

Speech acts

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1 What does it mean to *mean* something?

We've seen that an utterance like (1) can be used to express a number of different things, and can be said, in one way or another, to *mean* each of (1a)-(1c):

- (1) "Can you pass the salt?"
 - a. Do you have the requisite (physical) maneuverability needed to reach the salt and move it?
 - b. I would like you to hand me the salt/I am requesting that you hand me the salt
 - c. I believe there to be salt on the table

But it can also very well be said to mean any of the following:

- (2)
 - a. the speaker is using English
 - b. the speaker has an understanding of the rules of etiquette that forbid one from simply making demands on one's fellow diners (e.g. "Give me the salt!")
 - c. depending on her pronunciation of the word "pass," it may also mean that she is or is not a North American.

Although the proposals in (2) are matters of linguistic convention that are associated with (1), we don't necessarily want to say that they belong to what a speaker means (in some relevant sense) by using this utterance.¹

- (3) **A definition from Grice (1957): meaning_{NN}**
A speaker S means_{NN} something by uttering x if, in so doing, S intends to induce by x a belief/state of mind in a listener/audience H , and also intends his/her utterance to be recognized as so intended.²

¹A nice way of testing what does and doesn't belong to this category is to enclose the proposition in question in quotes. It's weird to say that (1) means " S speaks English," but it seems perfectly natural to say that it means "Please hand me the salt." Can you find meanings that we'd intuitively like to exclude that pass this test?

²NB: this leaves room for deception – behaving as if you have one intention when you actually have another!

Thus:

Linguistic meaning, in the relevant sense, is not simply a matter of *linguistic convention* (what we agree words mean, how one should behave in order to be perceived as a cooperative interlocutor), but is also a matter of one's *intentions* in a given context. One thing that we can *do* with words, then, is perform our intentions – or perform as if we have certain intentions or commitments, regardless of our actual internal state.

2 Doing by saying

... suppose that I have the bottle of champagne in my hand and say 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth'. Or suppose I say 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'. In all these cases it would be absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done—the action of betting, or christening, ... We should say rather, that in saying what I do, I actually perform the action. – Austin 1956, "Performative Utterances"

Austin (1956) observes that there is a class of things we can say that, in reporting something like our intention or desire to act in a certain way on the world, actually seem to constitute the performance of that act, perhaps regardless of the internal reality of our intention to do so. If I say "I promise to come to your party," but I know that I won't go, have I still promised?

2.1 What happens when we say something?

We can distinguish three kind of acts (Austin, "How to Do Things with Words"):

- (4) A **locutionary act**, which is simply the act of the utterance itself (i.e. an act of using language)
- (5) An **illocutionary act**, the act performed by or in saying something (associated with the speaker's intention to achieve a certain result)
- (6) A **perlocutionary act**, or the act that is achieved by performing an illocutionary act (associated with the audience uptake of speaker's intention, not necessarily the intention itself)
- (7) Examples:
 - a. *S* to *H*: "That branch is about to fall on your head!"
 - i. *S* said that a branch was going to fall on *H*'s head. **L**
 - ii. In so doing, *S* gave *H* a warning (about the branch). **I**
 - iii. In so doing, *S* motivated *H* to move. **P**
 - b. *S* to *H*: "Your taste in art is really ... unusual."
 - i. *S* said that *H*'s art taste was unusual. **L**

- ii. In so doing, *S* claimed that *H*'s art taste was unusual. I
- iii. In so doing *S* insulted(?)/offended(?)/complimented(?)/pleased(?) *H*. P

(8) How would you identify the acts here?

- a. "I promise to be on time to dinner."/"I'll be on time to dinner."
- b. "It will rain tomorrow."
- c. "A plague on both your houses!"
- d. "We apologize for the delay."
- e. "Hand me the salt!"

Question: What kinds of (illocutionary) acts do we achieve simply by saying?
E.g. *promising, requesting, betting, christening*, any others?

