

# What sentences do

*Act 1: Speech Acts and Sentence Types*

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# What is this class about?

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|     | b. | Hey, stranger!                         | <i>Greeting</i>     |
|     | c. | Please buckle your seatbelt.           | <i>Command</i>      |
|     | d. | Is there a doctor in the house?        | <i>Question</i>     |
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## Big question

What kinds of actions can we perform with what kinds of utterance and why?

# Connecting speech acts to meanings

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- ✦ Saying declarative sentences usually **provides information**
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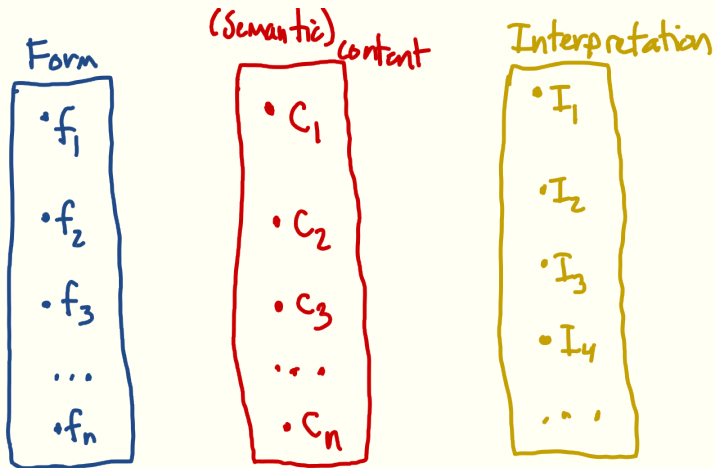
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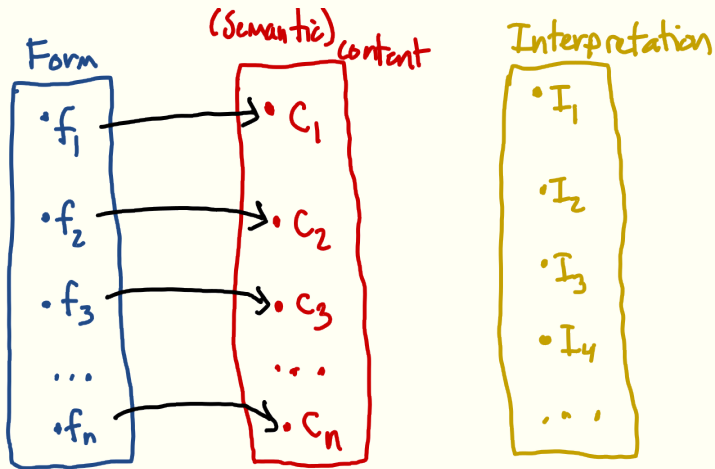
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- ❖ How should we model the meaning of these different sentence types to capture their communicative intent?
- ❖ How can we do the above while also allowing for sentences to be part of other kinds of speech acts?
- ❖ Need (a) an account of sentence meaning, and (b) an account of how this relates to **discourse contexts**

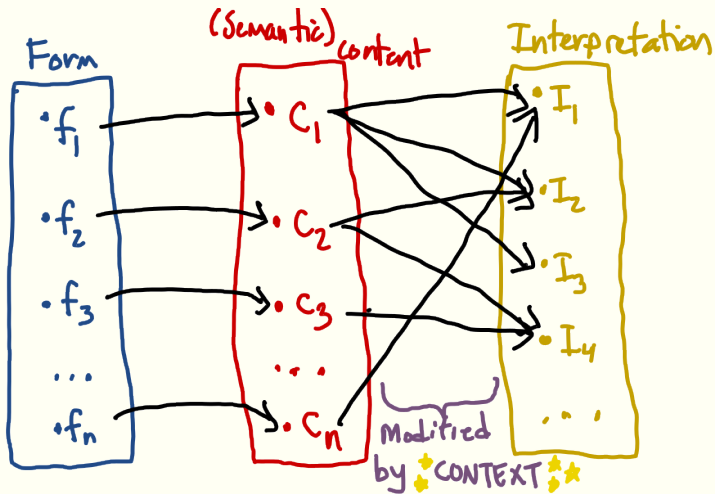
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- ✦ draw distinctions only when empirically justified
- ✦ allow us to make testable predictions

# Today

- ✦ Introduction(s)
- ✦ Establish the lay of the land: what do we want to capture?  
Empirical/theoretical considerations?
  - ✦ Speech acts
  - ✦ What are the sentence types?
- ✦ A first look at cool/tricky data

# Expectations for you

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# What do sentences do?

