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What is an indirect speech act?

Reconsidering the literal force hypothesis

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The notion of an indirect speech act is at the very heart of cognitive pragmatics, yet, after nearly 50 years of orthodox (Searlean) speech act theory, it remains largely unclear how this notion can be explicated in a proper way. In recent years, two debates about indirect speech acts have stood out. First, a debate about the Searlean idea that indirect speech acts constitute a simultaneous realization of a secondary and a primary act. Second, a debate about the reasons for the use of indirect speech acts, in particular about whether this reason is to be seen in strategic advantages and/or observation of politeness demands. In these debates, the original pragmatic conception of sentence types as indicators of illocutionary force seems to have been getting lost. Here, I go back to the seemingly outdated “literal force hypothesis” (see Levinson 1983: 263–264) and point out how it is still relevant for cognitive pragmatics.

Keywords: context, conventionalization, direct speech act, explicit performative, implicature, indirect speech act, literal force hypothesis, politeness, strategic speaker

1. Introduction

An important idea in cognitive pragmatics is to explain human communication by the mutual recognition of speaker intentions. If speech acts are basic units of communication then every speech act goes together with a speaker intention that has to be detected by the hearer. Felicity conditions, then, define the intentional profile associated with a certain type of speech act. In promising, for instance, the speaker commits herself to a future act that is in the interest of the hearer. This is the rough picture with direct speech acts that has been with us since the advent of speech act theory. Numerous attempts have been made to flesh out this picture.

However, when looking at concrete contexts of an utterance, things get more complicated. The utterance *Can you fix it?* may constitute a query for information

but also a request.¹ How can the hearer decide which type of speech act is intended? The problem of indirect speech acts thus poses a problem for speech act theory as well as for cognitive pragmatics in general. Yet, after 50 years of orthodox (Searlean) speech act theory – recall that Searle’s “Speech acts” was published in 1969 – it remains largely unclear how this notion can be explicated in a proper way.

A quick look at the *Oxford Dictionary of Pragmatics* (Huang 2012) yields the following entry for the notion *indirect speech act* (p.155):²

(1) **Indirect speech act (ISA)**

A *speech act whose *illocutionary force and sentence type are not directly matched. Thus, when an interrogative is used to make a request, as in *Can you turn down the TV a bit?*, we have an indirect speech act. Contrasts with a **direct speech act**. [...]

The locus classicus for the explanation of the notion *indirect speech act* is Searle (1979a). Basically, Searle holds that

- i. the secondary (= direct) and the primary (= indirect) illocutionary acts are delivered simultaneously,
- ii. the primary illocutionary act is derived by way of pragmatic inference (including Gricean reasoning),
- iii. some indirect speech acts may be “conventionalized” or “standardized”,
- iv. there are “generalizations” based on felicity conditions for illocutions that help to find the correct interpretation of an indirect speech act.

All of these claims have been disputed. Should the notion of an indirect speech act be accepted as a necessary term in pragmatic analysis? Note that opinions differ widely. Thus, Bara (2010:147) argues that “the problem of recognizing indirect speech acts does not exist in cognitive pragmatics, since there is no primitive notion of nonliteral speech act.”³ Other researchers view the notion as a helpful, if not outright necessary one. In particular, there are two recent debates focusing on the notions of indirect speech acts or “indirectness”: Firstly, the debate between Stephen Pinker (James Lee, Martin Nowak) and Marina Terkourafi dealing with the question whether indirectness should be better explained in terms of speakers’

1. Requests are certainly the best-researched indirect speech acts, see Ruytenbeek (2017) for an overview.

2. Bold face in the original. Compare the (more contextualist) definition by Kissine (2012:179): “Classically, a speech act is said to be indirect whenever its uptake (i.e. A’s understanding the utterance as being this speech act) is tied to the uptake of another speech act (...).”

3. One may ask here whether indirectness and nonliterality are the same phenomenon.

strategies or politeness (see Pinker 2007, 2011; Pinker, Nowak & Lee 2008; Lee & Pinker 2010; Terkourafi 2011a, b). Secondly, the debate between Rod Bertolet vs. McGowan, Tam, and Hall dealing with (i), i.e. the Searlean claim of the simultaneous deliverance of speech acts in the case of indirectness (see Bertolet 1994, 2017; McGowan, Tam & Hall 2009).

As far as I can see, although the above-cited dictionary entry still emphasizes this, the idea that sentence types are devices for indicating illocutionary force has got lost in the aforementioned debates. After all, the notion of a direct speech act only makes sense when grammatical properties of utterances can be related to types of speech acts (illocutionary forces). While Searle (1969:30) mentions “word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, the mood of the verb, and the so-called performative verb” as illocutionary force indicating devices in English, he is skeptical about directly attaching illocutionary rules to “elements (formatives, morphemes) generated by the syntactic component, except in a few cases such as the imperative” (Searle 1969:64). It must be stressed, however, that Searle did not show much interest in the linguistic functioning of the indicating devices.

