

Mind, Matter, and Language

Lecture 14: Speech Acts

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How to do things with words

How to do things with words

We can do many things with words:

- tell a story
- baptise a ship
- insult a friend
- ask for a favour
- declare war
- ...

Let's call an act performed by uttering words a **speech act**.

How to do things with words

Many expressions are conventionally associated with a certain type of speech act.

- 'Hello!' — greeting
- 'Sorry.' — apologising
- 'Where is Bob?' — enquiring
- 'Bob is in the basement.' — reporting
- 'Leave my house!' — requesting

How to do things with words

English has three main sentence types:

- **imperative**: 'Leave!'
- **interrogative**: 'Are you leaving?'
- **declarative**: 'You are leaving.'

The imperative form is associated with requests.

The interrogative form is associated with enquiries.

The declarative form is associated with statements.

How to do things with words

But the association is complicated.

- 'I name this ship 'Queen Elizabeth'' — baptizing
- 'I'll pick you up from the station.' — promising
- 'I apologise.' — apologising
- 'I love roses!' — thanking
- 'You will not do this again.' — requesting
- 'Can you pass me the salt?' — requesting
- 'Have a good day!' — wishing

Speech Act Theory

The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which we are engaged in elucidating.

John Austin, *How to do things with words* (1962)



When we utter a sentence, we perform different kinds of acts.

- **locutionary act**: uttering a sentence
- **illocutionary act**: asking, reporting, requesting, etc. — by virtue of conventional features of the uttered sentence
- **perlocutionary act**: enlightening the hearer, embarrassing ourselves, etc. — as a consequence of the utterance

Narrowly understood, a **speech act** is an illocutionary act.

Speech Act Theory

- 'Bob is running.'
- 'Is Bob running?'
- 'Bob, run!'

These sentences are associated with different illocutionary acts.

They have different **illocutionary force**.

But they also have something in common.

They have the same propositional **content** (meaning).

A simple model: Illocutionary force is determined by grammar.

sentence	truth-conditions	force
'Bob is running.'	Bob is running	statement
'Is Bob running?'	Bob is running	enquiry
'Bob, run!'	Bob is running	request

Speech Act Theory

Specialized speech acts are often marked by special verbs (**performatives**):

sentence	truth-conditions	force
'I name this ship 'Queen Elizabeth''	?	baptizing
'I sentence you to 5 years.	?	sentencing
'I promise that I'll pay you back.	?	promising

For a speech act to be successful, certain **felicity conditions** must be satisfied. These depend on the illocutionary force.

- 'I hereby declare war on Australia.'
- 'I sentence you to 5 years in prison.'
- 'Leave the house!'

Austin classifies illocutionary force into 5 groups

- **verdictive**: giving a verdict, reckoning, estimating, etc.
- **exercitive**: ordering, urging, advising, warning, voting, appointing, etc.
- **commissive**: promising, declaring, etc.
- **behabitive**: apologising, congratulating, condoling, etc.
- **expositive**: replying, conceding, illustrating, etc.

Problem: 'Can you pass the salt?'

Grammar suggests this is a question, but it's a request.

Response 1: It is a question. ('Yes, here you are.') It is also interpreted as a request for Gricean reasons. (Wait for tomorrow's lecture.)

Response 2: 'Can you ...?', 'Could you ...?', etc. are idioms for requests.

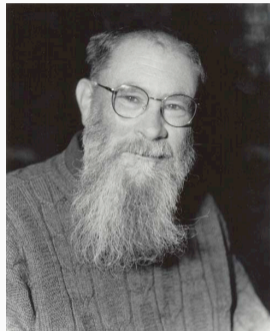
Scorekeeping

With any stage in a well-run conversation, or other process of linguistic interaction, there are associated many things analogous to the components of a baseball score.

[...] What play is correct depends on the score. Sentences depend for their truth value, or for their acceptability in other respects, on the components of conversational score at the stage of conversation when they are uttered.

[...] Score evolves in a more-or-less rule-governed way.

Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a language game" (1979)



What are the components of conversational score?

- shared assumptions between speakers and hearers (**Common Ground**)
- which objects are salient
- which possibilities are salient
- a standard of precision
- questions under discussion
- individual rights, obligations, and permissions

“What play is correct depends on the score.”

- ‘The cat is on the mat.’ — requires that there’s a unique salient cat (and mat).
- ‘I arrived at 7 pm.’ — requires loose standards of precision unless the arrival time was exactly 7 pm.
- ‘Leave my house!’ — requires authority to impose obligations.

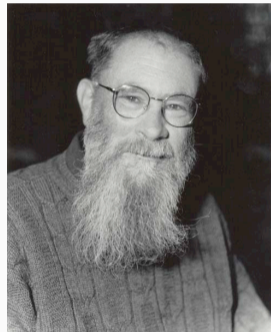
“Score evolves in a more-or-less rule-governed way.”

- ‘Bob is in the basement.’ — expands the Common Ground by the information that Bob is in the basement; adds Bob to the salient objects.
- ‘We might be brains in a vat.’ — makes skeptical possibilities salient.
- ‘Where is Bob?’ — adds Bob’s whereabouts to the Questions Under Discussion; adds an obligation on hearers to answer the question if they can.
- ‘Leave my house!’ — adds an obligation on the addressee to leave the house.

Accommodation:

Conversational score does tend to evolve in such a way as is required in order to make whatever occurs count as correct play.

Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a language game" (1979)



Accommodation:

- ‘Everyone passed the test.’ — makes all and only those who took the test salient.
- ‘France is hexagonal.’ — makes the precision standards low.
- ‘Let’s order pizza.’ — makes the speaker have authority.

Unless others resist, a move whose felicity requires a certain score tends to bring about that score.

Whenever an utterance is a move in a rule-governed activity, it changes what is subsequently permissible in that activity. Since our words often are contributions to such activities (e.g. conversations, games or systems of oppression), they are often covertly exercitive. Consequently, our utterances routinely change what is permissible for those around us.

McGowan, "Oppressive Speech" (2009)



McGowan:

- Every utterance has exercitive force: it actively changes or sustains what is socially and conversationally permissible.
- Making it socially permissible to treat certain people as inferior often **is** treating those people as inferior.
- Racist or sexist language can make or sustain permissions to treat certain groups as inferior. (If not resisted.)
- Racist or sexist language “oppresses”.