

COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN THE CONSTITUTION OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

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Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts has offered a fruitful way of focussing the relation between language and communication. In particular, by adopting the distinction we attend to linguistic and communicative subjects as actors, not just processors or conduits of information. Yet in many attempts to explicate the constitution of illocutionary acts the subject as actor is subsumed within the role of linguistic rules or conventions.

In this paper I propose an account of illocutionary acts in which rules or conventions are secondary to what I will call communicative skills. These skills are taken as the primary component of communicative competence. They are derived from the principle that linguistic communication is not ultimately a linguistic matter, but relates instead to the way a communicator uses language. This principle is found in the work of Donald Davidson, but Davidson has tended to concentrate on semantics, and leaves the details of linguistic communication for pragmatics. The aim of this paper is to defend the general principle and supply some pragmatic details.

I

Among those accounts in which linguistic rules or conventions have a predominant role there are many differences of emphasis and development,¹ but they share the underlying presupposition that illocutionary acts can be ultimately analyzed in terms of the meanings of sentences. One corollary of this view (the 'semantic' account) is that it is possible, in principle, to produce a sentence such that just the meaning of the sentence will determine that its production is the performance of a

¹ I take the main proponents of such views to include Searle, Jonathan Cohen, Hare, and Katz.

given illocutionary act. Another is that to know what illocutionary act a speaker² is performing it is in principle sufficient to know the linguistic rules or conventions governing the sentence that speaker has uttered.

The act is constituted in the ideal case by a sentence in the first person present indicative active, with an illocutionary verb in the performative (or illocutionary) prefix. It thus has the form: 'I [verb_{illoc}] that *p*'. For example, when I say 'I warn you that the ice is thin' I inform you that I warn you and what I warn you, and I thereby perform the act of warning you that the ice is thin. However, we do not always have the ideal case, so some qualifications are required.

First, we do not always produce explicit utterances – sentences with performative prefixes. I may simply say, 'The ice is thin', perhaps as a warning, or an assertion, or a promise. So we need to add that features of context and paralinguistic cues will often carry the indicative detail paradigmatically offered by the performative prefix.

Second, even when locutions are in the explicit form they are often used to perform acts other than the one explicitly indicated. This problem is dealt with by appeal to a theory of indirect speech acts. The details need not concern us here, but the general point is that features of context will override the explicit indication of force and clarify the act when the utterance of the sentence is not serious and literal. Indirect utterances are therefore ultimately understood in the same terms as serious literal utterances, and can always be recast as serious literal utterances. Thus the central point remains that (paradigmatically) aspects of the meaning of what is said determine what is done in saying. The role of context may often be important, but it can always be recast or incorporated as part of a bare linguistic object.

There seem to be three general objections to such approaches. The first, noted by Stampe,³ is that there is an unjustified step from comments about ways of *indicating* or specifying intended force or performative meaning to the idea that these features of the utterance object *determine* force, in the sense of constituting the illocutionary act as the act it is.

² In the style of pragmatics I discuss here 'speaker' is taken as generic for users of language. I shall follow that usage, and not address theoretical issues it may raise.

Searle, for example notes that every serious literal utterance contains some indications of force, especially if we acknowledge factors such as stress and intonation as well as words and word order. Therefore, he says, the illocutionary force potential of the sentence is given by the sentence itself.

[T]he description of the act as a happily performed locutionary act, since it involves the meaning of the sentence, is already a description of the illocutionary act, since a particular illocutionary act is determined by that meaning. They are one and the same act.⁴

Yet while a particular illocutionary act may be specified (determined in one sense) by the meaning of the sentence, this cannot be automatically taken as constituting (determining in *that* sense) an illocutionary act. Searle steps from the meaning of a sentence to the nature of an act, with no account of how such a step, from meaning to act, can occur.

