

# Taxonomizing Speech Acts

## Intention & Acts of Meaning Seminar, Week 6

Daniel W. Harris

March 10, 2016

- What are the major contemporary theories of speech acts?
- Conventional vs. communicative acts
- Illocutionary acts vs. perlocutionary Acts
- Some intentionalist taxonomic proposals

### 1 Mainstream Theories of Speech Acts

#### 1.1 Conventionalism

- This is the OG speech-act theory, and is still assumed or defended by some people (Alston, 2000; Hornsby and Langton, 1998; Langton, 1993).
- To perform an illocutionary act  $\alpha$  is to do something that counts as  $\alpha$  (in the relevant context) in virtue of conforming to certain conventions.
- These conventions are called ‘felicity conditions’ (Austin, 1962) or ‘constitutive rules’ (Searle, 1965, 1969; Searle and Vanderveken, 1985).
- This goes not just for institutionalized/ritualized speech acts (like marriage, christening ships), but also for asserting, requesting, questioning, promising,

etc. Different kinds of speech acts are individuated by features of their felicity conditions.

#### 1.2 Intentionalism

- To perform a (non-ritualized/institutionalized) speech act is to utter something with a Gricean meaning intention.
- Different kinds of speech acts involve intentions to produce different kinds of effects. (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Grice, 1957, 1968, 1969; Harris, 2014; Schiffer, 1972; Strawson, 1964)

#### 1.3 Dynamic Theories

- This is the dominant view among semanticists and many linguists, in part because it plays nicely with formal semantics.
- Conversations are organized around shared **discourse contexts**. These are bodies of representations constituted by the interlocutors’ shared attitudes—their mutual knowledge, or presuppositions, etc. Lewis famously likens the discourse context to a ‘conversational scoreboard’ (Lewis, 1979).

- To perform a speech act is to propose a change to the discourse context (Lewis, 1979; Roberts, 2012; Stalnaker, 2014). (This is sometimes cashed out as having an intention to change the context (Murray and Starr, MS; Thomason, 1990), in which case dynamic theories can be thought of as a fork of intentionalism.)
- Different kinds of speech acts are defined in terms of their different “characteristic effects” on discourse contexts.
- Asserting  $p$  is a proposal to add  $p$  to the “common ground” (Stalnaker, 1978).
- Asking a question is a proposal to adopt a new question (topic, issue) for discussion (Carlson, 1982; Ginzburg, 1995; Portner, 2004; Roberts, 2012).
- Directing (requesting, commanding) someone to  $\psi$  is proposing an addition to the conversational To-Do List (Portner, 2004; Roberts, 2004), or to the mutually adopted preferences (Murray and Starr, MS; Starr, 2010).

## 1.4 Thought-Expression Theories

- To perform a speech act is to do something that expresses, indicates, or are caused by (in the right way) a mental state. (Bar-On, 2004; Davis, 2003; Green, 2007; Pagin, 2011)
- Different kinds of speech acts are individuated in terms of the different kinds of mental states they express. (Green, 2007; Rosenthal, 1986)
- To assert is to express belief (knowledge?).
- The other cases are less clear. (Is asking a question, am I expressing a state of wondering-whether? In directing someone to  $\psi$ , am I expressing a desire that they  $\psi$ ? What’s the difference between requesting and commanding?)

## 1.5 Epistemic-Norm Theories

- Some very influential people have held that assertion is constituted by an epistemic norm (Dummett, 1973; Unger, 1975; Williamson, 2000).

- E.g., Williamson (2000, ch.11) says that a speech act is an assertion just in case it is subject to the knowledge norm: ‘S should: assert  $p$  only if S knows  $p$ ’.
- This is different than conventionalism. E.g., Searle says that a speech act isn’t  $\alpha$  if it doesn’t conform to the constitutive rules that define  $\alpha$ . On Williamson’s view, you can assert something you don’t know, but you’re just subject to criticism for doing so, and *that’s* what makes it an assertion.
- A lot of epistemologists and philosophers in the UK seem to take some view of this kind for granted now.
- How is does it work for speech acts other than assertion? As far as I can tell, nobody has even made a proposal about this.