According to the “literal force hypothesis” explained in Levinson (1983:263–264), who is drawing on Gazdar (1981), it is assumed that (a) “explicit performatives have the force named by the performative verb in the matrix clause”, and (b) “otherwise, the three major sentence-types in English, namely the imperative, interrogative and declarative, have the forces traditionally associated with them, namely ordering (or requesting), questioning and stating respectively (with, of course, the exception of explicit performatives which happen to be in declarative format).” Throughout this article, I will focus on condition (b) (while not excluding the special case of performatives). The main goal is, then, to explain why this idea of the non-matching of illocutionary force and sentence type, as defined in (1), motivates the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts.

In grammatical theory, numerous accounts have been proposed that postulate features encoding directness or the literal use of sentence types, for instance, syntactic deep structures, FORCE-nodes, certain semantic operators, etc. (see Meibauer, Steinbach & Altmann 2013a). Other researchers remained reluctant about the postulation of such encodings and preferred to speak of mere correlations or prototypical assignments of illocutionary force. For both parties, it is important to develop fine-grained conceptions of the notion of context (see Finkbeiner, Meibauer & Schumacher 2012; Meibauer 2012).

Ultimately, it depends on the context whether a certain utterance tends to be interpreted in a direct or indirect way. If interpreted in an indirect way, the context (or contextual inferences) seem to have the power to overwrite or suspend a default relation between sentence type and associated illocutionary force. Con-

ventionalization of indirect speech acts is thus an effect of preferred interpretations in standard contexts, as can be seen with standardized indirect requests.

In a new theoretical horizon, it is argued here, we should add to the sentence type the notion of a *construction*, which is more restricted with respect to its functional potential than the sentence type (see Finkbeiner & Meibauer 2016a). This could partly explain the notorious difficulties that have been discussed with respect to explicit performative constructions, or the riddle of the distribution of modal particles in German sentences. Seemingly, the best way to account for indirect speech acts is to go back to the architecture of the grammar-pragmatics interface. It is here that current debates between minimalists and contextualists have to be settled, and (in)direct speech acts still remain an important touchstone in this respect.

My aims in this paper are modest: First, I will point out that the puzzle of indirect speech acts is still unsolved, yet is central to the question of the grammar-pragmatics interface and cognitive pragmatics.⁴ Second, I will propose a more elaborated definition of an indirect speech act at the end of this paper. While it is clear that a definition cannot replace a full-fledged theory, definitions (such as the one given by Huang 2012) certainly guide further research.

The outline of this article is as follows. After dealing with the notions of neutral and non-neutral contexts in Section 2, I will go into the question of the simultaneous realization of speech acts in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the conventionalization or standardization of indirect speech acts, and Section 5 considers the Pinker – Terkourafi debate. Section 6 touches briefly on the relationship between implicature and indirect speech acts. Section 7 discusses the role of sentence types as indicators of illocutionary force, arguing that the explanation of this connection motivates the literal force hypothesis. Section 8 sidesteps to the classical problem of explicit performatives, while Section 9 comments on experimental evidence put forward as an argument against the computational relevance of secondary illocutionary acts. Section 10 concludes.

2. Non-neutral contexts

While the notion of context is not mentioned in (1), it is clear that in one context *Can you turn the radio off?* is a question, while in another context it is a request. Thus, in defining indirect speech acts, the notion of context matters. What exactly

4. Such an enterprise is not trivial. See the recent contribution of Jaszczolt (2019) on the “metapragmatic” question of the correct semantics/pragmatics divide, defending the legacy of Paul Grice.

a context is, is not easy to say (despite the typical linguistic parlance that some meaning effect ‘depends on the context’, see Meibauer 2012; Wharton 2010).

One influential idea in the debate on indirect speech acts was that indirectness arises in non-neutral contexts. Katz (1977: 14) explains the idea of a neutral context considering the so-called “anonymous letter situation”:

(2) *The anonymous letter situation*

The anonymous letter situation is the case where an ideal speaker of a language receives an anonymous letter containing just one sentence of that language, with no clue whatever about the motive, circumstances of transmission, or any other factor relevant to understanding the sentence on the basis of its context of utterance.

Let us ignore the concept of an “ideal speaker” for a moment and consider an example. If the letter contains the sentence *I will come tomorrow*, even the ideal speaker (or reader) must have some clue about the indexicals *I* and *tomorrow*, and the declarative sentence is compatible with a number of illocutions, for instance, with an assertion, an announcement, or a threat. Indeed, as Harnish (1982) argues, it is not clear for the readers that an illocutionary has been executed at all when they have no contextual information.

