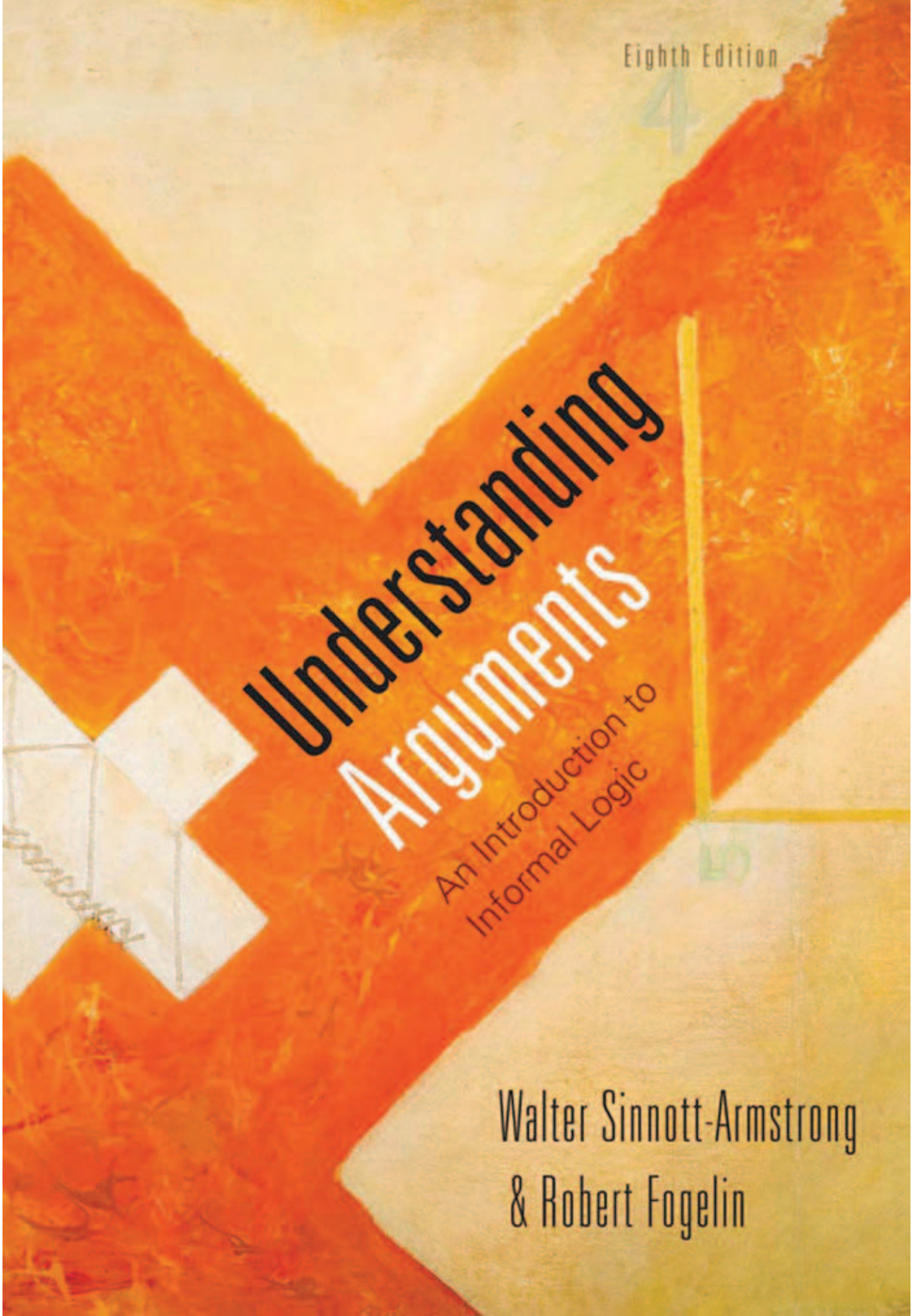
Eighth Edition
Understanding Arguments
An Introduction to Informal Logic
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# Understanding Arguments

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# The Web of Language

***A**rguments are made up of language, so we cannot understand arguments without first understanding language. This chapter will examine some of the basic features of language, stressing three main ideas. First, language is* conventional. *Words acquire meaning within a rich system of linguistic conventions and rules. Second, the uses of language are* diverse. *We use language to communicate information, but we also use it to ask questions, issue orders, write poetry, keep score, formulate arguments, and perform an almost endless number of other tasks. Third, meaning is often conveyed* indirectly. *To understand the significance of many utterances, we must go beyond what is literally said to examine what is conversationally implied by saying it.*

## LANGUAGE AND CONVENTION

The preceding chapter stressed that arguing is a *practical* activity. More specifically, it is a *linguistic* activity. Arguing is one of the many things that we can do with words. In fact, unlike things that we can accomplish both with words and without words (like making people happy, angry, and so forth), arguing is something we can *only* do with words or other meaningful symbols. That is why nonhuman animals never give arguments. To understand how arguments work, then, it is crucial to understand how language works.