## 1.6 Practical-Commitment Theories

- To perform a speech act is to undertake a commitment.
- E.g., Brandom (Brandom, 1994, 2000, 2008) thinks that to assert is to undertake a commitment to give reasons if asked, etc. (This is all inspired by Sellars (Sellars, 1954), and probably also Hegel or something.) For a translation into English, see MacFarlane (2011).
- One supposed advantage of Brandom’s view is supposed to be that it doesn’t define speech acts in terms of mental states; the linguistic facts and the psychological facts are on an explanatory par.
- Brandom doesn’t talk about speech acts other than assertion, but Kukla and Lance (2009) try to extent the same general approach to other speech acts.

## 2 Conventional vs. Communicative Acts

- Intentionalists accept that *some* things we do with language are essentially constituted by social/institutional conventions: getting married, christening ships,

testifying in court, etc. These are things that can't be done except given the right social or institutional conditions. They're *conventional acts*.

- But some are, in their essence, pure exercises of mindreading. These are communicative acts.

### 3 Not all speech acts are conventional

- There are no good candidate conventions governing asserting, requesting, asking, etc. Our ability to perform them is grounded in innate cognitive capacities, not local conventions.
  - In their essence, these acts don't vary from culture to culture.
  - (Of course, the means of performing them does vary superficially. But the *nature* of marriage itself (for example) varies, whereas the nature of assertion does not, only the means by which we perform it.)
  - There is no culture in which assertion (etc.) requires a special ritual for its performance, for example, or in which only certain individuals can assert.
- Some of Austin's and Searle's suggestions for conventions that constitute assertion just aren't necessary for the relevant acts. Many also aren't conventional in any interesting sense.
  - For example: Austin seems to suggest that someone who lacks sufficient evidence for *p* can't assert *p*. But this would rule out the possibility of unjustified assertions.
  - Similarly, Searle says that asserting *p* requires one's addressee not to already know *p*, and for the speaker to know this. But again, that seems like a good-making quality for assertions, not a necessary condition.
  - Likewise, Austin requires 'uptake'—correct interpretation on the part of the audience—for all illocutionary acts. But this rules out the possibility of misunderstanding an assertion or a command.

– The uptake requirement seems to result from collapsing the distinction between illocutionary success and communicative success, which I think we should want to keep distinct.

– Moreover, none of these conditions are conventional. They are all good-making qualities of any practice that fits an intentionalist definition of assertion, and this is not because of localized conventions but because they are qualities that normally make it more likely that the agents' goals will be achieved. They are *rational*, not conventional.

- Because there are no genuine social or institutional conventions that govern the practice of communicative acts, both Austin and Searle reach for linguistic conventions instead.
  - E.g., Austin suggests that presupposition failure is a kind of misfire—an infelicity that results in nonperformance of the relevant illocutionary act.
  - Another example he uses is misspeaking, malapropism, etc.
  - But for Austin, linguistic conventions govern *locutionary* acts, not *illocutionary* acts, so, by his own lights, these aren't the right kinds of felicity conditions to do the job.
  - Searle endorses an even stronger version of linguistic conventionalism—that one can assert *p* only by means of a sentence that means *p*. (And similarly for other speech acts.) But this ignores a lot of problems:
    - \* Nonlinguistic, non-conventional assertions (or acts that work just like assertions), as in Grice's (1957) examples.
    - \* Particularized conversational implicatures, indirect speech acts, irony, metaphor, semantic underspecification, "semantic transfer", etc.
    - \* We can't perform paradigmatic conventional acts indirectly.

## 4 Degrees of Success

I posit four degrees to which a speech act can succeed:

**Illocutionary Success:** Achieved when the speaker produces an utterance with an m-intention. There is no condition on the audience. A speaker who achieves illocutionary success has performed an illocutionary act.

