

# Language describes, but also changes, the world

There's great pleasure in reading stories and watching films about magic. In Rebecca F. Kuang's bestselling novel "Babel: An Arcane History," magic originates in the subtle gaps in translation between languages, a captivating idea for language mavens. And who hasn't wished that Hermione's "accio," or summoning spell, in the Harry Potter books could be used in real life to recover those AirPods that are missing again?! That kind of magic seems to be absent from our more mundane reality.

But there is magic in language. While language often merely describes the world, it can also change it.

The officiant at a wedding says, "I hereby declare you married," and that utterance plays a crucial role in making it so. Or consider "I hereby swear to tell the truth," which commits the speaker to being honest. The little word *hereby* is the giveaway that something magical is



IN A WORD  
BY KAI VON FINTEL

happening.

In my trade, such utterances are called "performatives" because they don't just describe; they are used to perform a non-linguistic action by the very act of uttering the sentence.

For the magic of performatives to happen, lots of things need to be just right; these are called "felicity conditions" by the philosopher J.L. Austin in his book "How To Do Things with Words." To make a wedding ceremony valid, the officiant has to be authorized to conduct such ceremonies. And the right words need to be spoken. And the participants need to be sincere.

When such utterances are spoken in jest or in pretense, not all the felicity conditions are satisfied and the magic doesn't happen.

The 1992 movie "Dracula" contains a scene in which the characters played by Keanu Reeves and Winona Ryder are married. The director hired an actual

priest to officiate, an actual wedding ritual was performed, and, when the actors were asked, "Do you take this man/woman ... ?" each replied in the affirmative. Ms. Ryder in a later interview said that she thought that this meant they actually got married! I am a linguist, not a lawyer, but I disagree with her. The felicity conditions were not fulfilled, and so there was no marriage performed.

Felicity conditions were in the headlines recently: Could saying certain words or even thinking particular thoughts declassify confidential documents? Again, studying the felicity conditions is what is needed. Even though language can be magic, we can't reliably get the world to be the way we wish it were by sprinkling *hereby* into our utterances.

Anyway, I hereby declare this column to be finished.

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