

Speech Acts

LANGUAGE AS ACTION

Speech Acts

- ▶ To speak is to act.
- ▶ Which is kind of obvious.
- ▶ But Austin (1962) noticed a less obvious way in which to speak is to act.

Performatives

Certain sentences **perform** the action they describe:

1. I now pronounce you married.
2. I christen this ship the *Santa Maria*.
3. I thank you for your support.
4. I apologize for embezzling company funds.
5. I bet you \$5 this horse will win the Triple Crown.

These are called **performatives** (with **performative verbs**).

Performatives

Non-performatives do not perform the action they describe:

1. I had a bagel for breakfast.
2. I love teaching linguistics.
3. I regret missing the first two weeks of the Institute.
4. Alice apologized for acting awful.

Performatives must be in the present tense and first person.

Performatives

Performatives allow the addition of *hereby*:

1. I hereby christen this ship the *Santa Maria*.
2. I hereby thank you for your support.
3. #I hereby love teaching linguistics.
4. #Alice hereby apologized for acting awful.

Speech Acts

And yet, non-performatives also perform an action; e.g., these sentences describe a situation:

1. I love teaching linguistics.
2. Alice hereby apologized for acting awful.

And these ask a question:

1. What time is it?
2. Where is the bookstore?

Speech Acts

So Austin realized that while not every utterance performs the act it describes, every utterance performs **SOME** act.

- ▶ It might, e.g., describe a situation: *Bertha built a boat.*
- ▶ Or it might ask a question: *Is Danny dating a dentist?*
- ▶ Or it might make a request: *Please pass the potatoes.*

But wait – there's more!

Some non-performatives perform an act that matches their form, but some do not. The latter are **indirect speech acts**.

- ▶ For example, **declaratives** generally make a **statement**:

Bertha built a boat.

- ▶ But they can also be an **indirect** way of asking a question or making a request:

I'm curious whether Danny is dating a dentist.

I'd appreciate it if you passed the potatoes.

Indirect speech acts

- ▶ **Interrogatives** generally ask a **question**:

Is Danny dating a dentist?

- ▶ But they can also be an **indirect** way of making a statement or a request:

Did you hear that Bertha's building a boat?

Could you pass the potatoes?

Indirect speech acts

- ▶ And **imperatives** generally make a **request**:

Please pass the potatoes.

- ▶ But they can also be an **indirect** way of making a statement or asking a question:

Be advised that Bertha is building a boat.

Tell me whether Danny is dating a dentist.

Types of speech act

- ▶ So we've got **performatives**, which perform the act they describe:
I promise to pickle the peaches.
- ▶ We've got **direct** speech acts, which perform an act that corresponds to their form:
Has Harriet held the hamster?
- ▶ And we've got **indirect speech acts**, which do neither:
Could you carry the coconuts?

Types of speech act

- ▶ And a given intention can often be phrased in any of these three ways:
 - ❖ *I command you to carry the coconuts!*
 - ❖ *Carry the coconuts!*
 - ❖ *It would be cool if you could carry the coconuts.*
(performative, direct, and indirect, respectively)

Types of speech act

- ▶ It's clear enough when an utterance is performative
- ▶ (for example, we've got the handy *hereby* test)
- ▶ ...but how do you tell when an utterance constitutes an indirect speech act
- ▶ ...and how do you tell what speech act is intended?

Locutionary acts

- ▶ The **locutionary** act a speaker performs (aka an utterance's **locutionary force**) is simply the conventional meaning of the utterance.
- ▶ The **illocutionary** act (or **illocutionary force**) is what the speaker intends to do by means of the utterance: assert, ask, request, promise, threaten, etc.
- ▶ The **perlocutionary** act (or **perlocutionary force** or **perlocutionary effect**) is the effect on the hearer.

Locutionary acts

- ▶ These can differ. The locutionary act of stating *I'm cold* can have different illocutionary forces:
 - ❖ Hand me a blanket
 - ❖ Cuddle up
 - ❖ Turn down the A/C
- ▶ Likewise, the perlocutionary effect can be any of these – and it may not match the illocutionary force.

Locutionary acts

- ▶ So how can the hearer determine the illocutionary intent?
- ▶ Grice to the rescue!

Speech acts and Grice

- ▶ If I've said *I'm cold*, the context and the Cooperative Principle are your allies in determining my intent.
- ▶ For example, *Can you move your arm?* has different relevance in a doctor's office vs. a movie theater.
- ▶ Similarly, *I have a car and I could pick you up at the airport* violates both Relation and Quantity unless you're actually making an offer.

Felicity conditions

- ▶ Another aid in determining illocutionary force:
Felicity conditions.
- ▶ Many utterances can't successfully perform their intended act unless certain conditions are met – conditions on the **felicity** of the act.

Felicity conditions

- ▶ Example: *I apologize for stepping on your toe.*
- ▶ Some of the felicity conditions on this apology:
 1. I stepped on your toe.
 2. You did not like it that I stepped on your toe.
 3. I am sorry that I stepped on your toe.

Felicity conditions

► Or:

*I **do solemnly swear** that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*

Felicity conditions

- ▶ Some of the felicity conditions:
 1. I've been elected President of the U.S.
 2. I agree to be President of the U.S.
 3. It is Inauguration Day, at the appointed time and place.
 4. I'm being sworn into office by the Chief Justice of the U.S.
 5. I utter precisely these words in this order.

Felicity conditions

- ▶ If one or more of the felicity conditions are not met, either the performative will be a **misfire** and not take effect (for example, if I haven't been elected President)...
- ▶ ...or it will be an **abuse** and will take effect, but insincerely (for example, if I take the oath of office with no intention of upholding the Constitution).

Felicity conditions

Searle observes that we often indirectly perform an act by either asserting or questioning one of its felicity conditions:

- ❖ *Do you need a ride to the airport?*
- ❖ *Would you like a ride to the airport?*
- ❖ *I've got a car.*
- ❖ *I could drive you to the airport.*

Felicity conditions

E.g., felicity conditions on a request that the hearer do X:

- a. X would be helpful.
(It would be really helpful if you did the dishes.)
- b. Speaker would like for hearer to do X.
(I'd appreciate it if you did the dishes.)
- c. Hearer is able to do X.
(Could you do the dishes?)
- d. Hearer is willing to do X.
(Are you willing to do the dishes?)

Felicity conditions

- ▶ Ambiguity may result; e.g., *I'm sorry* is a felicity condition on apologizing, but it can also be a direct speech act:

I'm very sorry you missed your flight.

- ▶ This can be either:
 - ❖ a direct speech act (statement that I am sorry about it)
 - ❖ an apology (statement of felicity condition)
- ▶ The latter depends on another felicity condition: Is it my fault that you missed your flight?

Felicity conditions

- ▶ And of course we're all familiar with the fake apology, designed to look like it's satisfying the felicity condition on apologizing but is actually just making a statement:

I'm very sorry you missed your flight

[...but I take absolutely no responsibility for it]

Felicity conditions

- ▶ Or worse yet:

I'm sorry you're angry with me.

or

I'm sorry you feel that way.

- ▶ Don't try these at home!

Felicity conditions

- ▶ Boy Scout official apologizing for Trump's speech:
"I want to extend my sincere apologies to those in our Scouting family who were offended by the political rhetoric that was inserted into the jamboree," said Chief Scout Executive Michael Surbaugh. "That was never our intent.... We sincerely regret that politics were inserted into the Scouting program."
- ▶ Is this a felicitous apology? Does it meet the felicity conditions on an apology?