Linguistics 111

Pragmatics II

Speech Act Theory

John Langshaw Austin (March 26, 191 – February 8, 1960)

the business of a sentence cannot only be to "describe" some state of affairs, or to "state some fact", which it must do either truly or falsely

(Austin: How to do things with words)

John was feeling tired and went to work.

John was feeling tired, but went to work.

In terms of logic:
A: John was feeling tired
B: John went to work

A and B

But:

The sentences actually convey more than this.

We know that John feeling tired preceded his going to work.

'but', although from a logical perspective meaning the same as 'and' conveys additional information

Making a statement may be the paradigmatic use of language, but there are all sorts of other things we can do with words.

We can make requests
ask questions
give orders
make promises
give thanks
offer apologies
etc.

Constatives

In general, speech acts are acts of communication. To communicate is to express a certain attitude, and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed. For example, a statement expresses a belief, a request expresses a desire, and an apology expresses a regret. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude being expressed.

Performatives

Some speech acts, however, are not primarily acts of communication and have the function not of communicating but of affecting institutional states of affairs. They can do so in either of two ways. Some officially judge something to be the case, and others actually make something the case. Those of the first kind include judges' rulings, referees' calls and assessors' appraisals, and the latter include include sentencing, bequeathing and appointing. Acts of both kinds can be performed only in certain ways under certain circumstances by those in certain institutional or social positions

Determine whether an utterance is a constative or a performative:

Use the 'I hereby' – test.

Any utterance that can potentially be introduced by 'I hereby' is probably a performative

Almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention:

- there is the act of saying something
- what one does in saying it
- how one is trying to affect one's audience.

Austin distinguishes the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it, and dubs these the 'locutionary', the 'illocutionary' and the 'perlocutionary' act, respectively.

John Smith turns to Sue Snub and says ‘Is Jeff’s shirt red?’, to which Sue replies ‘Yes’.

John has produced a series of bodily movements which result in the production of a certain sound. Austin called such a performance a phonetic act, and called the act a phone.

John’s utterance also conforms to the lexical and grammatical conventions of English – that is, John has produced an English sentence. Austin called this a phatic act, and labels such utterances phemes.

John also referred to Jeff’s shirt, and to the colour red. To use a pheme with a more or less definite sense and reference is to utter a rheme, and to perform a rhetic act.

Rhemes are a sub-class of phemes, which in turn are a sub-class of phones.

One cannot perform a rheme without also performing a pheme and a phone.

the locutionary act

The performance of these three acts is the performance of a locution – it is the act of saying something.

John has therefore performed a locutionary act. He has also done at least two other things. He has asked a question, and he has elicited an answer from Sue.

the illocutionary act

Asking a question is an example of what Austin called an illocutionary act. Other examples would be making an assertion, giving an order, and promising to do something. To perform an illocutionary act is to use a locution with a certain force. It is an act performed in saying something, in contrast with a locution, the act of saying something.

the perlocutionary act

Eliciting an answer is an example of what Austin calls a perlocutionary act, an act performed by saying something. Notice that if one successfully performs a perlocution, one also succeeds in performing both an illocution and a locution.

In the theory of speech acts, attention has especially focused on the illocutionary act, much less on the locutionary and perlocutionary act, and only rarely on the subdivision of the locution into phone, pheme and rheme.

Another example:
A bartender utters the words, 'The bar will be closed in five minutes,'

He is thereby performing the locutionary act of saying that the bar (i.e., the one he is tending) will be closed in five minutes (from the time of utterance)

Notice that what the bartender is saying, the content of his locutionary act, is not fully determined by the words he is using. They do not specify the bar in question or the time of the utterance.

In saying this, the bartender is performing the illocutionary act of informing the patrons of the bar's imminent closing and perhaps also the act of urging them to order a last drink.

The intended result of these illocutionary acts is understanding on the part of the audience.

Illocutionary acts are performed with the intention of producing a further effect. The bartender intends to be performing the perlocutionary acts of causing the patrons to believe that the bar is about to close and of convincing them to order one last drink.

The bartender is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering certain words.

The patrons must infer that the bartender intends to be urging them to leave.

There is a similarly indirect connection when an utterance of 'It's getting cold in here' is made not merely as a statement about the temperature but as a request to close the window or as a proposal to go some place warmer.

Whether it is intended as a request or as a proposal depends on contextual information that the speaker relies on the audience to have.

Typology of speech acts:

Constatives: affirming, alleging, announcing, answering, attributing, claiming, classifying, concurring, confirming, conjecturing, denying, disagreeing, disclosing, disputing, identifying, informing, insisting, predicting, ranking, reporting, stating, stipulating

Directives: advising, admonishing, asking, begging, dismissing, excusing, forbidding, instructing, ordering, permitting, requesting, requiring, suggesting, urging, warning

Commissives: agreeing, guaranteeing, inviting, offering, promising, swearing, volunteering

Acknowledgments: apologizing, condoling, congratulating, greeting, thanking, accepting (acknowledging an acknowledgment)

(Kent Bach and Michael Harnish)

We can perform a speech act
(1) directly or indirectly, by way of performing another speech act,
(2) literally or nonliterally, depending on how we are using our words, and
(3) explicitly or inexplicitly, depending on whether we fully spell out what we mean.

In indirection a single utterance is the performance of one illocutionary act by way of performing another. For example, we can make a request or give permission by way of making a statement, say by uttering 'I am getting thirsty' or 'It doesn't matter to me', and we can make a statement or give an order by way of asking a question, such as 'Will the sun rise tomorrow?' or 'Can you clean up your room?' When an illocutionary act is performed indirectly, it is performed by way of performing some other one directly.

In the case of nonliteral utterances, we do not mean what our words mean but something else instead. With nonliterality the illocutionary act we are performing is not the one that would be predicted just from the meanings of the words being used, as with likely utterances of 'My mind got derailed' or 'You can stick that in your ear'

If one's spouse says 'I will be home later'. she is likely to mean that she will be home later that night, not merely some time in the future.

In such cases what one means is an expansion of what one says, in that adding more words ('tonight', in the example) would have made what was meant fully explicit. In other cases, such as 'Jack is ready' and 'Jill is late', the sentence does not express a complete proposition. There must be something which Jack is being claimed to be ready for and something which Jill is being claimed to be late to.

In these cases what one means is a completion of what one says. In both sorts of case, no particular word or phrase is being used nonliterally and there is no indirection. They both exemplify what may be called 'impliciture', since part of what is meant is communicated not explicitly but implicitly, by way of expansion or completion.

The theory of speech acts aims to do justice to the fact that even though words (phrases, sentences) encode information, people do more things with words than convey information, and that when people do convey information, they often convey more than their words encode. Although the focus of speech act theory has been on utterances, especially those made in conversational and other face-to-face situations, the phrase 'speech act' should be taken as a generic term for any sort of language use, oral or otherwise.

Speech acts, fall under the broad category of intentional action.

One acts intentionally, generally one has a set of nested intentions.

E.g.: having arrived home without one's keys, one might push a button with the intention not just of pushing the button but of ringing a bell, arousing one's spouse and, ultimately, getting into one's house.

The single bodily movement involved in pushing the button comprises a multiplicity of actions, each corresponding to a different one of the nested intentions.

Speech acts are not just acts of producing certain sounds, they are intentional actions.