

Searle 1975
Indirect Speech Acts

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Introduction

- There are several cases of meaning:
 - (1) Cases in which the speaker means what he says and nothing more
 - (2) Cases in which the speaker means what he says, but also means something more
 - a. *I want you to do it* - meant as both a statement, but primarily as a request, by way of making a statement
 - (3) Cases in which the speaker means what he says, but also means another illocution *with different propositional content*
 - a. *Can you reach the salt?* - meant not merely as a question, but also as a request to pass the salt
- In (2), the second illocution is the same as the original proposition, but in (3) this is not the case.
- Searle suggests a *pattern of analysis* for cases of the type in (3) - but does not lay out a full-scale theory.
 - The utterance in these cases is meant as a request, the speaker (S) intends for the hearer (H) to know that, and intends to do so by getting the hearer to recognize that intention.
 - The utterance has two illocutionary forces - one illocutionary act is performed by way of performing another.
- Searle proposed earlier (1969) that these types of utterances can be understood in terms of the conditions required for them to be performed felicitously. He expands further on that notion in this paper.
 - The apparatus necessary to explain indirect speech acts includes a theory of speech acts and general principles of cooperative conversation (c.f. Grice). In some cases, convention plays a role as well.

Indirection: A Sample Case

- The utterance of (4b) below normally serves as a rejection of the proposal, but clearly not by virtue of its meaning:

- (4) a. *Student X: Let's go to the movies tonight*
 b. *Student Y: I have to study for an exam*

- Statements of the form of (4b) do not generally constitute rejections of proposals, even if they come immediately after a proposal. If Student Y had responded to the proposal with (5) instead, it would not normally be interpreted as a rejection:

- (5) *Student Y: I have to brush my teeth*

- The question, then, is how does Student X know that (4b), but not (5) is a rejection of his proposal?

– Some terminology:

- * The SECONDARY illocutionary act of a given utterance is the literal meaning of that utterance (above, that Y has to prepare for an exam)
- * The PRIMARY illocutionary act of a given utterance is the act performed by way of the secondary illocutionary act (above, in having said that he needs to prepare for an exam, Y rejects X's proposal)

– We can now re-word the question: How does X understand the nonliteral primary illocutionary act from understanding the literal secondary illocutionary act? This is part of the larger question of how Y means the primary illocution when he only utters a sentence that means the secondary illocution.

- Steps in reconstructing the derivation of the primary illocution in (4b):

Step 1 *I have made a proposal to Y, and in response he has made a statement to the effect that he has to study for the exam (facts about the conversation).*

Step 2 *I assume that Y is coöperating in the conversation and that therefore his remark is intended to be relevant (conversational coöperation, c.f. Grice).*

Step 3 *A relevant response must be one of acceptance, rejection, counterproposal, further discussion, etc (theory of speech acts, not yet expounded).*

Step 4 *But his literal utterance was not one of these, and so was not a relevant response (inference from Steps 1 and 3).*

Step 5 *Therefore, he probably means more than he says. Assuming his remark is relevant, his primary illocutionary point must differ from his literal one (inference from Steps 2 and 4) - this is a crucial step, which allows Y to figure out that the primary illocutionary point is not the same as the literal one.*

Step 6 *I know that studying for an exam normally takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening, and I know that going to the movies normally takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening (factual background information).*

Step 7 *Therefore, he probably cannot both go to the movies and study for an exam in the same evening (inference from Step 6).*

Step 8 *A preparatory condition on the acceptance a proposal, or on any other commissive, is the ability to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (theory of speech acts).*

Step 9 *Therefore, I know that he has said something that has the consequence that he probably cannot consistently accept the proposal (inference from Steps 1, 7, and 8).*

Step 10 *Therefore, his primary illocutionary point is **probably** to reject the proposal (inference from Steps 5 and 9).*

- These steps can be summarized as follows. First, establish that the primary illocutionary point departs from the literal. Second, establish what the primary illocutionary point is.

Conventional Performatives in Indirect Directives

- Some sentence-structures are quite standardly used to make indirect requests. On a first pass, they naturally fall into six groups:

Group 1 *Sentences concerning H's ability to perform an action (A):* **Can you** pass the salt? **You could** be a little more quiet. **Have you got** change for a dollar?

Group 2 *Sentences concerning S's wish or want that H will do A:* **I would like you** to go now. **I wish you wouldn't** do that. **I'd rather you didn't** do that.

