Comments on 'Speech Acts in Discourse Context' by Craige Roberts

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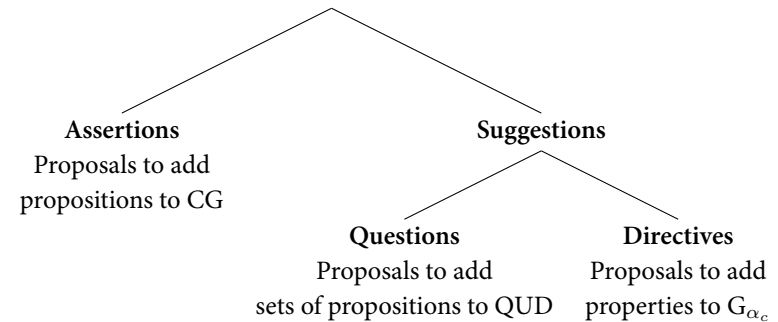
Points of Agreement

- For the purposes of linguistic pragmatics, a theory of speech acts should be picking up on *natural* kinds, not merely conventional social kinds (as in Austin, Searle). We should seek to carve nature at its joints.

- Our taxonomy of speech acts should distinguish speech acts in terms of different ways that we try, rationally and cooperatively, to change each others' minds.

Points of Disagreement

- I am skeptical that Craige's taxonomy is carving things up in the right way, both in terms of her own commitments, and in terms of what's Right and True.

- I am skeptical of some of the roles that Craige assigns to *context*, understood as a body of representations or contents that is public, in the sense of being intersubjectively constructed from interlocutors' shared mental states.

- In particular, I am skeptical of the idea that it is constitutive of speech acts that they are performed with the aim of changing the context, rather than just the addressee's mental states.

1   Two Taxonomic Issues

Craige argues that the speech acts with which she is concerned break down into categories as follows:

Assertions
Proposals to add
propositions to CG

Suggestions

Questions
Proposals to add
sets of propositions to QUD

Directives
Proposals to add
properties to G_{α_c}

I want to raise a couple of reasons for thinking that this taxonomy is not a principled one, given Craige's other commitments.

1.1   Aren't questions be a subcategory of directives?

Wouldn't the following diagram better capture the natural kinds we're working with here?

Assertions   Directives

Questions   (other)
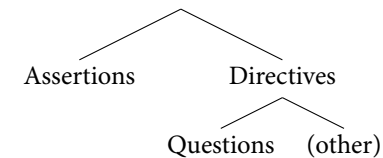
Some intuitive motivations:

- Both questions and non-question directives are constituted by the aim of getting the interlocutors to publicly adopt a goal (and associated plans) to act.

- Questions are aimed at a more specific kind of goal—the goal of adding a specific kind of information to CG. This is what

- Goals to act *in the discourse* are just a subgenre of goals to act *in the world.* (This was Austin's original point in inaugurating speech-act theory.)

Some theory-internal motivations:

- As Craige sets things up in §2, the state of QUD is fully determined by—and, indeed, defined in terms of—the state of G, but not vice versa.

- If q is on the QUD stack, this is *because* the interlocutors have a shared public goal of answering q.

- Facts about the QUD are just a special set of facts about G, broken out because we're particularly interested in them.

Moreover, every interrogative seems to correspond in pragmatic function to one or more imperatives (but not vice versa):

(1) a. Who is coming to the party?

  b. Tell me who is coming to the party!

  c. Help me to establish who is coming to the party!

  d. Let's talk about who is coming to the party!

1.2 Are questions and directives subcategories of assertions?

I'm worried that Craige is actually committed to something like the following picture:
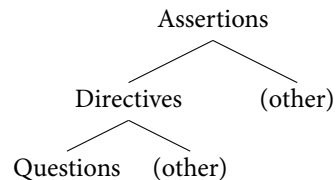
Similar argument as last time: facts about QUD and G are fully determined by facts about CG (or at least by the facts that ground the state of CG), but not vice versa:

1.2.1 Facts about G are a special case of facts about CG

Plausibly: g is in G_i iff interlocutors commonly accept, for the purposes of the conversation, that g is x_i's goal.

- This is true iff p (=the proposition that g is x_i's goal) is in CG.

- This is neither necessary nor sufficient for g's being x_i's actual goal, since interlocutors can accept p for the purposes of the conversation even if p isn't true.

- And so x_i might be secretly working against g, even if it is commonly accepted that g is i's goal.

1.2.2 Facts about QUD are a special case of facts about CG

Plausibly: q is in QUD iff interlocutors commonly accept, for the purposes of the conversation, that answering q is a goal they share.

- This is true iff p (=the proposition that answering q is among the interlocutors' goals) is in CG.