Yet, we find abstractions from realist, rich contexts in many speech-act theoretical accounts. Often, one does not speak about neutral contexts (as if such a thing could really exist) but one sticks to rules or principles that have the effect of guaranteeing some neutrality of a context or standard situations. For instance, Bach and Harnish (1979) use the concept of a “presumption of literalness”, and Searle (1969) invokes normal input-output conditions that guarantee the effectiveness of the illocutionary force indicators.

According to the literal force hypothesis outlined above, another influential idea in the debate on direct vs. indirect speech acts was that sentence types are illocutionary force indicators, i.e. that they *encode* illocutionary potential. In direct speech acts, under normal input-output conditions, an illocutionary force indicator such as the explicit performative construction would signal the kind of speech act the speaker intends to convey: *I (hereby) promise to come* is a promise in virtue of the literal meaning of the construction [*I (hereby) promise to X*]. By the same token, the imperative sentence type would signal an ordering (or request). In contrast, indirect speech acts are automatically bound to a non-neutral context.

Since speech acts are compatible with a number of readings, one has to postulate that direct speech acts go together with neutral contexts while indirect speech acts require non-neutral contexts. This, however, does not answer the question for the interpreter of a given utterance concerning which particular context s/he is

actually involved in. So, Bach and Harnish (1979) assume that there must be some pragmatic inferencing in any case (see also Harnish 1994; Terkourafi 2013).

3. Simultaneous realization of two speech acts

The standard account of indirect speech acts, as developed by Searle (1979), distinguishes three types (McGowan et al. 2009: 497; DIR=direct speech act, IND=indirect speech act):

Type I

“utterances that are *typically not* indirect speech acts, but, in a specific context, have (or function as having) indirect force.”

(3) **David:** [*Hey, let's dance!*]

Monica: *I don't like this song.* (DIR: assertion, IND: refusal to dance)

Type II

“utterances that *usually have* (or function as having) indirect force”

(4) **David:** *Can you pass the salt?* (DIR: question, IND: request)

Monica: *Sure.* [gives him the salt]

Type III

“utterances that *always* (that is, in all contexts) have (or function as having) indirect force”

(5) **David:** *I'd like a chardonnay, please.*

Waiter: *Comes in a minute.*

Research has largely been focused on Type II, pointing out that there are contexts in which the direct speech act would be preferred, e.g. when a physician asks Monica whether she is able to reach the salt without demanding from her that she should actually do so.⁵

5. The paraphrase *Are you able to reach the salt?* seems not to be used (unironically) as an indirect request. Asher and Lascarides (2001) explain this by assuming a blocking operation, i.e. *Are you able to reach the salt?* as an indirect speech act is blocked by the more conventional *Can you reach me the salt?*

While Searle (1979) holds that in indirect speech acts, there is a simultaneous realization of two illocutionary acts, the primary illocutionary act being the one that is meant in the context, the secondary illocutionary act (the “literal” illocution) being the one that is indicated by an illocutionary force indicator, Bertolet (1994, 2017) objects: For him, only the secondary (direct) speech act is realized. What Searle calls the primary illocutionary act is not realized; it is merely a function of the utterance in a specific context.

Searle (1979: 34) points out that his model of the “reconstruction of the steps necessary to derive the primary illocution from the literal illocution” contains a critical step. Step 5 requires that the hearer thinks that the speaker “probably means more than he says”, and “assuming that his remark is relevant, his primary illocutionary point must differ from his literal one”. He comments:

This step is crucial. Unless a hearer has some inferential strategy for finding out when primary illocutionary points differ from literal illocutionary points, he has no way of understanding indirect illocutionary acts. (Searle 1979: 34)

However, we have a problem here. One has to explain why the secondary (“literal”) illocutionary act can become inactive, can be suspended, is backgrounded, etc., *at all*. This is a challenge for most approaches I am aware of.⁶

4. Conventionalization

For many speakers, the idea that Type-II utterances have a literal meaning seems to be far-fetched. This shows that they think these utterances have a conventional meaning in the sense that the pattern that is used here, i.e. *Can you X?* has – despite its interrogative form – the meaning of a request. Searle argues that,

[...] within this framework, certain forms will tend to become conventionally established as the standard idiomatic forms for indirect speech acts. While keeping their literal meanings, they will acquire conventional uses, e.g., polite forms for requests. (Searle 1979: 49)

Searle’s view on indirect speech acts is called a “reinterpretation account” by Lepore and Stone (2015: 98). In contrast to Searle, these authors favor an “ambiguity account” which holds that Type-II cases are simply cases of ambiguity.

6. Bara (2010: 145) finds it unconvincing that, in inferencing theories like Searle (1979), “comprehension of an indirect speech act comes about only after the hearer’s failure to interpret the secondary illocutionary act.” Note, however, that inferencing theories usually are not theories about online computation.