2.2 Performative utterances

What Austin observed was that, while we are in the habit of interpreting utterances/statements in terms of their truth conditions, there seem to be a whole set of utterances that look a lot like statements, are grammatical, but can't necessarily be described as true or false. He calls these **performative** utterances.

- (9) Some performatives:
- a. "I do." (said at the right moment during a wedding ceremony)
 - b. "I apologize." (after stepping on your toe)
 - c. "I (hereby) name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth!*" (with bottle of champagne, etc)

What distinguishes a performative utterance from a **constative** (T/F) utterance?

- (10) Some explicit performatives:
- a. "I *promise* to be on time."
 - b. "I *claim* that you're a liar."

- c. “I *swear* I saw him take the cookies.”
- d. “I *bet* you ten dollars Jack will win the race.”
- e. “I *predict* it’ll rain tomorrow.”

(11) But:

- a. “I’ll be there on time.”
- b. “You’re a liar!”
- c. “I’m sure I saw him take the cookies.”
- d. “Ten bucks says Jack will win the race!”
- e. “I think it’s going to rain tomorrow.”

It seems hard to rate the examples in (10) as true or false. What about the examples in (11)?

Austin suggests some diagnostics for performative utterances (to be filled in).

(12) **Diagnostic 1:**

- a. “I promise to be there on time.” [a promise]
- b. “John promises to be there on time.” [not a promise]
- c. “I promised to be there on time.” [not a promise]

(13) **Diagnostic 2:**

- a. “I hereby bequeath my estate to my oldest child.” [(potentially) a bequest]
- b. “I hereby request you to pass the salt.” [a request]
- c. “I hereby eat this steak!” [not a steak-eating]

2.2.1 Felicity conditions vs. truth conditions

Performative utterances can “fail to come off” in a number of ways:

- (14)
- a. In the US: “I hereby divorce you!”
 - b. Me, this morning: “I declare this to be the Autonomous Republic of San Francisco!”
 - c. With my fingers crossed: “I promise to attend lecture tomorrow.”
 - d. Someone in a dinosaur costume, on the street: “You’re under arrest.”
 - e. *S*: “I bet you class will be cancelled today.” *H*: “Nah.”

It seems like some conditions have to be met for a performative to be felicitously uttered (or to achieve what it is trying to do)

- the convention invoked must exist and be accepted (note: there must be a convention invoked)

- the circumstances must be appropriate (the speaker must be the right person, at the right time, invested with the right authority)
- if it needs to be ratified in some way, this occurs (Austin's *securing uptake*)
- if these conditions are met, do my intentions matter?
- conversely, if the conditions are not met, I can intend to divorce you/declare a new state as hard as I want, but can I be said to have done it?

It seems, from this, that performatives (in the aspect of their meaning that is *doing*) prioritize linguistic (or other) conventions over whatever intentions the speaker may or may not have: the importance of felicity conditions seems to distinguish them from constatives/statements that are T/F.

However, true/false statements are also subject to felicity conditions:

- (15)
- ?“The cat is on the mat but I don't believe it is.”
 - ?“I promise to come to your party, but I have no intention of doing so.”
 - ?“All of John's children are bald, but he doesn't have any children.”

The speaker is acting as if he means to position himself in a certain way, but then undoes it!

An interesting consequence of the notion that convention and circumstance matters is that speech acts can be interpreted differently depending on the relationship between speaker and hearer:

- (16) “Please turn in your homework before 5pm.”
- ... said by your friend who wants to go out tonight
 - ... said by your instructor

3 Convention vs. intention

3.1 Convention

Searle seems to take the view that convention is the essential component of speech acts: illocutionary acts, for him, are “performed in accordance with ... sets of constitutive rules,” which essentially set conventions for a language community.

- (17)
- Will John leave the room?
 - John will leave the room.
 - John, leave the room!
 - Would that John would leave the room!
 - If John will leave the room, I will as well.