Jonathan Cohen says that the performative clause of an explicit utterance must be taken as meaningful, only distinguished by the fact that it does not describe anything, but instead makes explicit how the utterance is to be taken. With inexplicit utterances the performative aspect of meaning is still part of the meaning of the utterance, but given by factors such as intonation and contextual cues. Thus, he says, if 'Your haystack is on fire' gives a warning, and is rendered explicit by 'I warn you that your haystack is on fire', then 'the warning is also part of the former utterance's meaning'.⁵

What 'gives a warning' is presumably the *utterance of* 'Your haystack is on fire' – we refer to an utterance act. Yet Cohen assumes that this (act of) warning is part of the meaning of the sentences he mentions. But acts are not meanings, and so the act of warning is not obviously part of the meaning of even the explicit sentence. If the meaning does constitute the act somehow there must be some account of this relation.

³ D.W. Stampe, 'Meaning and Truth in the Theory of Speech Acts', *Syntax and Semantics* 3 (1975) pp.380-400.

⁴ J.R. Searle, 'Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts', *Philosophical Review* 77 (1968) pp.405-424.

⁵ L.J. Cohen, 'Do Illocutionary Forces Exist?', in K.T. Fann (ed.), *Symposium on J.L. Austin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) p.426.

At another point Cohen considers the utterance, 'Is it raining?', and says that even without it being made explicit by 'I ask whether it is raining', it seems impossible to separate illocutionary force from meaning. 'What on earth could be the meaning of your locutionary act other than to ask whether it is raining?'.⁶

The awkwardness of this last sentence shows another way in which equivocation occurs in this type of approach. The meaning of a sentence would never be of the form, 'to ask whether it is raining'; 'to ask whether it is raining' may, however, give the intention (or meaning in a different sense) of the person who performed the locutionary act. So if we reworked the sentence in a less awkward form we would get, 'What on earth would be your intention in performing your locutionary act other than to ask whether it is raining?'. This is a different matter, and makes a point quite different from that of Cohen's original rhetorical question.⁷

II

In the semantic account the meaning of an explicit sentence constitutes the illocutionary act named in the prefix, if it is serious and literal. The qualification is important. If primary, non-serious, non-literal sentences do constitute illocutionary acts, they do so in virtue of being reducible to or restatable as this paradigm. This means that the status of a sentence as serious or non-serious is crucial to the illocutionary act it supposedly constitutes. If a sentence is non-serious, then it has to be taken as non-paradigmatic and overwritten by contextual and paralinguistic features.

⁶ Cohen, 'Do Illocutionary Forces Exist?', p.427.

⁷ Part of the problem here is the way we use terms to describe illocutionary acts, and the same terms to describe the sentences that are typically used to perform those acts. So 'question', 'assertion', or 'warning' will be applied to illocutionary acts, but may also be applied to the sentences used to perform those acts. Need for care here has been noted by Davidson and Labov. See D. Davidson, 'Moods and Performances', in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p.110; D. Davidson, 'Communication and Convention', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p.286; and W. Labov, 'Rules for Ritual Insults', in D. Sudnow (ed.), *Studies in Social Interaction* (New York: The Free Press, 1972) pp.121-5. For similar awkwardness with the meaning-intention distinction, compare Searle's Principle of Expressibility, in 'Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts', p.418; and see Stampe, 'Meaning and Truth in the Theory of Speech Acts', p.5, for discussion of Searle's Principle.

This leads to the second problem with the semantic account. Illocutionary acts are supposed to be constituted by the meaning of what is said, yet the status of a sentence as serious or non-serious effects the acts that is performed, and this status can never be a function of features of the sentence.

Whether I am serious or not in producing an utterance is a matter regarding my relation to the object as it is; and if I am judged to be serious in producing the utterance the judgment will also bear on my relation to the utterance, no matter what the content of the utterance is.

Saying that I'm serious will not do the job, because that cannot decide that I am serious, or that I intend to be taken seriously, or that I will be judged to be serious. If there is to be judgment of my seriousness it must be based on features of the utterance act, the total speech act in the total speech situation (to use Austin's phrase), that display my relation to the object I produce – not on features of the object to which I am related. These features cannot be treated as a clarifying context included in or reducible to the utterance object, because seriousness arises as an issue given the utterance object clarified and disambiguated.

