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## **How to do things with words - a cognitive dimension**

### **1. Introduction - objectively oriented approaches to speech acts**

The phenomenon of illocutionary force (speech acts) was brought to the attention of linguistics as late as in 1955 and was first recognized and described by a philosopher - J.L. Austin. As an instance of non-literal meaning of utterances it was eventually relegated to the domain of linguistic performance and has since been generally regarded as an issue of pragmatics. That step was only too natural in the linguistic world dominated by generative theories. It was, by the same token, necessary for any linguist who saw the object of his study (i.e. language) as a structure describable in terms of objective and verifiable rules and designed to refer to the objective world - either directly or via concepts faithfully reflecting this world's categories.

It soon became evident that handling illocutionary force by means of the same rules which were believed to generate literal meaning (by postulating the existence of performative super-clauses in the deep structure), i.e. as merely an issue of truth-conditional semantics was not possible given the enormous variety of utterances accomplishing a specific illocutionary force as well as the fact that the same utterance can be used to perform a number of different speech acts. The thesis, put forward by Ross (1970) and supported by Sadock (1974) has proved untenable.

However, leaving illocutionary force within the domain of pragmatics (linguistic performance) but trying to explain it by means of traditional objectively oriented methods did not prove to be much more elucidating. The "idiom" approach claiming that illocutionary force should be understood as an interpretation conventionally ascribed to certain utterances whose literal meaning is not relevant - just like the literal meaning of typical idiomatic expressions (e.g. *to spin a yarn* is read as *to tell a tale*) really explained nothing at all. It is quite clear that this attitude would have to lead to treating any utterance as an idiom. Hence, it would become necessary to ignore the literal sense in general since only on few occasions is the illocutionary force explicitly expressed by means of performative clauses and, as observed by Austin (1962), every utterance counts as a performance of a certain speech act.

Another proposal was to explain illocutions in terms of logical inference in which the literal meaning of an utterance and its circumstances were the premises. This view seems interesting and deserves attention but any attempt to describe the train of reasoning which leads to the deciphering of an illocutionary force of a given utterance by a hearer as fixed and replicable regularities (such as the Conversational Postulates proposed by Gordon and

Lakoff 1975) poses a question whether such algorithms can legitimately be called "rules". They seem to have been formulated ad hoc with regard to certain kinds of expressions typically used to achieve certain illocutionary goals so as to handle various conventions holding for English. Even though this view does assign a role in accomplishing speech acts to language users' cognitive capacities, it allows them only to creatively and intentionally use objective rules. Besides, even though such conversational postulates would, indeed, "generate" the illocutionary force of some expressions, they would leave countless others unaccounted for unless one decided to embark upon the unimaginable task of formulating a separate postulate for every utterance which accomplishes a certain illocutionary act. The number of such "rules" would have to rise *ad infinitum*, especially that nearly all speech acts are indirect to a higher or lower degree. Kalisz (1993) proposes that speech acts should be treated as instances of implicature in the sense presented by Grice (1975). It appears, thus, that expressing and understanding illocutionary force by language users is not rule-governed in the sense developed within objectivist linguistics.

## **2. Illocutionary force - a cognitive approach**

In this situation it seems reasonable to refer to a theory which identifies meaning with conceptualizations and relates it to the outer world through concepts arisen along the parameters of people's cognitive capacities and influenced by various "human-related" factors. Such an attitude to linguistic meaning is one of the pivotal assumptions of cognitive linguistics and it is within its theoretical framework that the phenomenon of illocutionary force seems to be plausibly explainable. The notions of the cognitive theory lend themselves to a satisfactory and psychologically realistic explanation of how speakers manage put across and hearers to understand illocutionary forces, sometimes pointed at very indirectly. It is also effective in accounting for the fact that the same force is borne by such a great variety of utterances differing not only with regard to their propositional content but also syntactic form.

Austin (1962) not only discovered the phenomenon of illocutionary force but made an attempt at classifying various speech acts by assigning verbs representing them into five categories. That classification had numerous drawbacks and one that seems to be much more satisfactory and based on clear and relevant criteria was offered by Searle (1977). Nevertheless, the fact that illocutionary forces have names in a language indicates that they represent certain actual concepts. Even though Searle's effort was aimed at describing speech acts in terms of objective facts (referred to as, *propositional* content, *preparatory*, *sincerity* and *essential* conditions), the result of his work were descriptions which can be identified with the independently developed concept of prototypes (Rosch 1976, Lakoff 1980).