For Searle, each of the utterances in (17) has a common (propositional) content, but differ in terms of their illocutionary force, which is indicated by the construction used (a matter of convention).

In the performance of an illocutionary act the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and furthermore, if he is using words literally, he intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the rules for using the expression he utters associate the expressions with the production of that effect. – Searle 1965, “What is a speech act?” (emphasis mine)

So, contra Grice: while intention certainly matters for communication, *meaning_{NN}* doesn't sufficiently account for the degree to which things can mean things because we agree (implicitly) on certain rules. In a sense, then, the reason “I promise to be there on time,” is an act of promising, not just an act of reporting, is because we agree that this is how one makes a promise.

The reason that certain utterances are performative (or not performative) is a function, for Searle, of the **constitutive rules** of language (constitutive in the same sense that the rules of football or of chess are constitutive of those games, respectively). We can “discover the rules” by asking ourselves what the necessary and sufficient conditions are by which one can have been said to make a certain (conversational, illocutionary) move:

(18) Searle 1965 on PROMISE

“Given that a speaker S utters a sentence T in the presence of a hearer H , then, in the utterance of T , S sincerely (and non-defectively) promises that p to H if and only if:”

- a. normal input and output conditions hold (preparatory)
- b. S expresses that p in uttering T (propositional content)
- c. in expressing that p , S predicates a future act A of S (prop content)
- d. H would prefer S 's doing A to his not doing A , and S is aware of this (preparatory)
- e. it is not obvious to both parties that S will do A in the normal course of events (prep)
- f. S intends to do A /that the utterance of T will make him responsible for intending to do A (sincerity)
- g. S intends that the utterance of T will place him under an obligation to do A (essential)

Understanding what a speech act is, and how the words used come to be a certain type of action, then, is a question of identifying the set of propositional content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and the essential condition for different illocutionary forces.

Question: Based on (18), how would you characterize a threat?

3.2 Properties of speech acts

Searle's view is that by cataloguing those constitutive rules that make something a particular speech act, we can understand how these speech acts come to be *doing* rather than simply *saying*. Searle (1975) ("A taxonomy of illocutionary acts") offers 12 dimensions along which speech acts can vary, including the types of conditions noted in (18). Here is a more restricted set of dimensions from Searle & Vanderveken (1985):

1. **Illocutionary point:** the characteristic aim of each type of speech act. For instance, the characteristic aim of an assertion is to describe how things are, and perhaps also to bring about belief in an addressee; the characteristic aim of a promise is to commit oneself to a future course of action.
2. **Degree of strength of the illocutionary point:** Two illocutions can have the same point but differ along the dimension of strength. For instance, requesting and insisting that the addressee do something both have the point of attempting to get the addressee to do that thing; however, the latter is stronger than the former.
3. **Mode of achievement:** This is the special way, if any, in which the illocutionary point of a speech act must be achieved. Testifying and asserting both have the point of describing how things are; however, the former also involves invoking one's authority as a witness while the latter does not. To testify is to assert in one's capacity as a witness. Commanding and requesting both aim to get the addressee to do something; yet only someone issuing a command does so in her capacity as a person in a position of authority.
4. **Propositional content conditions:** Some illocutions can only be achieved with an appropriate propositional content. For instance, I can only promise what is in the future and under my control; or, at least, I cannot promise to do anything that it is obvious to myself and my promisee that I cannot do. So too, I can only apologize for what is in some sense under my control and already the case. For this reason, promising to make it the case that the sun did not rise yesterday is not possible; neither can I apologize for the truth of Snell's Law.³
5. **Preparatory conditions:** These are all other conditions that must be met for the speech act not to misfire. Such conditions often concern the social status of interlocutors. For instance, a person cannot bequeath an object unless she already owns it or has power of attorney; a person cannot marry a couple unless she is legally invested with the authority to do so.
6. **Sincerity conditions:** Many speech acts involve the expression of a psychological state. Assertion expresses belief; apology expresses regret, a promise expresses an

³Sometimes we apologize – or at least, say "I'm sorry" – when someone is having a bad day. What do you make of this? What do you make of the response "It's not your fault."?

intention, and so on. A speech act is sincere only if the speaker is in the psychological state that her speech act expresses.