Though given the sentence we do not yet have an illocutionary act, since the act relies on the determination of the speaker's relation to the sentence. So an account that focuses on rules and conventions governing the sentence cannot hope to explain the constitution of the act.

Note that this argument does not depend on the sceptical point that we can never know whether someone is serious or not. It is a point about the place of seriousness in the logic of utterance acts. The problem here is that communication involves the use of utterance objects, and so is something to be dealt with *given* the utterance object. Semantic accounts miss this point, and try to incorporate communication, the way the utterance is used, in the utterance itself.⁸

⁸ This objection has been developed at greater length by Davidson and François Recanati. See Davidson, 'Communication and Convention' (pp.265-280), and 'Moods and Performances' (pp.109-121), in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*; and F. Recanati, *Meaning and Force: The Pragmatics of Performative Utterances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) pp.221-235.

III

The third objection follows from the requirement that the explanatory case is literal, as well as serious. All non-literal cases must be able to be reduced to or recast as literal utterances, because the illocutionary act is taken to be determined and constituted by the meaning of what is said. But the literal meaning of explicit sentences does not constitute illocutionary acts.

Suppose someone says 'I warn you that your haystack is on fire', and what is said is clear, disambiguated, and literal (and serious). If we try to take linguistic rules as constitutive of illocutionary acts, then it seems that we have an indicative that literally says: the speaker warns the audience that the audience's haystack is on fire. Taking the step (from object to act) common to the semantic account, we could then re-describe this as a description, perhaps. It is not a warning. Perhaps the act of uttering this sentence is 'thereby' a warning, but that is not something following from linguistic rules as they relate to what is literally said.

As another example we can take 'I describe your haystack as a fire-trap', as literal and so on. Trying again to take linguistic rules as constitutive, we presumably have a description of the speaker as describing; that is, a description of an act of describing, and the two acts of describing are different acts.

The performative or illocutionary prefix, when taken directly, steps back from the act it mentions, and the question might arise how an explicit literal utterance could ever be anything other than the act of describing some other illocutionary act.

My response is that it is the wrong question, because utterance objects are never utterance acts. The question should be: how is it that an act of producing an utterance object with certain features may also be an illocutionary act? However, the response from within a semantic account is to relax the demand for literalness (in spite of its role in the qualifying clause). We would then treat the prefix as an 'indicator' rather than part of a description.

But now we need to know what distinguishes a prefix used as an illocutionary indicator from one used as part of a description – because we do use the explicit form descriptively. We get little help here, but presumably one would say that features of the utterance object (paralinguistic and contextual cues) clarify the

situation. These features make it clear that on a given occasion the prefix is an 'indicator' with a performative or illocutionary role.

These features, however, have to be incorporated as semantic features, as part of or reducible to the meaning of what is said, and so the semantic problem returns. If the clarifying feature is descriptive, then the whole utterance is a description, and if it is an indicator, then that needs to be clarified by further features, and so on.

The problem seems to be that we have no way out of the utterance object to enable us to gain a perspective on the object, or more accurately, a perspective on the use to which the utterance object (the whole object) is being put. The problem arises with all semantic ambiguity removed; that is, with the complete (Austinian) locution. It arises because illocutionary acts concern what is done with this complete locution, not simply features of the locution itself.

IV

François Recanati's work offers the basis for a more satisfactory account of the relation between what is said and what is done. Recanati takes as his starting point the intuition that once a speaker's communicative intentions are recognized the speaker has succeeded in communicating. If I intend, in a specified way, to perform the act of warning or stating or ordering, and the intended audience recognizes the intention, I thereby succeed in warning, stating or ordering. This idea can be found in Strawson, Forguson, and several other writers, and has influenced later work of Searle.⁹ The difficulty has been to give a clear account of the communicative intentions and the details of their recognition.

According to Recanati, the communicative intention is an open, or default-reflexive intention of an utterer in producing an utterance. It is the intention that:

- (a) the utterance give the audience reason to believe that certain prototypicality conditions are satisfied, and

⁹ See P.F. Strawson, 'Intention and Convention in Speech Acts', in K.T. Fann (ed.), *Symposium on J.L. Austin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) pp.380-400; L.W. Forguson, 'Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts', in I. Berlin, L.W. Forguson, D.F. Pears, *et al*, *Essays on J.L. Austin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) pp.160-186; and J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) pp.42-9 .