The modal *can* is, on this account, ambiguous between an ability and a request reading. For them, it is a matter of convention that people choose the request reading of *can* when they want to convey a request.⁷ However, this approach completely ignores the possibility that it is the sentence type (basically, a grammatical device) that encodes illocutionary potential (directly or indirectly, i.e. mediated via so-called *sentence mood*, see below).

This is similar to their argumentation with respect to Type-III cases. Here, they argue that the very occurrence of *please* shows that it is the conventionalized force of the request that matters and nothing else. Again, they ignore the problem of how to compositionally integrate the sentence meaning and the meaning of *please* such that *please* dominates the meaning of the interrogative sentence type.⁸

There seems to be an escape hatch in the modern world of construction grammar, where it is possible to postulate fixed form-function pairings (see Finkbeiner & Meibauer 2016a, c). For instance, one could assign the function ‘request to V’ to the sentence pattern [*Can you V, please?*]. However, while this is compatible with the idea of ambiguity and conventionalization, it does not tell us much about the relation between sentence types and illocutionary forces, which is important from the perspective of the so-called *reinterpretation account* (Searle 1979).

Thus, positing patterns like the above is not very appealing: First of all, construction grammar typically tends to leave out ‘construction pragmatics’. In contrast, modular theories of grammar, e.g. Chomskyan minimalism, are well aware that there is pragmatic competence of speakers in addition to the computational machinery. Second, while there are arguments aiming at modeling all sentence types as *constructions* (that do not respect strict compositionality, see Jacobs 2016), it cannot be excluded that some sentence types (e.g. interrogatives, see Krifka 2011) can be compositionally analyzed. For instance, a constructional analysis is promising in the case of verbless structures like *Really good, that paper!* (Finkbeiner & Meibauer 2016b). In full-blown syntactic structures, however, the syntactic phenomenon of verb movement (note that German has three standard positions of the finite verb) may be brought into connection with sentence types

7. This ties in with their “conventionalist” approach to pragmatic concepts. How ‘conventional’ indirect speech acts are has been repeatedly discussed, see Morgan (1978), Munro (1979) and Gibbs (1986).

8. For lack of space, I cannot go into the debate on intentionalism vs. conventionalism. I just want to draw the reader’s attention to the recent defense of Gricean intentionalism by Jaszczolt (2019). Commenting on Leezenberg’s (2006) distinction between Gricean and Confucian pragmatics, she states that Searle moves from conventions to intentions while Grice moves from intentions to conventions. I think that both notions are useful because they aim at different phenomena. Yet, Grice has no speech act theory to offer, and both theoretical traditions do not have much to say about the grammar of sentence types.

and their meanings. Finally, invoking constructional patterns like the above will inevitably lead to an enormous proliferation of construction types. When the non-conventionalized sentence structures are also seen as constructions, there are at least two constructions for every sentential form. This is not economical.

Even if one sticks to a broadly constructionist approach, which can easily lead to the assumption that there are many sentence types (*sentential constructions*) in a language, it needs to be explained why there are different sentence types in the world's languages *at all*. The key to understanding these facts cannot simply be conventionalization or constructional patterns; reinterpretation theory, to take up Lepore and Stone's label, has a story to tell about the *relation* between sentence types and illocutionary forces, for instance, how different types of interrogative sentences are related to different types of questioning acts.

5. Strategic speakers and politeness

In recent discussions on indirect speech acts, it is mostly presupposed that there *is* something like an indirect speech act. Researchers such as Steven Pinker and Marina Terkourafi want to find out what the *reason* for using indirect speech acts is (see Pinker 2007, 2011; Pinker, Nowak & Lee 2008; Lee & Pinker 2010; Terkourafi 2011a, b; Soltys, Terkourafi & Katsos 2014).

Recall that there are always direct alternatives for Type-II cases, see Examples (7) and (9):

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (6) <i>Can you pass the salt?</i> | (1. Request, 2. Question) |
| (7) <i>Give me the salt!</i> | (Request) |
| (8) <i>Who on earth wants that?</i> | (1. Assertion, 2. Question) |
| (9) <i>Nobody wants that!</i> | (Assertion) |

One reason that has been given for the application of indirectness is politeness. For instance, (6) is conceived as more polite than (7), since it saves the face of the addressee. Pinker and colleagues dismiss this politeness approach and focus on strategic advantages of being indirect. Lee and Pinker (2010) are interested in *off-record indirect speech* such as the following:

- (10) *I hear you are the foreman of the jury in the Soprano trial. It's an important civic responsibility. You have a wife and kids. We know you'll do the right thing.*
- (11) *Gee, officer. I was thinking that maybe the best thing would be to take care of the ticket here, without going through a lot of paperwork.*

(12) *Would you like to come up and see my etchings?*

(13) *We're counting on you to show leadership in our Campaign for the Future.*

According to Lee and Pinker, (10) is a threat, (11) is a bribe, (12) is a sexual advance and (13) is a solicitation for a donation. From the point of view of social psychology and game theory, such cases of indirectness can be best explained if one assumes (i) that politeness and indirectness are independent of each other (Lee & Pinker 2010: 787–790, (ii) that these cases display “plausible deniability as a solution to the identification problem”⁹ (Lee & Pinker 2010: 790–791), (iii) that they lend themselves to relationship negotiation (Lee & Pinker 2010: 794–795), and (iv) show features of “higher-order deniability” (Lee & Pinker 2010: 795–798).