Unfortunately, our understanding of human language is far from complete, and linguistics is a young science in which disagreement exists on many important issues. Still, certain facts about language are beyond dispute, and recognizing them will provide a background for understanding how arguments work.

As anyone who has bothered to think about it knows, language is conventional. There is no reason why we, as English speakers, use the word "dog" to refer to a dog rather than to a cat, a tree, or the number of planets in our solar system. It seems that any word might have been used to stand for anything. Beyond this, there seems to be no reason why we put words together the way we do. In English, we put adjectives before the nouns they modify. We thus speak of a "green salad." In French, adjectives usually

follow the noun, and so, instead of saying "verte salade," the French say "salade verte." The conventions of our own language are so much with us that it strikes us as odd when we discover that other languages have different conventions. A French diplomat once praised his own language because, as he said, it followed the natural order of thought. This strikes English speakers as silly, but in seeing why it is silly, we see that the word order in our own language is conventional as well.

Although it is important to realize that language is conventional, it is also important not to misunderstand this fact. From the idea that language is conventional, it is easy to conclude that language is totally arbitrary. If language is totally arbitrary, then it might seem that it really does not matter which words we use or how we put them together. It takes only a little thought to see that this view, however daring it might seem, misrepresents the role of conventions in language. If we wish to communicate with others, we must follow the system of conventions that others use. Grapefruits are more like big lemons than like grapes, so you might want to call them "mega-lemons." Still, if you order a glass of mega-lemon juice in a restaurant, you will get stares and smirks but no grapefruit juice. The same point lies behind this famous passage in *Through the Looking Glass,* by Lewis Carroll:

> "There's glory for you!"
> "I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously.
> "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

The point, of course, is that Humpty Dumpty cannot make a word mean whatever he wants it to mean, and he cannot communicate if he uses words in his own peculiar way without regard to what those words themselves mean. Communication can take place only within a shared system of conventions. Conventions do not destroy meaning by making it arbitrary; conventions bring meaning into existence.

A misunderstanding of the conventional nature of language can lead to pointless disputes. Sometimes, in the middle of a discussion, someone will declare that "the whole thing is just a matter of definition" or "what you say is true by your definition, false by mine." There are times when definitions are important and the truth of what is said turns on them, but usually this is not the case. Suppose someone has fallen off a cliff and is heading toward certain death on the rocks below. Of course, it is a matter of convention that we use the word "death" to describe the result of the sudden, sharp stop at the end of the fall. We might have used some other word—perhaps

"birth"—instead. But it certainly will not help a person who is falling to his certain death to shout out, "By 'birth' I mean death." It will not help even if *everyone* agrees to use these words in this new way. If we all decided to adopt this new convention, we would then say, "He is falling from the cliff to his certain birth" instead of "He is falling from the cliff to his certain death." But speaking in this way will not change the facts. It will not save him from perishing. It will not make those who care for him feel better.

The upshot of this simple example is that the *truth* of what we say is rarely just a matter of definition. Whether what we have said is true or not will depend, for the most part, on how things stand in the world. Abraham Lincoln, during his days as a trial lawyer, is reported to have cross-examined a witness like this:

> "How many legs does a horse have?"
> "Four," said the witness.
> "Now, if we call a tail a leg, how many legs does a horse have?"
> "Five," answered the witness.
> "Nope," said Abe, "calling a tail a leg don't make it a leg."

In general, then, though the *meaning of* what we say is dependent on convention, the *truth* of what we say is not.

In the preceding sentence we used the qualifying phrase, "in general." To say that a claim holds *in general* indicates that there may be exceptions. This qualification is needed because sometimes the truth of what we say *is* simply a matter of definition. Take a simple example: The claim that a triangle has three sides is true by definition, because a triangle is defined as "a closed figure having three sides." Again, if someone says that sin is wrong, he or she has said something that is true by definition, for a sin is defined as, among other things, "something that is wrong." In unusual cases like these, things are true merely as a matter of convention. Still, in general, the truth of what we say is settled not by appealing to definitions but, instead, by looking at the facts. In this way, language is not arbitrary, even though it is conventional.

## LINGUISTIC ACTS

In the previous section we saw that a language is a system of shared conventions that allows us to communicate with one another. If we examine language, we will see that it contains many different kinds of conventions. These conventions govern what we will call linguistic acts, speech acts, and conversational acts. We will discuss linguistic acts first.

We have seen that words have meanings conventionally attached to them. The word "dog" is used conventionally to talk about dogs. Given what our words mean, it would be incorrect to call dogs "airplanes." Proper names are also conventionally assigned, for Harry Jones could have been

named Wilbur Jones. Still, given that his name is not Wilbur, it would be improper to call him Wilbur. Rules like these, which govern meaning and reference, can be called *semantic* rules.

