context of utterance, as well as a commitment to retract p, should it come to light that p is not true relative to a new context of assessment.

Kukla & Lance (2009, 2013): extended these ideas to other illocutionary acts.

Kukla (2014): social status changes the force of a speech act

Tirell (2012): such normative account of speech acts helps us understand hate speech

## **Context & Speech Acts**

Speech acts change the state of context – which can be thought of as a “conversational score”. Theories that involve the notion of conversational score classify speech acts: by identifying components of the score/context that can be manipulated by speaking, and identifying categories of speech acts that manipulate those components. Some of these theories fit nicely with the theories from the five families.

## **Force & Content**

Illocutionary force of a speech act is independent from its content. Same content but different force:

- e.g. Fido fetched the stick
- e.g. Will Fido fetch the stick?
- e.g. Fetch the stick!

### **Challenge:**

- Interrogatives and imperatives do not express propositions.
  - E.g. Who loves the funk?
- Imperatives can be conjoined and disjoined, both with other imperatives and with declaratives. Moreover, any such combination can be the consequent of a conditional.
  - e.g. Fix me a drink and make it a double.
  - e.g. Mow the lawn and I'll wash the car.
  - e.g. Play a waltz if the mood is right.
  - e.g. If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?
  - e.g. If we only have enough money to buy one book, put back Naked Lunch or I'll put back Waverley.

## **Beyond the Theories**

- Creation of laws
- Hate speech & Propaganda
- Pejoratives