(b) the audience recognize (a) and recognize it as open.¹⁰

The ‘prototypicality’ conditions are conditions associated with the prototype of an illocutionary act but not necessary for the performance of that act. For example, the prototype of asserting that *p* may include the conditions that the asserter believes that *p* and wishes the audience to share that belief, but the act can be performed without the satisfaction of these conditions. What is necessary, according to Recanati, is that the speaker openly intend to give the audience reason to believe that these conditions are satisfied; so this is the primary communicative intention.¹¹

‘Default-reflexivity’ is intended to satisfy intuitions regarding the openness of communication without the possible psychological implausibility of straightout reflexivity. Rather than an infinite number of intentions, default-reflexivity demands that there be no intention inconsistent with any intention the intention would entail were it genuinely reflexive.¹²

The intention to order that *p*, then, is the intention that the audience recognize the intention that an utterance give the audience reason to believe that the prototypicality conditions of ordering are satisfied and recognizes this as open. The prototypicality conditions for ordering might be in part: the speaker wants *p* to be done by the audience because of the speaker’s authority over the audience.

The communicative intention is made manifest, according to Recanati, through the following mechanism: If I produce an utterance with an explicit performative prefix, or such a prefix is given by the context or paralinguistic cues, then by that act I declare myself to be warning or stating or ordering that *p*. However, there is no independent state of affairs in which I do these things. Thus, in performing an illocutionary act I flout a maxim of quality; what I say is mutually known to be false. By this I implicate, and my audience infers, that my declaration is performative, in Recanati’s sense of describing a state of affairs to be brought about by the act of

¹⁰ See Recanati, *Meaning and Force*, p.207.

¹¹ See Recanati, *Meaning and Force*, p.183. Recanati’s communicative intentions are not directed towards perlocutionary ends (what we intend to do by our utterance act), and the analysis is not obviously threatened by cases of apparent communication in which the speaker’s intentions fall short of perlocutionary effects.

¹² See Recanati, *Meaning and Force*, pp.192-201; and compare S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) pp.114-118.

utterance itself. Therefore, my performative declaration manifests my communicative intention.¹³

So in declaring that I warn you that p I indirectly warn you that p , because my declaration manifests my open intention that the utterance should give you reason to believe that the prototypicality conditions for warning are satisfied, and that you should both recognize this intention and recognize it as open. Once this intention is satisfied, I warn you that p .

V

Recanati's approach has many attractive features. Importantly, it involves a theoretical acknowledgement of the act-object distinction, and offers an explicit mechanism for relating these two aspects of an utterance. It also allows us to accept the overt form of explicit utterances, and avoids the counter-intuitive claim that certain sentences are both literal and not what they appear.

For Recanati the meaning of the sentence does not constitute the illocutionary act; rather, the illocutionary act is brought about by the use of the sentence in two levels of indirection. We have the step from the utterance of the explicit sentence to the declaration that the described act is to be brought about by the utterance act, and we have the step from this declaration to the recognition of communicative intention.

Notice that the second level of indirection is not avoidable. We could not represent a communicative intention within an act to which that intention relates, because this representation is already part of another act. Any representation of communicative intention must, so to speak, step aside from the intention it represents and take on its own intention. Communicative intention, in the operation of a mechanism such as this, must be displayed, not represented.

Yet Recanati's mechanism does not, I think, offer a general account of illocutionary acts. His approach applies to utterances in the explicit form of 'I [verb_{illoc}] that p '.

¹³ Recanati divides illocutionary acts into two main classes—constative and performative—and he takes a declaration to be illocutionarily neutral. For discussion, see Recanati, *Meaning and Force*, pp.163-9.

with the utterance being used to perform the illocutionary act associated with the illocutionary verb. Non-explicit or primary cases are then covered by appeal to context and paralinguistic cues. Thus Recanati shares a starting point with semantic accounts. Yet while the explicit form is theoretically basic to semantic accounts, since they attempt to operate through the semantics of that form, it is not clear that it should be central to an effective pragmatics.