I cannot go into further details of the debate, all the more I assume that the strategic approach and the politeness approach are not incompatible to each other. All I want to stress, and here I side with Terkourafi (2011a: 2863), is that “speaker and listener still share an intralinguistic goal (understanding and being understood)” which – in my view – is still dependent on the meaning of the sentence type used. This is best illustrated by example (12), which can be meant directly, as a simple question. After all, not all invitations to see etchings and stamp collections or to have a beer or a coffee are sexual innuendos. Therefore, the recipient still has to decide whether this utterance has to be taken as a direct or an indirect speech act.

6. Speech acts and implicatures

In Searle's (1979) model derivation of the primary illocutionary act, he appeals, in “Step 2”, to implicature theory, i.e. the Gricean Principle of Cooperation:

Step 2: I assume that he is cooperating in the conversation and that therefore his utterance has some aim or point (principles of conversational cooperation). (Searle 1979: 46)

Furthermore, the whole reconstruction process bears some similarity to the general schema for the derivation of conversational implicatures proposed by Grice (1989a). Therefore, it is no surprise that some scholars assume that indirect speech acts, i.e. the primary illocutionary act in Searle's terms, *are* conversational implicatures. And indeed, the properties of reconstruability and context-dependency point in this direction. In particular, Bertolet (1994) argues that the

9. By an identification problem, game theorists understand “strategies of speakers in negotiating relationship types under conditions of uncertainty” (Lee & Pinker 2010: 787).

functioning of an utterance in an indirect way is nothing but a conversational implicature derived in the context (see also Morgan 1978; Groefsema 1992). In my view, however, the problem is that implicature theory does not have much to say on “speech act assignment”, as Gazdar (1981) calls the process of assigning a certain illocutionary force to an utterance. Usually, conversational implicatures are seen as additional propositions, not as additional illocutionary forces. The paraphrases given for conversational implicatures have the form of declarative sentences, but researchers refrain from associating illocutions to these conversational implicatures.¹⁰

7. Coding of speech act potential in sentence types

The “literalist” hypothesis with respect to the sentence type/illocution relation amounts to a correlation along the following lines (see Altmann 1993 for German). Sentence types are constituted by a cluster of properties on the (a) syntactic (e.g. position of the finite verb), (b) morphological (e.g. verbal mood), (c) lexical (e.g. *wh*-words or modal particles), and (d) prosodical (e.g. accents or offsets) levels. For instance, the imperative sentence Germ. *Komm mal her zu mir!* (‘Come MP to me!’) is characterized by the initial position of the finite verb, the verbal mood imperative, the modal particle *mal*, and the falling intonation contour at the offset. In Altmann’s seminal approach, sentence types possess a certain sentence modality (Germ. *Satzmodus*) that draws on the speaker’s attitude towards the propositional content, and the sentence modality in turn is associated with a class of illocutions.¹¹

Admittedly, this is a simplified picture. In fact, there are many more sentence types, depending on the granularity of the morpho-syntactic and phonological analysis. For instance, in German we also find autonomous sentences that closely resemble the form of embedded sentences, like *Ob sie wohl kommt?* (‘Whether she MP will come?’), as a special kind of question. A more sophisticated analysis of German sentence types would roughly reveal 50 sentence types (see Meibauer, Steinbach & Altmann 2013a), depending on the formal criteria applied. Similar observations will certainly apply to the systems of sentence types in other languages (Siemund 2018).

10. Systematic comparisons between speech act theory and implicature theory, let alone integrative approaches, are rare. See Dascal (1994) for an early attempt.

11. Terminologies differ widely. For instance, Portner (2009:263) calls sentence types “clause types” and their associated illocutions “sentential forces”. It goes without saying that morpho-syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties should not be mixed up.

Table 1. The correlation between sentence types, sentence modality and illocutions

Sentence types	Sentence modality	Illocution/Searlean classes
Declarative sentence	S believes that p.	Assertion (Assertives)
Interrogative sentence	S wants to know whether p/for which X the formula X(p) is valid.	Question (Directives)
Imperative sentence	S wants that p becomes a fact.	Command (Directives)
Exclamatory sentence	S expresses their attitude towards the degree of p.	Exclamation (Expressives)
Optative sentence	S wishes that p become or could have become a fact.	Wish (Expressives)

In the modern German debate on sentence types, lasting for more than 30 years, two main strands of research can be distinguished: first, the *derivation hypothesis* (Germ. *Ableitungsansatz*) put forward by supporters of the Government & Binding theory, syntactic minimalists, and formal semanticists, and second, the *assignment hypothesis* (Germ. *Zuordnungsansatz*) that by and large is held by structuralists and supporters of construction grammar (see Finkbeiner & Meibauer 2016a, c; Meibauer, Steinbach & Altmann 2013a, b; Reis 1999).

