

Mind, Matter and Language

Philosophy of Language

Speech Acts and Literal Meaning

Outline

Performatives

Locutionary, Illocutionary, Perlocutionary

Indirect Speech Acts

Literal Meaning

Sentence Types)

- **Declarative Sentences** (*stating* what the world is like...)
 - “John kissed Sue”
 - “The mayor stole the vote”
- **Interrogative Sentences** (*asking* what the world is like...)
 - “Did John kiss Sue?”
 - “Who stole the vote?”
- **Imperative Sentences** (*stating* what the world *must/ought to* be like...)
 - “John, kiss Sue!”
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Sentence Types and Truth (Verification)

- **Observation:** it seems plausible to assign truth conditions (or verification conditions) only to declarative sentences.
- Classifying interrogatives or imperatives as either true or false leads to gibberish (or in more technical jargon, *ungrammaticality*).
 - *It is true that who stole the vote?
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Quick Historical Recap: Logical Positivism

- One of the main tenets of the doctrine of Logical Positivism was the claim that unless a sentence can be *verified* (i.e. assessed for its truth or falsity), it is strictly speaking meaningless.
- This view was partly stimulated by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) but later further developed and defended by several other philosophers, e.g. Ayer (1936).
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Performatives

- The logical positivists' insistent claim that truth (and verification) are foundational to language understanding was forcefully challenged by J. L. Austin.
- First, Austin observed that the paradigmatic function of declarative sentences is not invariably to *describe* the world, i.e. to say something that is verifiable/falsifiable (viz. true/false).
- Rather, declarative sentences are often used to *perform* actions. Austin dubbed such declarative sentences **performatives**. For example,
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 - (2) I pronounce you husband and wife.
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T-sentences

- One way of explicating truth conditions is using the so-called T-schema.
- Canonically, this schema looks as follows:
 - ‘ S ’ is true iff p
- Here, S is a sentence and p is the state of affairs that must obtain in order for S to be true (you can also think of p as a proposition).
 - ‘Grass is green’ is true iff grass is green
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Performatives and Truth

- For (1) and (2), it would be the following.
 - (1') 'I declare war on Zanzibar' is true iff I declare war on Zanzibar.
 - (2') 'I pronounce you husband and wife' is true iff I pronounce you husband and wife.
- These T-sentences seem to capture only one aspect of the meaning of the relevant sentences.
- For example, by asserting (1), I'm not simply describing the way the world is. Instead, by asserting (1), I'm (potentially) *changing* the world in a very substantial way!

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Performatives and Truth (cont.)

- Austin initially argued that performatives simply cannot be *true* or *false*, i.e. the question of truth and falsity simply does not arise for such sentences.
- One argument in favor of this view is given by the observation that the following types of exchanges are clearly anomalous.
 - (5) A: I name thee Sir Walter.
B: #That's false.
- Performatives thus contrast what Austin refers to as *Constatives*.
- In contrast to Performatives, Constatives are used to *describe* the way the world is and hence are either true or false.

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Performatives and Felicity

- But while performatives cannot be true/false, they can go wrong or be “infelicitous” as Austin dubbed it.
- For example, if I were to point at a random dog at the meadows and then assert (6), I would not obviously succeed.

(6) I christen thee *Biscuit*.

- Namings or christenings require many things, e.g. that I have authority to name the individual in question, that the individual has not already been named, that there are witnesses. In some cases, one even needs to break a bottle of champagne.

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- Austin therefore provided a list of so-called felicity conditions, i.e. conditions that must be met in order for it to be appropriate to use a performative.
 - a. There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect.
 - b. The circumstances must be appropriate.
 - c. The procedure must be executed correctly and completely.
 - d. The parties involved must have the right intentions.
- Let's consider some examples where these conditions are violated.

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Felicity Violations

- **Violation of condition (a):** Suppose I point to a random individual in this room and say (7).
 - (7) I hereby inherit all your belongings.
- I would obviously not succeed. Why not? Because I have violated (a) above.
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- **Violation of condition (b):** Imagine a case where an individual without the proper authority attempts to perform some ceremony.
 (i.e. the circumstances are not appropriate)
- **Violation of condition (c):** Imagine a case where the wrong form of words are used (“you’re now married to him and you’re now married to her, congrats”).
 (i.e. the procedure has not been executed correctly and completely.)
- **Violation of condition (d):** Imagine a case where one party fails to assent. For example, “I bet you that Trump will be impeached” requires confirmation from the addressee in order to constitute a bet.
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Performatives vs. Constatives

- If Austin's distinction between *performatives* and *constatives* is to mark a genuine difference between sentences that are assessed in terms of truth/falsity and sentences that are assessed in terms of felicity, then there should be a clear way of telling the difference between them.
- That is, there should be a clear way of explaining why (8) is performative while (9) is constative.

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Linguistic Criteria for Performatives

- First, Austin proposes a linguistic set of criteria: Performative sentences are *present tense, active, 1st person, and in the indicative mood*.
 - This is sufficient to explain the difference between (8) and (9).
- However, what about sentences such as (10) and (11) below.
 - (10) I now whisk the eggs.
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- (10) and (11) are both *present tense, active, 1st person, and indicative* — yet neither is intuitively performative.