First, it seems that the use of an explicit sentence to perform an illocutionary act associated with the verb in that sentence is unusual. More commonly, I suspect, we use the explicit form in indirect speech acts, and for clarification, when one describes what one was doing in another act.

The utterance of 'I warn you that the ice is thin', if it involved the introduction of the propositional content 'the ice is thin' to a piece of discourse, would probably occur as an indirect threat. If it occurred after the introduction of that propositional content it might be a clarification of an earlier inexplicit or indirect warning.

When the explicit form is used 'directly' it would tend to be for the more or less formal invocation of authority, acknowledgement or expectation. I give a warning using the primary form, but you fail to heed my warning, so I say, 'I warn you that the ice is thin' (although more naturally it would be, 'Well, I've warned you'). By repeating the warning using the explicit form I might hope to add a note of urgency, or perhaps have my warning placed on the record, so to speak, and avoid recriminations. We might also use the explicit form for orders and other acts where there is a fairly explicit institutional backing to draw on or invoke. Analysis of these latter cases might show that they begin to shade into performatives.

These remarks would need support from linguistics,¹⁴ but I think that they match our intuitions regarding usage. This does not mean that it is necessarily wrong to take as the model a case that rarely occurs, but the point should at least make us hesitant.

¹⁴ Wunderlich has developed some of these points at greater length. See D. Wunderlich, 'Methodological Remarks on Speech Act Theory', in J.R. Searle, F. Kiefer & M. Bierwisch (eds.), *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980) pp.291-312.

There is, however, a more important reason for thinking that Recanati's account cannot be the whole story. His mechanism works in two stages. In the first, the utterance of a sentence with a performative prefix gives a declarative speech act; that act then implicates a performative declaration; and this manifests the speaker's communicative intentions. The implicature occurs because the requirement that there be an independent state of affairs is flouted.

But this suggests that in order for Recanati's mechanism for the constitution of illocutionary acts to get started it must be possible already, without that mechanism, to perform an illocutionary act. It must be possible to perform a declarative act in order to flout the requirements of a declarative act and thereby perform the act of warning. Thus we still need an account of the step from the utterance act to the illocutionary act.

VI

The first step towards a solution is to consider mood as an aspect of a sentence – although not part of the meaning of the sentence – which marks the whole sentences and makes it identifiable as an indicative, interrogative or imperative. We can then suppose that there is a relation (with qualification, conventional) between moods and illocutionary acts, such that (all things being equal) the production of a sentence with a certain mood displays the intention to perform certain illocutionary acts. By this we appear to have a bridge from object to act. The mood of the sentence the speaker produces displays the speaker's communicative intentions in producing the sentence; and via the mood the audience is able to infer the speaker's intentions; thus allowing for the appropriate uptake of intentions (as outlined at the beginning of Sect. IV).

Note that this account does not say that to produce a sentence with a certain mood is to perform a certain illocutionary act; it is to display the intention to perform it. The qualification is important. If we rely on a simple conventional relation between mood and act we come up against the problem of seriousness again, since no gap is allowed between object and act for the intentions with which the object is produced –

so we could only deal with a form of communication without features such as indirection or irony.¹⁵

So mood displays communicative intention; but while it may get communication going, it is at best a very general and prima facie display of intention. The display requires detail, and it must be possible to defeat the expectation raised by mood, since, for example, we can with indicatives perform any number of illocutionary acts.

I suggest that we find the supplementary aspects of display in the way the utterance is placed in a context and the manner of its production. This frames and shades the utterance act, and thereby adds detail to the display of intention and confirms or defeats prima facie directness and seriousness.

So when a speaker produces a sentence, the interplay of mood, context and manner displays the speaker's communicative intentions, namely: that the utterance act give the audience reason to believe that certain prototypicality conditions are satisfied, and that the audience recognize the first intention and recognize it as open. The act may be direct or indirect, depending on whether the context and manner confirm and detail the intentions displayed by mood, or defeat that display and imply some other act.