While the first-mentioned approaches want to formally ‘derive’ pragmatic and semantic properties from syntactic properties such as movement of the finite verb or the insertion of *wh*-elements, the second approach aims at describing the full amount of correlations between sentence types and their uses in context, and explaining the mechanism of *speech act assignment*.¹² Both approaches proceed from the assumption that there is a regular, systematic connection between a sentence type and its illocutionary potential.

In recent years, Kissine (2012, 2013) has developed an approach to the sentence type-illocution interface that deserves critical discussion. Consider the following groups of utterances in (14), (15) and (16). With respect to (14), Kissine argues that (14a) may be intended as a direct speech act (QUESTION) or an indirect speech act (REQUEST). The utterance (14b), in contrast, is always a request. Therefore, he concludes, interrogative sentences may be directly associated with requests.

- (14)
- a. When will you close the door?

b. Will you close the door?
- QUESTION, REQUEST

REQUEST

12. See Sadock and Zwicky (1985), Reis (1999), Meibauer (2013), and Meibauer, Steinbach & Altmann (2013b) for overviews. The debate about the correct form-function fit is also taken up by Harnish (1994), Allan (2006) and Pafel (2016).
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Indeed, this would undermine the idea that sentence types correlate with illocutions (putting matters of conventionalization aside). However, on closer consideration, it is unclear whether this is a convincing argument. Put in a fitting context, (14b) may also constitute an information question. For instance, in a didactic context, the teacher asks *If a refugee stands before your door, what would you do? Will you close the door?* Furthermore, since Searle does not posit a class of EROTETIC speech acts (as one could certainly do), he would associate the interrogative sentence type with the class of directive speech acts, questions being directives like requests. Therefore, one can argue that interrogative sentences are related to illocutions being assembled in the class of directives.

Now consider the examples of imperative sentences in (15) and interrogative sentences in (16). As is well known, these sentence types are compatible with a number of illocutions.

- | | | | |
|------|----|--|---------------------|
| (15) | a. | <i>A: May I have this piece of cake? B: Yes, take it.</i> | PERMISSION |
| | b. | <i>Always cut your fingernails round and your toenails square</i> (cited after Hamblin 1987: 11). | ADVICE |
| | c. | <i>Have a nice journey!</i> | GOOD WISH |
| | d. | <i>Hit me, and I'll hit you back.</i> | THREAT |
| (16) | a. | [Peter, who had made a New Year's resolution to give up smoking, lights up, Mary says:] <i>What was your New Year's resolution?</i> (cited after Wilson and Sperber 1988). | RHETORICAL QUESTION |
| | b. | <i>Where did Napoleon die?</i> | EXAM QUESTION |
| | c. | <i>Which hand is the marble in?</i> | GUESS QUESTION |
| | d. | <i>A: The President has resigned. B: Good heavens. Has he?</i> | SURPRISE QUESTION |

With respect to (14b), Kissine (2012: 182) admits that it is clearly an interrogative sentence but not interpreted as a question (again, I can imagine that it can be used as an information question) and concludes:

Such a rationale presupposes that literal and serious utterances of interrogative sentences are not necessarily associated with the act of requesting information, exactly in the same way as not all utterances of imperative sentences constitute directive speech acts. (Kissine 2013: 182)

Kissine (2012: 183) assumes that examples like (14b) “are, at the literal and direct level, cases of saying without performing an illocutionary act”. To be more precise:

(17) *Conventionalized indirect speech acts*

“The utterance is literal, but the content of the only illocutionary act the utterance constitutes is distinct from that of the corresponding locutionary act. However, it is possible to reconstruct the interpretation process as starting from the performance of an illocutionary act whose content is identical with that of the locutionary act.” (Kissine 2012: 183–184)

Obviously, the locutionary act is understood as mere content without any illocution. However, the move to posit such literal and illocutionless ‘sayings’ is not conclusive. The parallel to irony – where what is said is not asserted – is not convincing because irony is a case of overt untruthfulness, as Dynel (2018) puts it. Though Kissine accepts that indirectness exists, he does not explore the possibility to explain speech act assignment in cases like (18) and (19) under the assumption that there are primary and secondary forces involved.