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Counterexamples

- First, many sentences that satisfy each of Austin's criteria, have clear non-performative uses. Consider, for example, the following dialogue:

(12) A: How do you keep succeeding in upsetting the Americans?
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- Second, there is no obvious incompatibility between a sentence being performative and it being constative at the same time. For example:

(13) I (*hereby*) report to you that the king is unhappy.

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(16) Sue stopped smoking.

(17) The president of England is a man.

- If Sue never smoked, there is something clearly odd (i.e. infelicitous) about (16). Similarly for (17). Since there is no president of England, this sentence seems odd.
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- Austin therefore gives up the distinction between performatives and constatives and instead focuses on the notion of *force*.
- The idea here is that an utterance of a given sentence comes with a particular force, and this is distinct from its meaning.
- For example, it might be clear what (20) means, but not immediately obvious what its force is, i.e. is it a command, a recommendation, etc.

(20) Shut the door.

- In short, Austin's main point is that in uttering a sentence that has a certain meaning, one is simultaneously *doing* something. What exactly one is doing depends on the force of the utterance.

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Outline

Performatives

Locutionary, Illocutionary, Perlocutionary
A Threefold Distinction

Indirect Speech Acts

Literal Meaning

Speech Acts

- Roughly speaking, a *speech act* is a general term for the *acts* that one can perform when making an utterance.
- For example, one can make certain things the case simply by saying them, i.e. one can *promise, assert, appoint, warn* etc. simply by saying:
 - (22) I promise you that ...
 - (23) I warn you that ...
- In contrast, I cannot travel to Los Angeles simply by saying (24) and I cannot lose 20 pounds by saying (25).
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Speech Acts (cont.)

- However, *speaking* is not necessary to perform a speech act.
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- Consider the following three-fold distinction.
 - (i) **Locutionary Act**
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- Before moving on, let's consider the distinction between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Suppose a speaker asserts (28).
 - (28) I promise that you will regret it.
- This sentence can be uttered with different forces, e.g. it could be a *warning*, a *recommendation*, a *threat* etc.
- Moreover, by uttering this sentence the speaker might achieve different things, e.g. bringing the addressee to her senses or simply annoying her.
- The former is part of the illocutionary act whereas the latter is the perlocutionary act (or the perlocutionary *effect*).

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 - The **locutionary** act is the act of uttering a meaningful sentence (i.e. making certain physical oral gestures resulting in the production of a phonological string of words forming a grammatical sentence).
 - The **illocutionary** act is the intention to produce a certain effect in the hearer by getting the hearer to recognize that the speech act performed is conventionally associated with that particular intention.
 - The **perlocutionary** act is an effect produced in the hearer which is not conventionally associated with the speech act in question nor necessarily intended by the speaker.

Outline

Performatives

Locutionary, Illocutionary, Perlocutionary

Indirect Speech Acts
Further Distinctions

Literal Meaning

Literal vs. Non-Literal

- There are, however, reasons to think that Austin's three-fold distinction is a bit too simple.

The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says. In such cases the speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in the hearer, and he intends to produce this effect by getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce it, and he intends to get the hearer to recognize this intention in virtue of the hearer's knowledge of the rules that govern the utterance of the sentence. But, notoriously, not all cases of meaning are this simple: [...] For example, a speaker may utter the sentence "I want you to do it" by way of requesting the hearer to do something. The utterance is incidentally meant as a statement, but it is also meant primarily as a request, a request made by way of making a statement.

Searle (1975, 30)

Literal vs. Non-Literal

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Literal vs. Non-Literal (cont.)

- Searle continues,

There are also cases in which the speaker may utter a sentence and mean what he says and also mean another illocution with a different propositional content. For example, a speaker may utter the sentence "Can you reach the salt?" and mean it not merely as a question but as a request to pass the salt.

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Indirect Speech Acts

- Let's consider Searle's case above. A speaker asserts (30).

(30) Can you reach the salt?

- Since (30) is in the interrogative mood (viz. a question), it is conventionally associated with a request for information.
- Given its literal meaning, one would thus think that a speaker uttering (30) is simply requesting information as to whether the addressee is capable of reaching the salt.
- But this seems clearly wrong. A speaker uttering (30) is not simply requesting information, she is making a request!
- This is a case of what Searle calls an *indirect speech act*.

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Indirect Speech Acts

The problem posed by indirect speech acts is the problem of how it is possible for the speaker to say one thing and mean that but also to mean something else. And since meaning consists in part in the intention to produce understanding in the hearer, a large part of that problem is that of how it is possible for the hearer to understand the indirect speech act when the sentence he hears and understands means something else. The problem is made more complicated by the fact that some sentences seem almost to be conventionally used as indirect requests. For a sentence like "Can you reach the salt?" or "I would appreciate it if you would get off my foot", it takes some ingenuity to imagine a situation in which their utterances would not be requests.