### 3. Speech act prototypes

Even though the concept of a prototype has arisen from research on human categorization with regard to observable, real-world phenomena such as colors, pottery, cutlery, animals, plants, etc. there is no reason why it should not apply to concepts representing more abstract entities, in whose number illocutionary forces can be included. As already mentioned, they are labeled in language by specific predications of nominal character, at least in such languages as English or Polish and constitute, therefore, certain concepts within a speaker's mental world. Furthermore, there is no reason why the concepts of speech acts should not be represented, as is usual with other concepts, by prototypical instances. Such prototypes, identifiable with Searle's conditions of felicitous speech act performance, can be assumed to serve as reference points useful in identifying various instances of human verbal behavior as expressions of various illocutionary forces. As commonly happens in the case of prototypes of other categories, speech act models can also be departed from, i.e. certain conditions constituting such a model can be violated, which produces instances that are more or less prototypical. This fact was first noticed and presented by Kalisz and Kubinski (1993) who studied the thoroughly described by Searle (1975) act of promising and demonstrated how the model could be distorted in actual real-life situations. That yielded unprototypical promises, whose illocutionary force was, nevertheless, identifiable.

It is assumed, therefore, that speech acts are represented by concepts within a conceptualizer's mental world and these concepts can be described as Gestalts, i.e. as structured configurations which are psychologically simpler as wholes than as bundles of details. They can, nonetheless, be analyzed into components which, as mentioned before, are identified with felicity conditions as developed by Searle (1975). Thus, it is believed, a speaker (conceptualizer) bears in mind concepts of certain prototypical events which are idealizations of various illocutionary forces. Such events typically comprise a number of facts - as indicated by Searle. Contrary to Searle's beliefs, however, it is assumed that the felicity conditions are mental in nature and, therefore, do not have to be always realized in real-life situations. Yet, the mental model is necessary as a reference point in the process of identifying utterances as accomplishments of specific illocutionary forces.

The well-known instance of the act of promising may be used to illustrate the above remarks. Apart from the universal *normal input and output* conditions that the speaker and the hearer use a language familiar to both of them, which makes it possible for them to understand each other, and that the speaker utter a certain proposition, the *propositional content* condition states that the speaker's proposition should predicate of a future action of his. This may also be referred to as the semantic content condition. The *preparatory* conditions, in turn, concern the circumstances of a promise, inclusive of the speaker's and the hearer's states of mind. Thus, the hearer should prefer the speaker's performing the predicated-of action to his not performing it. Next, it should be evident to both participants that the action would not be carried out by the speaker anyway, as part of his duties or a

certain routine. The speaker should also be able to do what he promises. Another condition, that of *sincerity*, requires that the speaker genuinely intend to perform the action specified. Finally, the *essential* condition concerns the intention of the speaker that making a specific utterance should put him under certain obligation and another intention - that the hearer should understand his utterance in this way, i.e. realize that he is dealing with a promise.

Indeed, such conditions seem to describe a model promise, but this does not mean that casual language users consciously analyze actual situations by scanning them with reference to such parameters. As mentioned before, a speech act Gestalt is psychologically simpler as a whole than as a combination of elements. Another example supporting this view is Coleman and Kay's (1982) study of lies which proved that speakers were well, albeit subconsciously aware of the model of lying which comprised three conditions: that the speaker should believe that his statement is false, that he should have an intention to deceive, and that his statement should be actually untrue. The informants taking part in the experiment were sure that they were dealing with a lie in situations where all the three conditions held and became hesitant if any of them did not apply. When asked to define a lie, however, they appeared conscious of only one aspect of the model - that a lie is an untrue statement. It appears that when classifying an assortment of utterances made in different situations as lies or not lies they automatically confronted it with the model of a lie they held within their mental worlds.

As was shown by Kalisz and Kubinski (1993) situations in which the conditions specified for promises get violated are not only conceivable but very common, which results in, for example, unsolicited promises (the hearer does not want the speaker to do anything for his sake), insincere promises (not intended to be kept - a violation which was noticed by Searle himself), irrelevant promises (the speaker is going to perform the action in question as a routine), tentative promises (the speaker is not sure whether he will be able to perform the action), unrealistic promises (the speaker cannot do what he commits himself to), etc. Such departures from the prototype move specific instances out of the center of the category. Yet, because they still share numerous attributes with the model, they stay within. On the other hand, a non-prototypical instance also has some attributes in common with models of other speech acts and, as a result, resembles them to an extent. For example, an unsolicited promise may become similar to a threat, an irrelevant one - to a statement, etc. These facts seem to support the idea that speech acts are mental in nature since speakers are usually capable of recognizing them even if they deal with instances which are in a certain way faulty.

