

# Chapter 10: Indirect Speech Acts

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## 1 Introduction

Roadmap

- Performatives
  - Felicity Conditions
  - Explicit Performatives
  - Implicit Performatives
- Indirect Speech Acts
  - Primary and Literal Acts
  - Restated Felicity Conditions
  - Conventionalization of Indirect Speech
  - Indirect Speech Acts Across Languages

## 2 Performatives

Performatives: a class of speech acts where the speaker is not describing something, but rather doing something

Illocutionary Force: the act which the speaker intends to perform by speaking

Examples of performatives:

1. I declare this meeting adjourned.
2. I now pronounce you man and wife.
3. I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth!

### 2.1 FELICITY CONDITIONS

Instead of analyzing the truth value of performatives, we analyze whether the speech act is felicitous (successful, valid, and appropriate).

A violation of conditions A-B is a “misfire,” where the intended act is not successfully performed. However, a violation of either of the C conditions is an “abuse” meaning the speech act is performed and valid, but it is done insincerely.

(4) Felicity Conditions (Austin 1962: 14–15):

- (A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
- (A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocations of the particular procedure invoked.
- (B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
- (B.2) completely.
- (C.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further
- (C.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.<sup>5</sup>

## **2.2 EXPLICIT PERFORMATIVES**

Properties of Explicit Performatives:

1. Indicative mood
2. Simple present tense
3. Non-habitual interpretation
4. Frequently contain a performative verb (sentence, declare, confer, invite, request, order, accuse, etc.)
5. Often in active voice
6. First person subject
7. Sometimes modified by the adverb "hereby"

Explicit performatives can often be paraphrased as more casual sounding speech:

1. I hereby order you to shut the door.
2. Shut the door.

The more casual version is called an implicit performative.

## **2.3 IMPLICIT PERFORMATIVES**

Just as explicit performatives can be paraphrased as implicit performatives, all utterances can be paraphrased as explicit performatives. Therefore, all utterances are performatives. This tells us

two things about all utterances:

1. All utterances have illocutionary force
2. All utterances have felicity conditions

### 3 Indirect Speech Acts

A direct speech act is one where the grammatical form matches the intended illocutionary force. Explicit performatives are direct speech acts.

An indirect speech act is an utterance in which one illocutionary act is intentionally performed by means of the performance of another act.

#### 3.1 PRIMARY AND LITERAL ACTS

The primary act is the one that is the main objective of the utterance, while the literal act is the actual act being performed by the utterance.

In the example, “My friend wants tea,” the primary act is a request for tea while the literal act is a statement about what the friend wants.

#### 3.2 RESTATED FELICITY CONDITIONS

In order for an indirect speech act to be successful, the literal act should be related to the Felicity Conditions of the primary act in specific ways.

Speakers perform an indirect speech act by asking about or stating one of the Felicity Conditions.

	promise	request
preparatory conditions	(i) S is able to perform A (ii) H wants S to perform A, and S believes that H wants S to perform A (iii) it is not obvious that S will perform A	H is able to perform A
sincerity condition	S intends to perform A	S wants H to perform A
propositional content	predicates a future act by S	predicates a future act by H
essential condition	counts as an under- taking by S to do A	counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A

The examples below show how the literal speech act should interact with the Felicity Conditions of the primary speech act. Examples 1 and 2 ask about the preparatory condition, examples 3 and 4 state the sincerity condition, and examples 5 and 6 ask about the propositional content of the request.

1. Do you have any tea?
2. Could you possibly give me some tea?
3. I would like you to give me some tea.
4. I would really appreciate a cup of tea.
5. Will you give me some tea?
6. Are you going to give me some tea?

In general, people can use the Gricean Cooperative Principles to discern the intended meaning of indirect speech acts. Another way the meaning of indirect speech acts is clarified is through conventionalization.

### 3.3 CONVENTIONALIZATION OF INDIRECT SPEECH

Indirect speech acts follow conventionalized forms to a certain extent, but not in the same way as idioms. Contrary from idioms, both the literal and primary acts are understood to be part of what is meant when an indirect speech act is performed. This can be seen in the example below.

Q: Can you please tell me the time?

A1: It's almost 5:30.

A2: No, sorry, I can't; my watch has stopped.

A3: Yes, it's 5:30.

In A1, the person responds to just the primary act. In A2, the person responds to just the literal act. In A3, the person responds to both.

### 3.4 INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS ACROSS LANGUAGES

The conventionalization of indirect speech acts means that speakers of a language come to recognize triggers that lead them to interpret a intended meaning, such as “would you please” or “why don't you.”

But, this also means that the intended illocutionary force of a indirect speech act is not always preserved cross-linguistically. However, there is some evidence to believe that while not all languages have the same conventions for indirect speech, they may conventionalize indirect speech using the same basic principles.

## 4 References

Kroeger, P. R. (2019). *Analyzing meaning: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. Language Science Press.