

Intentionality in Performative Utterances

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What is Self-Referentiality?

A self-referential utterance (on our usage) is one in which the utterance itself constitutes the performance of the action the utterance describes. For example:

“I apologize.”

This is distinct from an utterance which merely refers to itself. For example:

“This sentence is a sentence.”

What is Self-Referentiality?

The self-referentiality must also be able to guarantee the truth of the utterance. Thus

“I hereby remove you from existence.”

is not self-referential because it is impossible for it to be the act it describes.

How We Get It: Hereby

"I hereby promise to make you pancakes."



"I, *through this right here very utterance*, promise to make you pancakes."

How We Get It: Existential Closure

“I promise to make you pancakes.”



There is an act of promising to make me pancakes.



What else could constitute the act besides that very utterance?



“I, *through this right here very utterance*, promise to make you pancakes.”

The Limits of Self-Referentiality

Self-referentiality is *necessary* but not *sufficient*:

“I hereby utter a sentence with eight words.”

“I hereby utter a sentence in English.”

The Limits of Self-Referentiality

These examples

1. Actually *are* the acts they describe (namely, uttering).
2. Are self-guaranteeing.

So What are We Missing?

Intention!

$(\text{self-referentiality}) + (\text{intention}) = \text{performativity}$

What is Intention?

Intention in the case of performatives is the intent *at least* to perform the action described by the performative.

It may also include the intent to *define* the type of action described.

How We Get It: Verb Encoding

Searle tells us that intentionality is encoded in performative verbs.

Take the verb “promise.” Searle says that it is impossible to make a promise without intending to do so.

“Promise” is *necessarily intentional*.

How We Get It: Verb Encoding

Searle uses this idea to support his claim that it is impossible to derive performativity from an assertion.

He says that just *saying* you have the intention to promise doesn't actually mean that you *do* have it.

"I promise" [descriptive]

≠

"I promise" [performance]

How We Get It: Verb Encoding

“To say that a person performed the act named by the verb implies that he or she did it intentionally, that if it wasn’t intentional, then the agent didn’t do it under that description. Illocutionary verbs characteristically have this feature. I cannot, e.g., promise unintentionally. If I didn’t intend it as a promise, then it wasn’t a promise.” – Searle (551/17)

A Problem for Searle

We can use the word promise without intending to make a promise.

“I promise to...” + [sarcastic intonation]

“I promise to...” (while secretly not intending to abide by the promise)

How, then, does the verb “promise” (or any other performative verb) encode intentionality?

Potential Solutions

To circumvent the problem in the second example (an insincere promise), we might say:

1. An insincere promise is still a real promise. The speaker intends to promise, but intends to *break* the promise (rather than never intending to make the promise at all).
2. The intention encoded by “promise” is not the intention to perform the act but the intention to *communicate* the performance of the act, that is, to make the other person believe you have promised.

Potential Solutions

Still, it is not clear how to solve the problem in cases where it is clear that the speaker does *not* intend to communicate a promise of any kind.

Thus, for now we can only say that the *act* of promising is necessarily intentional, not the verb itself.

How We Get It: Frogs & Defining

Eckardt is very aware that self-referentiality, arguably the main topic of her paper, is not sufficient for performativity.

Along with certain criteria for the content of performative verbs like “promise”, she adds the following criterion:

“The speaker must want the information transfer *e* to be a PROMISE [or other performative act].”

How We Get It: Frogs & Defining

Here she adopts a strategy similar to the earlier proposed solution to Searle's problem: the intention is to *communicate* a promise.

Unlike Searle, she does not think that this intention is contained in the performative verb itself.

So where does it come from?

The Frog Analogy

“Imagine a painter who draws a nice and realistic picture of a frog. There is no doubt that the picture shows a frog... However, does the picture show a he-frog or a she-frog? If both sexes look alike, the painter has the authority to decide the sex of the depicted frog. If the painter intends the picture to show a she-frog, then that is so. Otherwise it isn't.” – Eckardt (46/26)

The Frog Analogy

Literary formalists will take great issue with this point, due to the fact that it is popular currently to examine works completely separate from their author's (or painter's, etc.) intention. According to this school of thought, the creator's intentions have no place in the interpretation of the creation, which stands on its own.

The Frog Analogy

Whether or not we choose to accept this view, we can easily make Eckardt's case stronger by softening the strength of the creator's defining power.

Rather than having the ability to define their painting as a she-frog or their utterance as a promise, creators have the ability to define *how people perceive* their creation.

Eckardt herself cites psycholinguistic studies that demonstrate this as a fact, indicating that this alteration of her theory is at least not very far from what she originally conceived.

But Where Does it Come from?

We still don't know where the intention to define actually comes from. Eckardt does not explicitly address this, but she does say:

“explicit performative utterances... comprise the speakers act of defining the category of the utterance.”

If the utterance itself is not only the action but its definition, then the speakers intention is presumable represented with all the things that make up the meaning of an utterance. This includes the meaning of the words (so Searle wasn't all wrong), the intonation, and accompanying body language.