However, it is not unlikely that in the cases where violations of the conditions of a prototype are severe there may arise difficulties in identification. For example, when a speaker tells an interlocutor to perform an action which is evidently in his own interest as well as the hearer's, it can be taken as a request as well as a piece of advice.

#### **4. Illocutionary force - a linguistic, not just pragmatic phenomenon**

The issue of illocutionary force of utterances also provides support for the cognitive idea that studies upon language should not be sectioned into research on separate "components" such as syntax, semantics and pragmatics. A linguist who wishes to satisfactorily account for language and its communicative potential should study meaning in all its aspects looking for its sources in the mental world of users. Since a speech act is, as observed by Searle (1971) a basic unit of communication, it is interesting to observe in the manner in which it is accomplished how all the previously treated separately aspects (form, semantic meaning and situation) unite and cooperate to achieve specific illocutionary goals. It seems also worthwhile to add that, since illocutionary force is of basic importance in the process of communication, it should be of interest to methodologists working out effective strategies of foreign language teaching and, of course, to teachers who put their ideas to work.

It has already been presented how facts concerning the literal meaning of an utterance and its situation of occurrence meet within a mental model of a speech act and can be described in terms of various conditions. It will be subsequently demonstrated that also the syntactic form of an utterance is not arbitrary but determined by the model and in this way "harnessed" as a carrier of the intended illocutionary meaning.

Prior to this it is necessary, however, to mention another phenomenon described within cognitive linguistics which seems to be of crucial importance in accounting for the enormous creativity of speakers with regard to ways of expressing illocutionary force and the subsequent variety of utterances used for this purpose. This is the idea of imagery recognized and presented in numerous works by Langacker (1986, 1987 and other). Imagery is understood as the ability of the human mind to construe the same situation in a number of different ways, with regard to various dimensions, i.e. factors influencing the mode of perception.

It should also be reminded that instances of speech acts encountered by language users in real life constitute radial categories centered around a prototype and held together by the principle of family resemblance. The prototype, in turn, is not a monolith but a collection of various conditions, as already indicated. It is these individual conditions that the attention of a conceptualizer can focus on or, in other words, he can construe the model approaching it in a variety of ways - from various directions.

#### **5. Imagery and its role in expressing illocutionary force**

The demonstration how mental imagery applies to speech act models yielding various utterances bearing a respective illocutionary force should begin with a detailed description of a chosen speech act - in the way suggested by Searle (1971). The following conditions constitute the model of the speech act of inviting/offering. The double name of the speech act in question is justified by the fact that invitations and offers operate within a certain "frame" where one is necessary to understand the meaning of the other, like in the case of

the *buy/sell* pair. A person inviting someone else to do something *eo ipso* commits himself to performing some action, too, be it only pointing at an unoccupied chair in the case of encouraging someone to take a seat. Issuing an offer, on the other hand, necessarily demands some response (action) from the hearer, e.g. if one offers to bring a chair and the addressee accepts it, he has no choice but to sit down. Thus, the prototypical speech act of inviting involves the following:

Condition 1 (C1): normal input and output conditions must occur.

Condition 2 (C2): the speaker must utter a proposition.

These two conditions are universal and apply to all speech acts but the following form a configuration typical of just invitations:

Condition 3 (C3): the proposition must predicate of a future action by the hearer.

Condition 4 (C4): the speaker must assume that the hearer prefers performing the action to not performing it.

Condition 5 (C5): the speaker makes an axiological assessment by assuming that the hearer will benefit from the action.

Condition 6 (C6): the invitation must be relevant; the speaker must assume that the hearer would not perform the action on his own account.

Condition 7 (C7): the invitation must be spontaneous - issued out of the speaker's free will.

Condition 8 (C8): the speaker must be entitled to issue the invitation, i.e. to be in a certain way "in charge" of the premises.

Condition 9 (C9): it must be possible for the hearer to perform the action, the action should be becoming to him and will not require great effort on his part.

Condition 10 (C10): the speaker sincerely wants the hearer to perform the action or, at least, does not mind it.

Condition 11 (C11): the speaker intends for his utterance to count as an expression of encouragement that the hearer perform the predicated-of action.

It must be repeated that the above conditions describe but a model, a perfect instance and everyone could instantly enumerate examples of invitations not complying with this ideal. For example, invitations can be: indirect (C3 not observed), unsolicited (C4), perverse (C5), irrelevant (C6), forced (C7), illicit (C8), perfidious (C9), insincere (C10) or mock - not serious (C11).