# Components of a speech act

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- ✦ A **speaker**  $Sp$
- ✦ An **addressee**  $Ad$
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Our focus: connection between **utterances** and **illocutionary acts**

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The same rough inventory across languages (at least the first 3):

## (3) Dutch

- a. De wombat snurkt.
- b. Snurkt de wombat?
- c. Snurk!
- d. Wat een schattige snurkende wombat!

## (4) Estonian

- a. Vombat norskab.
- b. Kas vombat norskab?
- c. Norska!
- d. Milline armas norskav vombat!

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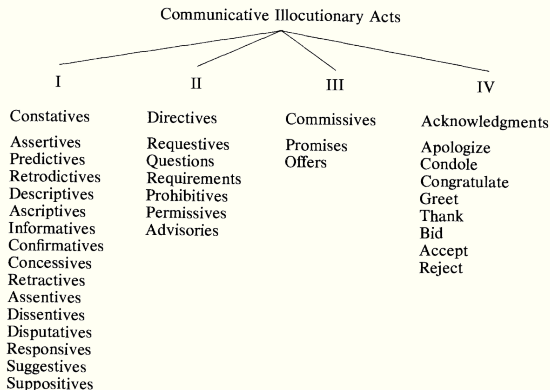
For linguists: do we need illocutionary force operators? If so, what is their role?

- ✦ Putting things in categories is only as meaningful as the categories themselves

Ideally we would like our ontology to have some empirical basis  
Nice descriptions, but missing some empirical rigor

# What is wrong with this picture?

Taxonomy of speech act types, from Bach & Harnish (1979):



If our goal is to explain the form-meaning connection, do we have forms for each of these types?



# Where do forces come from?

‘Syntaxified’ idea: left-periphery **force operators**, heading a ForceP (in the extended projection of CP) (Rizzi 1997, a.m.o.)

- ✦ Sentences denote (e.g.) propositions, which are transformed into speech acts by illocutionary force operators

Supporting evidence: edge-occurring discourse-oriented particles

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## (5) **Estonian**

**Ega** sa midagi pole unustanud?  
PRT you anything be.NEG forgot.NEG  
‘You haven’t forgotten anything(, right?)’  
(Sign after airport security checkpoint)

(Roberts 2023: ex. 6)

## (6) **Cantonese**

nei5 hai6 mei5gwok3 jan4 **me1**?  
2SG COP USA person PRT  
‘You aren’t American, are you?’

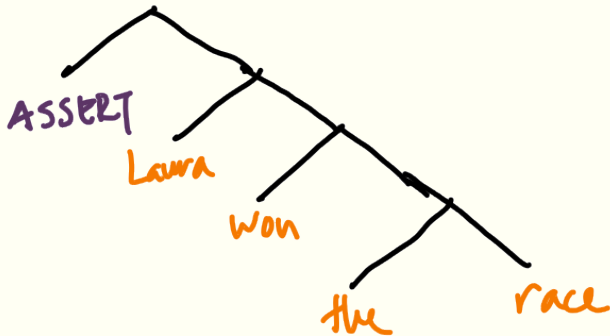
(Lam 2014: ex. 11)

# Depicting speech act operators

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- ✦ inferences about speaker intent/speech act arise from the above effect + general pragmatic reasoning

# Building blocks of a theory

# Beginnings

Three main ingredients of an account of the form to update pipeline:

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**Goal:** A principled account of what sentences mean in context