**Communicative Success:** Achieved when the addressee recognizes which m-intended effect is intended by the speaker.

**Narrow Perlocutionary Success:** Achieved when the speaker performs an illocutionary act and thereby has their m-intended effect on their addressee.

We may want to further distinguish between *proximal* and *distal* perlocutionary success.

- Proximal perlocutionary success is having one's m-intended effect.
- Distal perlocutionary success is producing whichever other effects one thereby intended to achieve.
- E.g.: in asserting that your dog is loose, my proximal perlocutionary aim is to make you believe that he's loose, whereas my distal perlocutionary aim may be to get you to chase after him.
- The m-intended effect of an indirect speech act  $\alpha$  is always a distal perlocutionary aim of the direct speech act by means of which  $\alpha$  is performed.

## 5 Taxonomy

Central claims (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Grice, 1957, 1968, 1969; Schiffer, 1972; Strawson, 1964):

- To perform a speech act is to mean something by an utterance.

- To mean something by an utterance is to produce it with a meaning intention ('m-intention').
- Different kinds of speech acts are defined in terms of different kinds of m-intentions.

This could work with various definitions of m-intentions, but let's just use Grice's (1969) version:

### M-Intentions

The fact that  $U$  meant something by uttering  $x$  is grounded in the fact that, for some addressee  $A$ ,  $U$  uttered  $x$  intending

- (1)  $A$  to produce a particular response  $r$ ;
- (2)  $A$  to think (recognize) that  $U$  intends (1); and
- (3)  $A$  to fulfill (1) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2).

The variable  $r$  here stands in for a specification of the m-intended effect. Intentionalism explicates speech acts in terms of their characteristic m-intended effects.

I posit three, increasingly fine-grained taxonomic ranks: *families*, *genera*, and *species*.

### 5.1 Families

Families of communicative acts are distinguished by the kind of mental attitude that features in their m-intended effect.

The two main families: assertions and directives

Following Grice (1957; 1968; 1969) and Schiffer (1972), I posit the following two families.

**Asserting  $p$**  is m-intending that one's addressee **believe  $p$** .

**Directing one's addressee to  $\psi$**  is m-intending one's addressee to **form an intention to  $\psi$** .

A controversy: is the m-intended effect of directing *action* (Grice, 1957; Schiffer, 1972) or intention to act (Grice, 1968, 1969). I think the latter is better, mostly because it will pay off when we get to semantics.

Other Families?

Aside from beliefs and intentions, are there any other kinds of m-intended effects? Schiffer says no; assertions and directives ( $\leftarrow$  not his terminology) are “mutually exclusive and exhaustive” (1972, 95). But I don't see why not. Here are some plausible candidates:

- Distress, which Grice thought might be the m-intended effect of an insult (1989, 220).
- Supposition, presupposition, hypothesis, etc.—what Stalnaker calls “acceptance concepts” (other than belief) (1984, 79–80).
- Changes of credence—see Yalcin's ‘Baysean Expressivism’ (2012).
- Mental imagery?
- States of aesthetic appreciation?
- Desires?
- Emotional states?

A methodological proposal: the semantics of some expressions can give us good reasons to posit new kinds of m-intended effects, which in turn can give us a good reason to posit a new kind of speech act

## 5.2 Genera

Within a given family, a genus is distinguished by features of the *content* of the mental state that serves as its m-intended effect.

Genera within the assertion family

**Expressing an intention to  $\psi$**  is m-intending to produce a belief that the speaker intends to  $\psi$  (i.e., asserting that one intends to  $\psi$ ).

**Promising to  $\psi$**  is (roughly) to express an intention to help one's addressee by  $\psi$ ing.

**Threatening to  $\psi$**  is (roughly) to express an intention to harm one's addressee by  $\psi$ ing.

**Expressing a belief that  $p$**  is m-intending to produce a belief that one believes  $p$ .

Other propositional attitudes can be expressed in similar ways.