However, because all the facts so described together add up to a whole which constitutes the concept of invitation, it is possible to activate the entire structure by referring in a certain way to one of its aspects. This process is governed by a certain logic even if it cannot be described in terms of strict rules. This logic follows from the ability to construe

the model in different ways by concentrating on one of its distinct parts. Consequently, the aspect of the model chosen for reference determines not only the lexical choices for the intended utterance but also its syntactic form. Only a sample of various linguistic expressions will be presented to illustrate this idea for the sake of conciseness. It is believed, however, that any utterance that manages to communicate a certain illocutionary force does so because it can be proved to pertain more or less directly to the model of a respective speech act.

At the same time, however, a speaker must bear in mind certain general principles holding for a language, as described by Lakoff (1987), such as the ones stating that requests for information are expressed by means of interrogative utterances, assertions by declarative ones, etc. They may seem trivial but are of great importance when it comes to formulating actual verbal configurations meant to communicate something.

Thus, the most direct and straightforward invitation can be accomplished by referring to C11 and uttering an imperative sentence:

1. Have some more wine!

This is in accordance with the general principle following from common practice which instructs that if a speaker wants a hearer to do something he simply tells him to do it. Since such an utterance is made in a specific situation where some other conditions may be observed to hold (e.g. the speaker is the host at a party entitled to invite his guests to take drinks - C8, the hearer, being a visitor, cannot do as he wishes - C6, the action is appropriate and possible - C9) the utterance is likely to be understood as an invitation and not, for example, as an order. Sometimes the invitation can be conditional, for example

2. Stay overnight if you want

- when the speaker is uncertain of the actuality of C4. He can, therefore, refer to it only tentatively since he does not know the hearer's thoughts. Due to the same reasons the model of invitation can be activated by referring to C4 by means of a question, like

3. Would you like some more wine?

4. Will you stay overnight?

or by means of *whimperatives*:

5. Won't/Wouldn't you come over on Sunday?

6. Why don't you sit down?

(6) pertains to C3, while (5) to C3 as well as C4. In their case certain more sophisticated general principles are applied. According to them negative yes/no questions count as mild directives just like negative questions concerning the reasons of not performing some action (they were described as conversational postulates by Gordon and Lakoff). It must be noted that they do not have to be language specific as they certainly hold also for Polish. The apparently suitable utterance pertaining directly to C3

7. You will stay overnight.

is not likely, however, to be employed as a bearer of the illocutionary force of inviting because of the conventional meaning of *will* used in declarative sentences with second- or third-person subjects. As indicated by Sweetser (1990), the root, basic meaning of this modal is the reference to real futurity. In the situation of inviting this is not what a speaker can predicate of - he does not know what a hearer will do. All he can do is ask about it, as illustrated by examples 3 through 6.

The remaining modal verbs can be and are used to issue invitations within declarative sentences. For example,

8. You may/can stay overnight.

asserts C9 - that there are no obstacles posed by the speaker that would prevent the hearer from performing the action. Since this depends on the speaker, he can predicate of it in the declarative rather than the interrogative form: the speaker knows best what is possible in the situation he manages. On the other hand, the feasibility of the action may depend on the hearer and his plans, of which the speaker may not be informed. Therefore, he may be forced to ask a question:

9. Can/Could you come over to my birthday party?

10. Can't/Couldn't you drop in someday?

It should be noted that 10 is a real negative question, not a *queclarative* asserting that the hearer is capable of doing what the sentence predicates of.

The modals *should* and *must* are also useful in invitations since they can be used to refer to C5 stating that the action will be beneficial for the hearer (they do it indirectly basing on the assumption that one is obliged to do what is good to him). For example

11. You must/should try this cake!

(It would be, indeed, sinister to encourage anyone to try something that one knows is harmful or disgusting). Since it is the speaker's assumption and belief - the utterance is declarative, not interrogative.

There are numerous other examples whose propositional content and syntactic form are also determined by the part of the model which they refer to. Thus, C4 can be touched upon indirectly by an utterance like:

12. Come on, I know you like ice-cream! (therefore I assume you want some)

However, stating the assumption directly would be inappropriate as an invitation since people normally do not read the desires of others and if they predicated of them straightforwardly, they would break the principles of politeness by blatantly disregarding their right of free choice. Also C5 is assumed by the speaker, hence he is likely to refer to it by means of a declarative sentence, for example

13. Here, hot tea will do you good.

If, however, he asked a question about it, it would indicate that he is not certain whether the suggested action will be beneficial for the hearer, which could invalidate his utterance as an invitation or at least make it suspicious unless the question is a declarative like:

14. Don't they say hot lemon tea good for a sore throat? (so have some)

On the other hand, C9 can depend on the speaker as well as the hearer - hence both the declarative and the interrogative form of invitations pertaining to it are conceivable - as already noted.