- This is neither necessary nor sufficient for its actually being the case that the interlocutors have answering q as one of their goals, since we can accept p for the purposes of the conversation even if it isn't true.

- Moreover, the interlocutors might be secretly working against answering q while publicly pretending to try to answer it.

- Moreover, in order to play its role in underwriting the relevance/felicity of various speech acts, the QUD has to be public, in the sense of being commonly accepted for the purposes of the conversation.

1.2.3 Craige Seems to Agree?

All of this actually seems to follow from what Craige herself says:

> Since the CG includes all that the interlocutors take to be true, it includes information about the discourse scoreboard as well. The point of the more articulated scoreboard is not to *replace* the CG so much as to clarify the different types of information that interlocutors crucially track in discourse and the different roles these types of information play in the evolution of he felicitous discourse. (Roberts, 2017, 10)

1.2.4 Weird Consequences

- **All Directives are Assertions**: Facts about G are just special cases of facts about CG. So proposals to change G are, ipso facto, proposals to change CG (but not vice versa).

- **All Acts of Questioning are Assertions**: Facts about QUD are just special cases of facts about CG. So proposals to add to QUD are, ipso facto, proposals to add to CG (but not vice versa).

- **Equivalent Speech Acts?**: Suppose $[\![\text{Do cats meow?}]\!] = q$, and let p be the proposition that the interlocutors of this conversation have the common goal of answering q. Then the following two sentences should have the same speech-act potential:

  (a) Do cats meow?

  (b) The interlocutors of this conversation have the common goal of answering the question of whether cats meow.

  This seems wrong. The second can be used to ask a question only indirectly—perhaps via accommodation.

- But if the fact that q is in QUD and the fact that p is in CG boil down to the same fact about interlocutors' psychological states—viz., that they commonly accept that answering q is their shared goal—then it's unclear why asking a question with (a) should have a different effect than performing an assertion with (b).

2 Communication without Context Update

2.1 Publicity Requirements on Speech Acts

CG, QUD, and G are all constitutively *public*

In order for the context to be in a certain state, the interlocutors must commonly accept, for the purposes of the conversation, that it is in that state.[1]

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[1] More carefully: in order for a component of context X to have a property ϕ, there must be some proposition p such that (i) the truth of p is sufficient for the truth of the proposition that X has ϕ, and (ii) the interlocutors commonly accept p for the purposes of the conversation. Why this caveat? Because language users presumably don't have the concept of a QUD until they start reading Craige's papers.

Performing a speech act is proposing to make some information public

- Adding p to CG requires getting the interlocutors to commonly accept p. So, in order to perform an assertion, I have to intend to do this.

- Adding ϕ to G requires getting the interlocutors to commonly accept ϕ is among their goals. So, in order to perform a directive, I have to intend to do this.

2.2 Speech Acts without Publicity

We sometimes perform speech acts without any intention, expectation, or even hope that new information will make it into the common ground as a result. E.g.:

- CREMATION
  I am writing my will, which is to be opened only after I die. Among other things, I write the following:

  (2) Cremate my body.

  This is a directive speech act. But if everything goes according to plan, I will be dead (and so unable to participate in shared attitudes) by the time my speech act is understood. Suppose that this is what eventually happens.

- FRENCH TAXI
  I've just gotten into a taxi in Paris, and I have a very high credence that the driver doesn't understand English, but is merely pretending. I utter this sentence:

  (3) I would like to go to the airport. Take me there.

  I intended for the driver to believe that I want to go to the airport, and I think there's some small chance that I've succeeded. But I don't know (or believe, or accept) that he has understood me. I am too shy to check, and so I am sitting back, annoyedly expecting him to take a wrong turn. Happily, he understood me after all, and takes me to CDG.

In both cases, I have performed speech acts and succeeded in my communicative and perlocutionary aims without making the content of my act, or the fact that I performed

it, public. This suggests that Craige's theory of speech acts only applies to certain special cases.[2]

It seems that we can perform speech acts, and be successful in doing so, even if we merely intend to change the private thoughts of our addressees, and not public facts about the context or our shared mental states.

References

Clark, H. H. and Marshall, C. R. (1992). Definite reference and mutual knowledge. In Clark, H. H., editor, *Arenas of Language Use*, chapter 1, pages 9–59. University of Chicago Press and Center for the Study of Language and Information.

Roberts, C. (2017). Speech acts in discourse context. In Fogal, D., Harris, D., and Moss, M., editors, *New Work on Speech Acts*, Oxford, UK. Oxford University Press.

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[2] Specifically, I can rationally intend to make p common ground by assering p only if my interlocutors and I are in what Clark and Marshall (1992) call a "shared situation": each can perceive the utterance, perceive the others perceiving it, perceive the others perceiving the others perceiving it, and so on. (Also, there need to be no defeaters, as there are in FRENCH TAXI.)