Searle (1975, 31)

Indirect Speech Acts

- The question then is, what is it that enables speaker/hearer to grasp indirect speech acts. Something beyond conventional (illocutionary) force is needed in order to explain this.

Examples of Indirect Speech Acts

- There is a long list of expressions that can be used to perform “indirect directives” as Searle calls them. For example...
 - Could you be a little more quiet?
 - I would be most grateful if you would leave.
 - Would you kindly get off my foot?
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- One might be tempted to think that indirect speech acts are not indirect at all. For example, one might be tempted to think that the meaning of (30) just is (31a) or perhaps (31b).

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Indirectness (cont.)

- However, notice that the following dialogue sounds weird/funny.
 - (32) a. Be quiet!
 - b. #Yes, I COULD be a little more quiet, but I won't.
- In contrast, the dialogue below sounds absolutely fine!
 - (33) a. Could you be a little more quiet?
 - b. Yes, I COULD be a little more quiet, but I won't.
- This seems to strongly suggest that the literal meaning of (33a) cannot simply be (32a). The command/order communicated by an utterance of (33a) really is *indirect*.

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Conventionality

- Despite not being literal directives, these sentences are *conventionally* used to express directives.
- There is an interesting difference between imperatives and declaratives, namely that one can insert the word 'please' in an imperative sentence, but not in a declarative.
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- However, the sentences from earlier seem to allow the insertion of 'please'.
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Explaining Indirect Speech Acts

- Searle distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary* illocutionary acts. One locutionary act can thus feature both a primary and secondary illocutionary act.
- What seems clear is that Austin's three-fold distinction does not suffice to explain how a sentence with one conventional illocutionary force can be used to perform a different illocutionary act.
- Searle goes on to suggest an explanation of indirect speech acts — in particular an explanation of how and why certain sentences can be used to perform indirect speech acts while other sentences cannot.
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Literal Meaning

Problems for Truth Conditional Semantics

Literal Meaning

- The *standard* view, according to Searle:

Sentences have literal meanings. The literal meaning of a sentence is entirely determined by the meanings of its component words (or morphemes) and the syntactical rules according to which these elements are combined. A sentence may have more than one literal meaning (ambiguity) or its literal meaning may be defective or uninterpretable (nonsense).

The literal meaning of a sentence needs to be sharply distinguished from what a speaker means by the sentence when he utters it to perform a speech act [...]

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Literal Meaning

- “We might, with apologies for poor draftmanship represent this descriptive element as follows.” (Searle, 1978, 121)



- “When things are like that, we feel inclined to say, the cat is on the mat; otherwise not. And that is what the sentence says – it says that things in the cat and mat line of business are in the relation depicted.” (Searle, 1978, 121)

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Literal Meaning (cont.)

- However, it is quite easy to construct scenarios where it is less than clear whether the sentence is really true or false.
- For example, suppose the cat and the mat are floating freely around in outer space. Would the sentence be true in such a scenario? (i.e. a scenario where the cat and the mat might stand in certain spatio-temporal relation to each other but where there is no privileged perspective and no gravity).
- Searle concludes:

[...] the notion of literal meaning of the sentence “the cat is on the mat” does not have a clear application, unless we make some further assumptions, in the case of cats and mats floating freely in outer space; and though our picture did not depict the earth’s gravitational field, it, like the sentence, only has an application relative to a set of background assumptions.

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- Secondly, it seems we would need a rather large set of contextual assumptions.

Suppose the cat and the mat are in the spatial relations depicted in [the figure above], at the surface of the earth, but that each [...] are suspended on an intricate series of invisible wires so that the cat, though slightly in contact with the mat, exerts no pressure on it. Is the cat still on the mat? Once again it seems to me that the question does not have a clear answer, and that is just another way of saying that the meaning of the sentence "The cat is on the mat" does not have a clear application in the context as so far specified and hence it does not yet determine a clear set of truth conditions.

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- According to Searle, the lack of a context-free literal meaning of (40) is not due to e.g. ambiguity, presupposition failure, implicatures, vagueness, or meaning change (metaphor, irony, idiomatic meanings).

(40) The cat is on the mat.

- To illustrate, compare (40) to (41)–(44) below.

(41) I'm here now.

(42) Biscuit is big.

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- Is it true if ...
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 - c. Smith is naked in the morning, but submerged in water?
- Again, this does not look like a case of ambiguity, indexicality, presupposition, meaning transfer, vagueness, etc.

Literal Meaning (cont.)

- We might for example ask under what *precise* conditions (46) is going to count as true.
 - (46) Smith weighs 80kg.
- Is it true if ...
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- A similar point carries over to e.g. imperatives.

(47) Hand me that broom.

- While imperatives do not have truth conditions, they are often assumed to have *obedience* conditions. The thought being that the meaning of an imperative can be explicated in terms of the conditions under which the imperative is obeyed.
- However, it is easy to construct scenarios where it is less than clear whether the imperative has been obeyed. Consider for example...
 - a. The addressee incases the broom in plastic and hands it to the speaker.
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