Recanati's mechanism comes into play when the current mechanism results in the performance of a declarative act, the prototypicality conditions of which are flouted.

The relation between features of display and the actual speech acts performed as a result of that display is complex. For one thing, the relation between mood and act cannot be straightforwardly conventional. Even if we suppose that each mood is standardly related to a particular act at the top of a hierarchy the relation would only operate all things being equal; and given the qualification offered by manner and context, things will never be equal. Also, although I will not argue the case here, it seems easier to say that each mood raises the possibility of a range of acts, and that the specific act depends on the details of display given by manner and context.

¹⁵ It is an approach similar to this by Dummett that is one target of Davidson's discussion of seriousness. See his 'Communication and Convention', pp.270-71, and also 'Moods and Performances', pp.112-13.

It also seems hopeless to aim for anything like a calculus of the details of display for particular acts. It is not just that intentions will often be vague and revisable, and interpretation a matter of searching for the best revisable explanation. Even given the possibility of definite intentions, just what factors amount to a display of those intentions will depend on a specific context and a specific set of shared presuppositions. As well, context, manner and mood seem to come together as an interplay rather than a simple summation. As communicators we must be able to work with such complex variables, but I doubt that such skills are nomological, or able to be described in detail.

VII

I have argued that in the account we give of the constitution of illocutionary acts we cannot rely on the meaning of the utterances we produce in performing the acts. The act, I have claimed, is a function of the way we use the utterance we produce, so our account must, without presupposing the illocutionary act, show how this way we use the utterance becomes constituted as an illocutionary act. The answer suggested here (in preliminary terms) has been that mood, manner and context form a display of communicative intentions that allows for the possibility of the performance of the illocutionary act via the recognition by the audience of those intentions.

While we have left aside attempts to distinguish utterance acts solely in terms of features of utterance objects, the mood and content of what is said remain significant features of the speech situation, and will be brought to bear in the performance and interpretation of acts. But when meaning plays a role in the constitution of illocutionary acts (that is, in the interpretation, via implicature, of indirect acts) this will be derivative on the possibility of direct acts, which do not rely on meaning.

Thus, to perform illocutionary acts, as the acts we wish to perform, it is not enough to know a language. We must be able to bring about that interplay of mood, contexts and style that will display our communicative intentions; and we must be able to interpret such displays by others. This requires skills and capacities that go beyond the knowledge of a language.

These skills and capacities are not mysterious – they are at least partly what is manifested as manner, affect or style (personal, oratory, and literary). Yet the point

that arises from what I have said is that we should not place them to one side as a complement to communication. They are crucial in as much as they involve the ability to control the paralinguistic shading and contextual framing of what we say, and therefore to perform the acts we do in saying.

It should be noted that illocutionary acts are not constituted by intentions; they are constituted by an interactive mechanism grounded in the manifestation of intentions. This means that the actual presence of communicative intentions is not necessary for interpretation. As language users we are also interpreters, and search for ways of making sense of utterance acts as communicative acts. Language use always has its context and style, and so we always have a basis for interpretation irrespective of intentions.

Similarly, if we lack the requisite skills and capacities for communication (perhaps because we are in an unfamiliar situation), it is not that nothing will happen. There is always a context and there are usually paralinguistic phenomena, and our audience can use these in constructing an interpretation. However, without such skills and capacities, or with techniques inappropriate to the speech situation, we risk being misunderstood or dismissed. Even with skills, there will be varying limits (governed in part by the relation between speaker and audience) to the extent to which we can control the interpretation of our communicative acts.

However, because communication occurs as discourse, not as a series of discrete initiating acts, understanding can be developed and revised, and is not limited to a flash of recognition. For the actions of communicative subjects in the view I have been encouraging come together as interaction. Once we treat communicative subjects primarily as actors we have the possibility for a pragmatics that can tie communicative action within a broader sphere of social action, and is not locked within a circle of language.¹⁶

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¹⁶ This paper has benefited from comments from a number of people, including Robert Dunn, Stephen Gaukroger, two anonymous reviewers for this journal, and the editor of the journal.