Group 3 *Sentences concerning H's doing A:* Officers **will** henceforth wear ties at dinner. **Won't you** stop making that noise? **Will you** quit it?

Group 4 *Sentences concerning H's desire or willingness to do A:* **Would you be willing** to write me a letter of recommendation? **Would it be convenient for you** to come on Wednesday?

Group 5 *Sentences concerning reasons for doing A:* **You ought** to be more polite. **Why don't you** be quiet? **We'd all be better off if you'd** just pipe down.

Group 6 *Sentences embedding one of these elements inside one another, or embedding an explicit directive illocutionary verb inside one of these elements:* **Would you mind awfully if I asked you if you could** write me a letter of recommendation? **I would appreciate it if you could** make less noise.

Observations About Conventional Performatives

- Searle notes several “salient facts” about these sentences, which hold in a pretheoretical sense.

Fact 1 : *The sentences in question do not have an imperative force as part of their meaning.*

Fact 2 : *The sentences in question are not ambiguous as between an imperative illocutionary force and a nonimperative illocutionary force.*

Fact 3 : *Notwithstanding Facts 1 and 2, these are conventionally used to issue directives.* There is a systematic relation between these and directive illocutions in a way that does not exist between *I have to study for an exam* and rejecting proposals.

Fact 4 : *The sentences in question are not, in the ordinary sense, idioms.* When using one of these sentences as an indirect directive, they still admit a literal response. Also, when translated word-for-word into other languages, they often still have the same indirect illocutionary force as in English.

Fact 5 : *To say they are not idioms is not to say they are not idiomatic.* They are used idiomatically in their role as indirect speech acts.

Fact 6 : *The sentences in question have literal utterances in which they are not also indirect requests.* The intonation, though, may vary between these readings.

Fact 7 : *In cases where these sentences are uttered as requests, they still have their literal meaning and are uttered with and as having that literal meaning.* What is added in indirect speech acts is not any additional or different sentence meaning, but rather additional *speaker* meaning.

Fact 8 : *It is a consequence of Fact 7 that when one of these sentences is uttered with the primary illocutionary point of a directive, the literal illocutionary act is also performed.* You can see this in that a subsequent report of the utterance can truly report the literal illocutionary act.

The Theory of Speech Acts

- One way to look at both types of indirect speech acts is by examining the set of conditions necessary for the felicitous performance of the act.

(6)

Directive and Commissive Felicity Conditions		
CONDITION	DIRECTIVE (REQUEST)	COMMISSIVE (PROMISE)
Preparatory	H is able to perform A	S is able to perform A. He wants S to perform A
Sincerity	S wants H to do A.	S intends to do A.
Propositional Content	S predicates a future act A of H	S predicates a future act A of S
Essential	Counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A	Counts as the undertaking by S of an obligation to do A

- Using the conditions from (6), Groups 1-6 of types can be reduced into three types.

- *Those having to do with felicity conditions on the performance of a directive illocutionary act.* The ability of H to perform A (Group 1) is a preparatory condition, the desire of S that H perform A (Group 2) is the sincerity condition, and the predication of A of H (Group 3) is the propositional content condition. Groups 1-3, then, group together, as they all concern felicity conditions on directive illocutionary acts.
- *Those having to do with reasons for doing the act.* Groups 4 and 5 group naturally together, as a desire or willingness to do A (Group 4) is a reason for doing A (Group 5).
- *Those Embedding one element inside another one.*

- Four generalizations follow:

Generalization 1 *S can make an indirect request (or other directive) by either asking whether or stating that a preparatory condition concerning H's ability to do A obtains. "Can you pass the salt?" "You can close the door (please)."*

Generalization 2 *S can make an indirect directive by either asking whether or stating that the propositional content condition obtains. "Will you close the door?" "You will be quiet (please)."*

Generalization 3 *S can make an indirect directive statement by stating that the sincerity condition obtains, but not by asking whether it obtains. "Do you want to close the door?" "#You want to close the door."*

Generalization 4 *S can make an indirect directive by either stating that or asking whether there are good or overriding reasons for doing A, except where the reason is that H wants or wishes, etc., to do A, in which case he can only ask whether H wants, wishes, etc., to do A.*

- We are now equipped to go through an example of an indirect request in the same level of detail as our rejection of a proposal. A simple case: At the dinner table, X says to Y *Can you pass the salt?* by way of asking Y to pass the salt. Notice that not just any statement about salt will get Y to pass it - *#Salt is made of sodium chloride.*