7. **Degree of strength of sincerity conditions:** Two speech acts might be the same along other dimensions, but express psychological states that differ from one another in the dimension of strength. Requesting and imploring both express desires, and are identical along the other six dimensions above; however, the latter expresses a stronger desire than the former.

What corresponds to the *essential condition* here? How would you characterize the *essential condition* of:

- (19) a. an imperative (ORDER)?
b. an interrogative (QUESTION)?
c. a declarative (ASSERTION)?

3.3 What price intention?

An opposing view from Strawson (1964): there are cases where illocutionary force is not simply a matter of convention.

We can readily imagine circumstances in which an utterance of the words “Don’t go” would be correctly described not as a request or an order, but as an entreaty. I do not want to deny that there may be conventional postures or procedures for entreating . . . But I do want to deny that an act of entreaty can be performed only as conforming to such conventions. What makes X’s words to Y an entreaty not to go is something . . . relating to X’s situation, attitude to Y, manner, and current intention. – Strawson 1964, “Speech Acts”

While the utterance “Don’t go” can go from a request to an order as a matter of circumstances/convention (i.e. the relationship between the speaker and hearer), it is only the speaker’s intention to entreat that can make the utterance an entreaty: and it is only successfully performed as an entreaty if the hearer recognizes that it was intended as such.

For Strawson, speech acts are not made possible by extra-linguistic constitutive rules, but for the same reason that we can *mean_{NN}*: we are able to reason about one another’s intentions:

- *understanding_{NN}* (as the counterpart to *meaning_{NN}* is essentially the same notion as *uptake*: both involve recognition of the speaker’s intent to achieve a certain response

- Strawson adds an additional level of intention/recognition to $meaning_{NN}$: that H understands that part of what S is doing is to get him to recognize his intention to provoke a certain response
- We might have special words or procedures to indicate to one another this higher-level intention (explicit performatives, conventionalized procedures), but these only work because by using them I am declaring my intentions
- I can't be said to have promised you anything if you don't understand that by saying x I am both intending you to think I have promised, and intending you to recognize that I want you to think I have promised
- this notion can be identified with "securing uptake" of the speech act (Austin): both understanding and uptake involve recognizing the overtness of an "audience-directed intention"

Question: On this view, what is it I am doing when I promise with my fingers crossed, or knowing that I don't intend to keep my promise? How can we make sense of this?

4 Putting the pieces together

Following Strawson's line of thought, we might ask: what does it mean (practically speaking) for S 's overt intent to promise to be understood/taken up (by H)?

It seems to mean something like Searle's essential condition: S intends that the promise places her under certain obligations (to do some act A) *as far as H is concerned*: that is, S may or may not actually intend to do A , but is committed to the intent to be obligated in some public way to do A (as a fact of what a promise, conventionally, is; see Condoravdi & Lauer 2011).

Let's go back to the infelicitous examples in (15):

- (15) a. ?"The cat is on the mat but I don't believe it is."
 b. ?"I promise to come to your party, but I have no intention of doing so."

Can we make more sense of what is going wrong here? What commitments is the speaker acting as if she intends to take on?

From Lauer & Condoravdi (2012): the conventions associated with certain utterances/clause types are at the level of the commitment that the speaker has as a result of using them (as a result of acting as if she intends to take the commitments on)

DECLARATIVE CONVENTION: When a speaker utters a declarative sentence p with denotation $\llbracket p \rrbracket$, she commits herself to act as if she believes that $\llbracket p \rrbracket = 1$.

From this perspective, how might we characterize infelicity/misfires? How might we explain that the same sentence can appear to be a different speech act depending on who says it, and when/where they do so?

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