Genera within the directive family

Questions are a special case of directives:

**Asking-whether  $p$**  is m-intending for one's addressee to assert (or express a belief that, etc.) either  $p$  or not- $p$  (i.e., directing one's addressee to say whether  $\psi$ ).

**Asking-wh- is  $\phi$**  is m-intending for one's addressee to assert (or express a belief that, etc.) that  $x$  is(n't)  $\phi$ , (for some relevant  $x$ ) (i.e., directing one's addressee to say wh- is  $\phi$ ).

Questions are tricky because they seem to require different sorts of speech acts as answers on different occasions. Sometimes they require an assertion of the answer, sometimes (as in quiz questions) an expression of belief in the answer, etc. It may be that these are distinct genera of questions.

## 5.3 Species

Within a given genus of speech act, particular species are distinguished on the basis of the particular *reasons* on the basis of which the speaker intends the addressee to have the m-intended response (Schiffer, 1972; Strawson, 1964).

How does the *supporting reason* of a speech act,  $\alpha$ , fit into the speaker's intentions? I argue that it is the m-intended effect of an indirect speech act,  $\beta$ , that is performed by performing  $\alpha$ , and that in turn backs  $\alpha$  (supports it, reinforces it, etc.).

For example, here is what I take to be the full communicative plan required to perform an act of requesting for  $A$  to  $\psi$ :

### Requesting (Structured Plan)

The fact that  $U$  requested for a certain addressee  $A$  to  $\psi$  in uttering  $x$  is grounded in the fact that  $U$  uttered  $x$  intending

- (1) (DIRECTION)
  - (i)  $A$  to form an intention to  $\psi$ ;
  - (ii)  $A$  to recognize  $U$  intends (1i);
  - (iii)  $A$  to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);
- (2) (EXPRESSION OF DESIRE)
  - (i)  $A$  to form a belief that  $S$  wants  $A$  to  $\psi$ ;
  - (ii)  $A$  to recognize  $U$  intends (2i);
  - (iii)  $A$  to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and
- (3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)
 

$A$  to recognize  $U$  intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of  $U$ 's intention (1i);
- (4) (SUPPORTING-REASON CONDITION)
 

$A$  to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2i).

This plan has four components that all play a role within the complex act of requesting:

- Clauses (1i–iii) constitute  $S$ 's act of directing  $A$  to  $\psi$ .
- Clauses (2i–iii) constitute  $S$ 's act of expressing their desire for  $A$  to  $\psi$ .

- Clause (3) is what makes  $S$ 's expression of desire an indirect speech act—one that  $S$  performs *by means of* their directive act.
- Clause (4) is what makes  $S$ 's expression of desire the act that *backs*  $S$ 's directive.

Distinctions at the species level are made by saying what kind of indirect act backs a given act at the genus level.

Species within the directive family

**A request for  $A$  to  $\psi$**  is a directive for  $A$  to  $\psi$  backed by an expression of a desire for  $A$  to  $\psi$ .

**A command for  $A$  to  $\psi$**  is a directive for  $A$  to  $\psi$  backed by a conditional threat to harm  $A$  unless  $A$   $\psi$ 's.

**An inducement for  $A$  to  $\psi$**  is a directive for  $A$  to  $\psi$  backed by a conditional promise to help  $A$  if  $A$   $\psi$ 's.

**Advising  $A$  to  $\psi$**  is a directive for  $A$  to  $\psi$  backed by an indirect assertion that it is in  $A$ 's interest to  $\psi$ .

Species within the assertion family

The existence of evidentials in languages other than English (e.g., Cheyenne) gives us some reason to posit these (Murray, 2014):

**A observational report that  $p$**  is an assertion that  $p$  backed by an indirect assertion that one learned  $p$  via direct observation.

**A hearsay report that  $p$**  is an assertion that  $p$  backed by an indirect assertion that one learned  $p$  from another speaker's assertion.

Although we don't have grammatical evidentials in English, we probably perform similar acts in a less explicit way, and we sometimes use appositives and parentheticals to make the secondary act explicit. (A full account would require us to figure out the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction.)