**Tactic:** Look at a variety of illocutions with the same sentence type and see what they have in common and when they vary



**What do declaratives,  
interrogatives, and imperatives  
do?**

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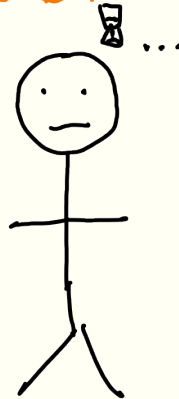
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- ✦ Attempt to convince hearer of  $p$  (Grice 1957; Bach & Harnish 1979)

# ASSERTION



Not all declarative utterances are purely ‘assertions’, in that they also have other communicative effects:

(7)     **Threat**

If you cross me, there'll be hell to pay.

(8)     **Promise**

I'll turn in the assignment no later than Monday.

(9)     **Indirect question**

I wonder what we're having for dinner.



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We will have similar desiderata for other sentence types.

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Falling↓ vs rising↑ declaratives:

- (10) John is getting married↓. (Isn't that nice!)
- (10) John is getting married↑? (That's news to me.)

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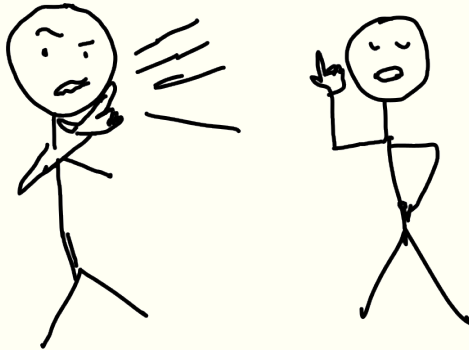
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**Coordination view:** To open public coordination on (resolving) an issue, which typically involves the above

(?Roberts 1996/2012; Ginzburg 1996; Farkas & Bruce 2010; Murray & Starr 2018); see also discussion by Rawlins 2024)

# QUESTION

??



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(15) **'Controversy' questions**

*Conspiracy theorist YouTuber*: Was 9/11 an inside job?

✗ Info-seeking, ✗ Knowledgeable Ad, ✓ Sp ignorance

(Sadock 1971; Han 2002; Rohde 2006; Caponigro & Sprouse 2007; Biezma & Rawlins 2017; Farkas 2022, 2024; Roberts 2024, a.m.o.)

# Interrogatives and bias

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- a. Do you speak Dutch ↑ or Frisian ↓?
  - b. Do you speak Dutch ↑ or Frisian ↑?

What's the difference between (a) and (b)?

# Canonical imperatives

Canonical view: Impose upon the addressee an obligation to do something

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Version which is weaker than 'obligation' but still on the same track  
(Searle 1975):

- ✦ Conveys that *Sp* wants *Ad* to do *x*
- ✦ Acts to induce *Ad* to do *x*

0 1 2 3 4



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(21) **Curses, blessings, well-wishes**

- a. Go jump in a lake! (idiomatic)
- b. (May) God bless you.
- c. Get well soon!

# Imperatives and intonation

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Rising intonation makes imperatives seem much more like suggestions:

- (22) A: I'm so tired. I can't concentrate on semantics anymore.
- a. B: Take a nap↑? Go home↑?
  - b. B: Doe een dutje↑? Ga naar huis↑? (Adapted from Rudin 2018)



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One reason to think they matter: some langs do have dedicated morphosyntactic signatures of exclamatives:

(24) **Dutch**

- a. Wat **een** mooie bloemen heb je!  
what a beautiful flowers have you  
'What beautiful flowers you have!' (lit. 'What a beautiful flowers you have!')
- b. Je hebt (\*een) mooie bloemen.  
you have a beautiful flowers  
'You have beautiful flowers.'

# Wrapping up

Uttering different types of sentences have different discourse effects:

- ✦ Declarative → assertion
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- ❖ What are the constraints on the form-meaning mapping?

For tomorrow: Think about what the common denominator is among subtypes of **declaratives** and **interrogatives**

- ❖ Are there subtypes we didn't mention? (In English or any other language)?

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