Other conventions concern the ways words can be put together to form sentences. These are often called *syntactic* or *grammatical* rules. Using the three words "John," "hit," and "Harry," we can formulate sentences with very different meanings, such as "John hit Harry" and "Harry hit John." We recognize that these sentences have different meanings, because we understand the grammar of our language. This grammatical understanding also allows us to see that the sentence "Hit John Harry" has no determinate meaning, even though the individual words do. (Notice that "Hit John, Harry!" *does* mean something: It is a way of telling Harry to hit John.) Grammatical rules are important, for they play a part in giving a meaning to combinations of words, such as sentences.

Some of our grammatical rules play only a small role in this important task of giving meaning to combinations of words. It is bad grammar to say, "If I was you, I wouldn't do that," but it is still clear what information the person is trying to convey. What might be called stylistic rules of grammar are of relatively little importance for logic, but grammatical rules that affect the meaning or content of what is said are essential to logical analysis. Grammatical rules of this kind can determine whether we have said one thing rather than another, or perhaps failed to say anything at all and have merely spoken nonsense.

It is sometimes hard to tell what is nonsense. Consider "The horse raced past the barn fell." This sentence usually strikes people as nonsense when they hear it for the first time. To show them that it actually makes sense, all we need to do is insert two words: "The horse that was raced past the barn fell." Since English allows us to drop "that was," the original sentence means the same as the slightly expanded version. Sentences like these are called "garden path sentences," because the first few words "lead you down the garden path" by suggesting that some word plays a grammatical role that it really does not play. In this example, "The horse raced . . ." suggests at first that the main verb is "raced." That makes it hard to see that the main verb really is "fell."

Another famous example is "Buffalo buffalo buffalo." Again, this seems like nonsense at first, but then someone points out that "buffalo" can be a verb meaning "to confuse." The sentence "Buffalo buffalo buffalo" then means "North American bison confuse North American bison." Indeed, we can even make sense out of "Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo." This means "North American bison from Buffalo, New York, that North American bison from Buffalo, New York, confuse also confuse North American bison from Buffalo, New York, that North American bison from Buffalo, New York, confuse."

Examples like these show that sentences can have linguistic meaning when they seem meaningless. To be meaningful, sentences need to follow

both *semantic* conventions that govern meanings of individual words and also *syntactic* or *grammatical* conventions that lay down rules for combining words into meaningful wholes. When a sentence satisfies essential semantic and syntactic conventions, we will say that the person who uttered that sentence performed a *linguistic act:* The speaker said something meaningful in a language.[1] The ability to perform linguistic acts shows a command of a language. What the speaker says may be false, irrelevant, boring, and so on; but, if in saying it linguistic rules are not seriously violated, then that person can be credited with performing a linguistic act.

Later, in Chapters 13–14, we will look more closely at semantic and syntactic conventions, for they are common sources of fallacies and other confusions. In particular, we shall see how these conventions can generate fallacies of ambiguity and fallacies of vagueness. Before examining the defects of our language, however, we should first appreciate that language is a powerful and subtle tool that allows us to perform a wide variety of jobs important for living in the world.

### EXERCISE I

Read each of the following sentences aloud. Did you perform a linguistic act? If so, explain what the sentence means and why it might not seem meaningful.

1. The old man the ship.
2. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
3. Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like bananas.
4. The cotton clothing is made of grows in Mississippi.
5. The square root of pine is tree.
6. The man who whistles tunes pianos.
7. To force heaven, Mars shall have a new angel. (from Monk)
8. "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe." (from Lewis Carroll)

And now some weird examples from Dan Wegner's Hidden Brain Damage Scale. If these make sense to you, it might be a sign of hidden brain damage. If they don't make sense, explain why:

9. People tell me one thing one day and out the other.
10. I feel as much like I did yesterday as I do today.
11. My throat is closer than it seems.
12. Likes and dislikes are among my favorites.
13. I've lost all sensation in my shirt.
14. There's only one thing for me.
15. I don't like any of my loved ones.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. When an actor on a stage says lines such as "To be or not to be, that is the question," does the actor perform a linguistic act?
2. When someone hums (but does not sing) the "Star-Spangled Banner," does she perform a linguistic act? Why or why not?
3. Can a speaker mispronounce a word in a sentence without performing any linguistic act? Why or why not?


## SPEECH ACTS

When we are asked about the function of language, it is natural to reply that we use language to communicate ideas. This is, however, only one of the purposes for which we use language. Other purposes become obvious as soon as we look at the ways in which our language actually works. Adding up a column of figures is a linguistic activity—though it is rarely looked at in this way—but it does not communicate any ideas to others. When I add the figures, I am not even communicating anything to myself: I am trying to figure something out. A look at our everyday conversations produces a host of other examples of

language being used for different purposes. Grammarians, for example, have divided sentences into various moods, among which are:

Indicative: Barry Bonds hit a home run.