Take the rhetorical cases mentioned by Kissine as an example:

- (18) a. [Peter, who had made a New Year’s resolution to give up smoking, lights up, Mary says:] *What was your New Year’s resolution?* (cited after Wilson and Sperber 1988). RHETORICAL QUESTION
- (19) a. [A spills his glass of wine over the carpet, and clumsily attempts to wipe it off. S says:] *Go on! Ruin my carpet!* RHETORICAL REQUEST
 b. *Hit me, and I’ll hit you back.* (= 13d)

In both cases, an analysis as an indirect speech act is applicable. In (18a), we can analyze the rhetorical question as an indirect speech act of assertion, in (19a) we can analyze the rhetorical request as an indirect assertion, too (Meibauer 1986). And even the first part of (19b) may be analyzed as a rhetorical assertion.

In sum, we do not have to construct a case of conventionalized indirect speech acts along the lines proposed by Kissine. It is also possible to stick to the Searlean approach. What remains problematic, however, is Searle’s idea of a double realization of speech acts that has been attacked by Bertolet (1994, 2017). If one argues that only *one* speech act can be realized, then one has to explain how the secondary act is backgrounded. Although the speaker knows that interrogative sentences are normally used for realizing questions, she is able to see that, in a particular case, a request is intended by the speaker. One may even imagine ambiguous situations like the one in which my doctor (who is an old friend of mine and has recently treated my broken arm) and I are drinking at the bar and he asks *Can you reach me the whiskey bottle?*

Modal particles may be optionally inserted into sentence structures. In (21b), the direct speech act (as in (21a)) is turned into an assertion (i.e. we have a rhetorical question), in (22b), the direct speech act (as in (22a)) is turned into a THREAT or ADMONITION.

I would not like to argue that (21b) and (22b) are, because of the modal particle, direct speech acts; instead, I want to treat the modal particles as dominating indicators and still respect the illocutionary force potential of the respective sentence types.

9. Experimental evidence

As we have seen in Section 3, Searle (1979) holds that, in indirect speech acts, two acts are realized simultaneously. Yet, only the primary illocutionary act is the one that contributes to the ongoing discourse. While his working-out schema is not intended to simulate the real process of pragmatic inferencing, it may serve as a foil for experimental research. In particular, one may ask whether there is a computational order such that the secondary illocutionary act comes first while the primary illocutionary act comes second. This assumption corresponds to the *Serial Processing Model* (see Shapiro & Murphy 1993). In contrast, one may assume that both meanings are available from the start: this model is dubbed the *Parallel Processing Model*. Shapiro and Murphy argue that the second approach is the correct one because their participants' reaction times were longer when being asked to derive the secondary illocutionary act in contexts in which the primary illocutionary act was salient. Furthermore, Shapiro and Murphy found that there is no selection between several meanings, but that only one interpretation that fits the context is derived.

More recently, Ruytenbeek, Ostashchenko and Kissine (2017: 58–59) argued against so-called 'literalism', i.e. the assumption that "the major sentence types (e.g. imperative) are associated at the semantic level with an illocutionary force (e.g. directive)" and therefore are bound to "the prediction that the interpretation of any utterance of an interrogative or declarative sentence should activate the illocutionary force of question or asserting, respectively". I agree that illocutionary force is not directly coded in the semantics of sentence types (nor in the syntactic structure). Yet, it might be possible that there are semantic properties of sentence types, as is displayed in the modality of sentence types. For instance, Krifka (2011) discusses a number of semantic approaches trying to model question meanings in a strictly formal and compositional manner. And these semantic properties must have some connection to 'forces' assigned in a situational context. The question

then is to explain how this semantics can be overridden by contextual information that forces indirect readings.

In their experimental studies, Ruytenbeek, Ostashchenko and Kissine (2017: 59) show that “conventionalization was not required for an interrogative sentence to be interpreted as a request, without the question meaning being activated”. They looked at pairs like (23) and compared them to corresponding imperatives:

- (23) a. *Pouvez-vous VP?* Conventionally associated with directive force
 ‘Can you VP?’
 b. *Est-il possible de VP?* Not conventionally associated with directive force
 ‘Is it possible to VP?’

What they found was that the response times were similar. They take this finding as evidence for the hypothesis that illocutionary force encoded somehow in the sentence does not matter. Instead, their results support “theories that conceive of the relationship between sentence types and the speech acts they are prototypically associated with in terms of arrays of semantic features that make the former particularly suited for the latter” (Ruytenbeek, Ostashchenko & Kissine 2017: 60), for instance, the features of potentiality or being addressee-oriented (Ruytenbeek, Ostashchenko & Kissine 2017: 47). It is not clear, however, how such semantic features are distinguished from instantiations of sentence modality, e.g. in the form of paraphrases such as *S wants H to do p*) or mood operators such as IMP (that have to incur an interpretation anyway).