Step 1 *Y has asked me a question as to whether I have the ability to pass the salt (fact about the conversation).*

Step 2 *I assume that he is coöperating in the conversation and that therefore his utterance has some aim or point (principles of conversational coöperation).*

Step 3 *The conversational setting is not such as to indicate a theoretical interest in my salt-passing ability (factual background information).*

Step 4 *Furthermore, he probably already knows that the answer to the question is yes (factual background information).*

Step 5 *Therefore, his utterance is probably not just a question. It probably has some ulterior illocutionary point (inference from Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4.) What can it be?*

Step 6 *A preparatory condition for any directive illocutionary act is the ability of H to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (theory of speech acts).*

Step 7 *Therefore, X has asked me a question the affirmative answer to which would entail that the preparatory condition for requesting me to pass the salt is satisfied (inference from Steps 1 and 6).*

Step 8 *We are now at dinner and people normally use salt at dinner; they pass it back and forth, try to get others to pass it back and forth, etc. (background information).*

Step 9 *He has therefore alluded to the satisfaction of a preparatory condition for a request whose obedience conditions it is quite likely he wants me to bring about (inference from Steps 7 and 8).*

Step 10 *Therefore, in the absence of any other plausible illocutionary point, he is probably requesting me to pass him the salt (inference from Steps 5 and 9).*

- According to this analysis, then, the reason that “Can you pass the salt?” but not other salt-based sentences can serve as an indirect request is that your ability to pass the salt is a preparatory condition for the request itself.
- The two key components to figuring out indirect speech acts, then, are:
 - A strategy for establishing the existence of an ulterior illocutionary point beyond the meaning of the sentence (by means of conversational principles).
 - A device for finding out what that ulterior illocutionary point is (by means of the theory of speech acts in combination with background information).

Some Problems (And Possible Solutions)

Problem 1 *Why do some syntactic forms work better than others?* For example, why can one ask you to do something by saying “Can you hand me that book on the top shelf?” but not (at least, not as obviously) by saying “Is it the case that you at present have the ability to hand me that book on the top shelf?”

- One part of the answer is that within the framework Searle puts forward, certain forms will tend to become conventionally established as the standard idiomatic forms for indirect speech acts. What is important to note here is that they still keep their literal meanings, as well.
- A second part of the answer is that in order for an utterance to be plausible as an indirect speech act, a sentence has to be “idiomatic to start with”. Searle might have been better to use the word “unmarked” than “idiomatic” in this context.

Problem 2 *Why can one perform indirect directives by either asserting **or** querying the satisfaction of the propositional content and preparatory conditions, but may only do so by asserting (but not querying) the sincerity condition?*

- It is odd to ask other people about the existence of one’s own elementary psychological states, and it is also odd to assert the existence of other people’s elementary psychological states when addressing them.

Problem 3 *Can it be said that (at least in English) some of the “conventional” sentence types are really imperative idioms?*

- Not likely. For example, *Why not...?* works by challenging H to provide reasons for not doing A, which indirectly requests that H do it.

Other Types of Indirection

- In general, one can perform any illocutionary act by asserting (but not by questioning) the satisfaction of the sincerity condition for that act.

(7) *I am sorry I did it.* (an apology)

(8) *I believe he is in the room.* (an assertion)

(9) *I intend to try harder next time, coach.* (a promise)

- Searle is most interested in indirect commissives, especially offers and promises. They pattern into the same six Groups that were previously discussed.
- Another case is hypothetical sentences as indirect commissives:

(10) *If you wish any further information, just let me know*

(11) *If I can be of assistance, I would be most glad to help*

- These types of sentences lead to the following generalizations:

Generalization 5 *S can make an indirect commissive by either asking whether or stating that the preparatory condition concerning his ability to do A obtains.*

Generalization 6 *S can make an indirect commissive by asking whether, though not stating that, the preparatory condition concerning H's wish or want that S do A obtains.*

Generalization 7 *S can make an indirect commissive by stating that, and in some forms by asking whether, the propositional content condition obtains.*

Generalization 8 *S can make an indirect commissive by stating that, but not asking whether, the sincerity condition obtains.*

Generalization 9 *S can make an indirect commissive by stating that or by asking whether there are good or overriding reasons for doing A, except where the reason is that S wants or desires to do A, in which case he can only state but not ask whether he wants to do A.*