## References

- Alston, W. P. (2000). *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*. Cornell University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do Things with Words*. The Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Bach, K. and Harnish, R. M. (1979). *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Bar-On, D. (2004). *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- Brandom, R. (1994). *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2000). *Articulating Reasons*. Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2008). *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*. Oxford University Press.
- Carlson, L. (1982). *Dialogue Games: An Approach to Discourse Analysis*. Number 17 in Synthese Language Library. D. Reidel, Dordrecht, The Netherlands.
- Davis, W. (2003). *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dummett, M. (1973). *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. Duckworth.
- Ginzburg, J. (1995). Resolving questions, i. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 18(5):459–527.
- Green, M. S. (2007). *Self-Expression*. Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1957). Meaning. *The Philosophical Review*, 66(3):377–388.
- Grice, H. P. (1968). Utterer's meaning, sentence-meaning, and word-meaning. *Foundations of Language*, 4(3):225–242.
- Grice, H. P. (1969). Utterer's meaning and intention. *The Philosophical Review*, 78(2):147–177.
- Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Harris, D. W. (2014). *Speech Act Theoretic Semantics*. PhD Dissertation, City University of New York Graduate Center.
- Hornsby, J. and Langton, R. (1998). Free speech and illocution. *Legal Theory*, 4(1):21–37.
- Kukla, R. and Lance, M. (2009). *'Yo!' and 'Lo!': The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*. Harvard University Press.
- Langton, R. (1993). Speech acts and unspeakable acts. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 22:305–330.
- Lewis, D. K. (1979). Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8(3):339–359.
- MacFarlane, J. (2011). What is assertion? In Brown, J. and Cappelen, H., editors, *Assertion*, pages 79–96. Oxford University Press.
- Murray, S. E. (2014). Varieties of update. *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 7(2):1–53.
- Murray, S. E. and Starr, W. B. (MS). The structure of communicative acts. *Unpublished Manuscript*, Online at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ctf8stqvpl1rdqs/The-Structure-of-Communicative-Acts.pdf?dl=1>.
- Pagin, P. (2011). Information and assertoric force. In Brown, J. and Cappelen, H., editors, *Assertion*, pages 97–136. Oxford University Press.
- Portner, P. (2004). The semantics of imperatives within a theory of clause-types. In Watanabe, K. and Young, R., editors, *Proceedings of SALT 14*. CLC Publications.
- Roberts, C. (2004). Context in dynamic interpretation. In Horn, L. and Ward, G., editors, *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, pages 197–220. Blackwell.

- Roberts, C. (2012). Information structure in discourse: Toward an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 5:1–69.
- Rosenthal, D. M. (1986). Intentionality. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 10:151–184.
- Schiffer, S. (1972). *Meaning*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Searle, J. (1965). What is a speech act? In Black, M., editor, *Philosophy in America*, pages 221–239. Allen and Unwin, London.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts*. Cambridge University Press, London.
- Searle, J. and Vanderveken, D. (1985). *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sellars, W. (1954). Some reflections on language games. *Philosophy of Science*, 21(3):204–228.
- Stalnaker, R. (1978). Assertion. In Cole, P., editor, *Syntax and Semantics 9*, pages 315–332. Academic Press, New York.
- Stalnaker, R. (1984). *Inquiry*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Stalnaker, R. (2014). *Context*. Context and Content. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Starr, W. B. (2010). *Conditionals, Meaning and Mood*. PhD thesis, Rutgers University.
- Strawson, P. F. (1964). Intention and convention in speech acts. *The Philosophical Review*, 73(4):439–460.
- Thomason, R. H. (1990). Accommodation, meaning, and implicature: Interdisciplinary foundations for pragmatics. In Philip. R. Cohen, J. M. and Pollack, M. E., editors, *Intentions in Communication*, chapter 16, pages 325–364. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Unger, P. (1975). *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism*. Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.
- Yalcin, S. (2012). Bayesian expressivism. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 112(2):123–160.