10. Summary

We have seen that quite different approaches to indirect speech acts are possible.¹⁴ My main concern in this paper is that minimalists (literalists) as well as contextualists (relativists) have a common task, namely, to explain why there are different sentence types at all. In principle, one could imagine languages that have only one sentence type, for instance of the declarative type, when they have explicit performative verbs at the same time. This would yield patterns like *I hereby state/ask/request (...) p*. Yet it seems that cross-linguistically at least declarative, inter-

14. Beyond classical speech act approaches, the challenge of indirect speech acts is also taken up from a number of theoretical perspectives such as construction grammar (Stefanowitsch 2003), rhetorical relations approach (Clapp 2009), conventionalism (Lepore & Stone 2018), and evolutionary social psychology (Pinker 2007). See also the taxonomic proposal put forward by Terkourafi (2014).

rogative and imperative sentence types are distinguished (Sadock & Zwicky 1985; Siemund 2018).¹⁵

I take it that an explanation of the sentence type inventory in the world's languages must be functionally based. In this sense, assertions, questions, and directives constitute basic illocutionary forces (and, as categories for classes of speech acts, comprise several more specific illocutionary force types). In contrast, while promising is an important type of illocutionary force, too, a formal commissive sentence type is rarely found, if at all. Thus, it is tenable to assume that sentence types serve certain functions and needs of a speech community. For every member of such a speech community, there is a normal expectation that a given sentence type is suited to realize a certain function. Seen in this light, the 1960s conception of a neutral context and the 1980s idea of a 'prototypical' relation are not very different. In the case of conventionalized indirect speech acts, one may assume that there is an expectation that the use of a certain speech act formula is the easiest way of reaching a certain communicative aim. Indeed, in children's pragmatic acquisition, it is quite likely that such formulae are learned fast and easily (Gretsch 2013; Zufferey 2015: 43–60).

This does not mean that one has to abandon the idea that sentence types have a certain semantics. Quite on the contrary, pragmatic theory will profit from any attempt to derive prototypical effects from grammar and the lexical make-up of sentences used in utterances. For instance, the distribution of German modal particles in German sentence types can only be explained with respect to semantic properties of these expressions. Thus, the German modal particle *denn* is not compatible with declaratives and imperatives; only interrogative sentences allow for *denn*. Therefore, a strong connection between the semantics of *denn* and the semantics of interrogative sentences follows.¹⁶

It also seems possible to match grammatical properties (morphology, syntax) directly to pragmatic functions without assuming encoded semantics. This is not what semanticists do (e.g. Kaufmann 2013; Krifka 2011; Han 2011) but is not to be excluded in principle. For instance, Pafel (2016) assumes that sentence types are directly connected to so-called "intentional modes". However, to speak of the motives for indirectness such as politeness and speaker strategies without any recourse to grammar will not suffice. Understanding a single speech act in context activates knowledge about the 'literal' meaning of sentence types.

15. Therefore, these are sometimes called *major moods*, as opposed to *minor moods* like the exclamative sentence type (Harnish 1994).

16. This strong connection even leads Bayer (2012: 13) to the (minimalist) assumption that *denn* is a "functional head that heads a particle phrase that is in construction with the CP's layer of illocutionary force".

Coming back to the initial quotation from Huang (2012), I would like to propose the following definition of an indirect speech act.¹⁷

(24) *Indirect speech act*

A speech act realized by sentence type x whose illocutionary force in context type₁ does not correspond to the illocutionary force that is prototypically (normally, standardly...) assigned to an utterance of this sentence type in context type₂. A deviation from prototypical speech act assignment may be signaled by indicators of indirectness.

Take the yes/no interrogative sentence as an example. Speakers know that this grammatical device is normally, i.e. in context types₂, used as a question demanding answers such as *yes* or *no*. However, used indirectly, in context type₁, yes/no interrogatives can be used as requests, requests in turn being normally realized by imperative sentences. To facilitate the computation of the intended meaning, indicators of indirectness may be built into the respective sentence structures.

The definition in (24) is by no means the outcome of an empirical theory. It is only the attempt to give a definition that covers the often-disputed facts with respect to the term *indirect speech act*. If this term has any theoretical use, this use has to do with the grammar-pragmatics interface.¹⁸ The above definition covers context-dependency, the concept of a 'neutral' or standard context, and the principal assumption that there is a relation between a sentence type and an illocutionary force, yet leaves open how this connection has to be modeled at the grammar-pragmatics interface (e.g. representations of sentence modality in the semantic component of the grammar). Even when, in a certain context, the indirect speech act is derived faster than the direct speech act, this does not demonstrate that there is no encoding of illocutionary potential at sentence structure level; it only demonstrates that speakers are very sensitive to context and their assumptions with respect to their normalcy expectations.

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17. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to speak of *context type* instead of simply *context*.

18. Note that Ariel (2008), who explicitly studies the grammar-pragmatics interface, does not explicitly discuss this fundamental phenomenon of form-function fit.

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