Finally, C10 (of sincerity) can only be asserted like in

15. I'd like you to come to my birthday party.

It must be mentioned at this point that especially C9 can give rise to an enormous range and variety of utterances bearing the illocutionary force of invitations - with respect to their propositional content. The reason is that the possibility of a hearer to perform a certain action can be asserted very indirectly by means of subtle implications. For example

16. We have a spare room upstairs. (so you can stay overnight)

17. Hi! I've just made coffee! (so you can have some)

Needless to say it is declarative sentences (also in the form of declaratives) which are best suited for a speaker to inform of the occurrence of conditions favorable for performing the action that the hearer is invited to.

The examples of utterances which pertain to the model of a speech act through one of the component conditions could be proliferated. The few actual utterances quoted were intended to illustrate the idea that the mental speech act model determines the actual form and content of predications speakers use to accomplish an illocutionary force. Only a few most typical forms were presented and explained but this does not mean that speakers cannot achieve some specific illocutionary goal in an original way but in this case their utterances will refer to the model rather indirectly. Therefore, a certain amount of reasoning along the lines described by Grice (1975) would be demanded of a hearer. In a situation like this, however, if a speaker relies too much on a hearer's ability to reason (simply, if his implication is too heavily veiled) he may risk being misunderstood with regard to the illocutionary point. The right model may just fail to "click on" in the hearer's mind. The risk is considerable since, as indicated by Miller (1973) consequences resulting from misunderstanding the illocutionary force of somebody's utterance may be much graver and more difficult to repair than in the case of not grasping its literal meaning. Nevertheless, illocutionary force in general is a matter of implicature, as observed by Kalisz (1993) which can simply be more or less direct unless, of course it is explicitly identified by means of a performative clause like *I promise*, *I invite*, etc.

## 6. Speech act models in classrooms

The above described theory has a bearing on the way in which students of a foreign language should be taught to communicate in the language they learn. As mentioned earlier, a speech act is a basic unit of communication and most people take up the effort of learning a foreign language for practical purposes, i.e. to become capable of effectively communicating with other people speaking that language. They are more likely to achieve this goal by requesting, asking, promising, informing, warning, advising, inviting, congratulating, etc. rather than mastering rigid patterns predicating, for example, of the whereabouts of the gardener's cat or the implications of the gardener's failing to water his vegetables. It seems advisable, therefore, that from the very beginning students should be taught to speak with a purpose but, of course, the means to achieve this purpose should be adjusted to their current skills. Definitely, one cannot escape practicing grammatical patterns but, as it appears, this procedure would be more fruitful and rewarding if learners were aware what purposes they can achieve by mastering them - putting this in illocutionary terms. It is also reasonable to suppose that beginners would fare better by learning how to realize specific illocutionary goals most directly yet politely. This is possible by referring straightforwardly to most crucial felicity conditions (like the *essential* one).

For learners to understand such strategies should not be difficult at all since illocutionary force appears to rise above language barriers, and only linguistic means of accomplishing it differ. Awareness of certain states of mind relevant for speech acts very likely emerges in the consciousness of a human in early childhood, presumably at the pre-conceptual stage, for example such feelings as desire, pleasure, discomfort. Later, it is plausible to think, as language is acquired, models of specific speech acts develop inspired by the need to achieve various goals by an individual. Thus foreign language learners certainly bear them in mind and apply them in their native tongue no matter how advanced in the process of learning they are. This is ready-made material for a teacher to refer to. It is not meant, of course, that a teacher of a foreign language should become a cognitive linguistics or a speech act theory expert and get familiar with all their theoretical assumptions.

As if in response to the described above ideas authors of recently written foreign language textbooks as well as many teachers tend to set various kinds of linguistic expressions in realistic situations in which they have a chance to become bearers of genuine illocutionary force. Very often different means of communicating this force are provided and practiced (e.g. various ways of expressing disagreement with others' opinions, various ways of expressing requests, etc.). This is not to say that language methodologists and teachers have suddenly adapted the cognitive model of language for teaching purposes. A much more plausible assumption seems to be that it is the cognitive theory which complies with general ideas of language (and it is a common belief that carrying meaning is the *raison d'être* of language without splitting hairs over what precisely should be referred to as meaning). Cognitivism entertains such a holistic approach to language by viewing all its aspects as cooperating in its function to reflect what is borne in human minds.

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