Imperative: Get in there and hit a home run, Barry!

Interrogative: Did Barry Bonds hit a home run?

Expressive: Hurray for Barry Bonds!

The first sentence states a fact. We can use it to communicate information about something that Barry Bonds did. If we use it in this way, then what we say will be either true or false. Notice that none of the other sentences can be called either true or false even though they are all meaningful.

## PERFORMATIVES

The different types of sentences recognized by traditional grammarians indicate that we use language to do more than convey information. But this traditional classification of sentences gives only a small idea of the wide variety of things that we can accomplish using language. Sometimes, for example, in using language we actually *do* things in the sense of bringing something about. In one familiar setting, if one person says, "I do," and another person says, "I do," and finally a third person says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," the relationship between the first two people changes in a fundamental way: They are thereby married. With luck, they begin a life of wedded bliss, but they also alter their legal relationship. For example, they may now file joint income tax returns and may not legally marry other people without first getting divorced.

In uttering sentences of this kind, the speaker thereby *does* something more than merely *stating* something. The philosopher J. L. Austin labeled such utterances *performatives* in order to contrast performing an action with simply describing something.[2] For example, if an umpire shouts, "You're out!" then the batter is out. The umpire is not merely describing the situation but *declaring* the batter out. By way of contrast, if someone in the stands shouts, "He's out!" the batter is not *thereby* out, although the person who shouts this may be encouraging the umpire to call the batter out or complaining because he didn't.

Performatives come in a wide variety of forms. They are often in the first person (like "I do"), but not always. "You're all invited to my house after the game" is in the second person, but uttering it performs the act of inviting. In some circumstances, one person can speak for another person, a group, or an institution. At political conventions, heads of delegations say things like this: "The delegates from Kentucky, the Bluegrass State and the home of the Kentucky Derby, cast their votes for the next President of the United States, Joe W. Blodgett." In saying this, the speaker performs the act of casting Kentucky's votes in favor of Blodgett. Even silence can amount to a performative act in special situations. When the chairperson of a meeting asks if there are any objections to a ruling and none is voiced, then the voters, through their silence, have accepted the ruling.

Because of this diversity of forms that performatives can take, it is not easy to formulate a definition that covers them all. To avoid this difficulty, we will not even try to define performatives here. Instead, we will concentrate on one particularly clear subclass of performatives, what J. L. Austin called *explicit performatives.* All explicit performatives are utterances in the first-person singular indicative noncontinuous[3] present. But not all utterances of that form are explicit performatives. There is one more requirement:

> An utterance of that form is an explicit performative if and only if it yields a true statement when plugged into the following pattern:
> In saying "I _____" in appropriate circumstances, I thereby _____.

For example, "I congratulate you" expresses an explicit performative, because, in saying "I congratulate you," I thereby congratulate you. Here a quoted expression occurs on the left side of the word "thereby" but not on the right side. This reflects the fact that the formula takes us from the words (which are quoted) to the world (the actual act that is performed). The *saying*, which is referred to on the left side of the pattern, amounts to the *doing* referred to on the right side of the word "thereby." We will call this the *thereby test* for explicit performatives. It provides a convenient way of identifying explicit performatives.

The thereby test includes an important qualification: *The context of the utterance must be appropriate.* You have not congratulated anyone if you say, "I congratulate you," when no one is around, unless you are congratulating yourself. Congratulations said by an actor in a play are not real congratulations, and so on. Later in this chapter, we will try to clarify what makes a context appropriate.

Assuming an appropriate context, all of the following sentences meet the thereby test:

I promise to meet you tomorrow.

I bid sixty-six dollars. (said at an auction)

I bid one club. (said in a bridge game)

I resign from this club.

I apologize for being late.

Notice that it doesn't make sense to *deny* any of these performatives. If someone says, "I bid sixty-six dollars," it is not appropriate for someone to reply "No, you don't" or "That's false." It could, however, be appropriate for someone to reply, "You can't bid sixty-six dollars, because the bidding is already up to seventy dollars." In this case, the person tried to make a bid, but failed to do so.

Several explicit performatives play important roles in constructing arguments. These include sentences of the following kind:

I *conclude* that this bill should be voted down.

I *base* my conclusion on the assumption that we do not want to hurt the poor.

I *stipulate* that anyone who earns less than $10,000 is poor.

I *assure* you that this bill will hurt the poor.

I *concede* that I am not absolutely certain.

I *admit* that there is much to be said on both sides of this issue.

I *give my support* to the alternative measure.

I *deny* that this alternative will hurt the economy.

I *grant* for the sake of argument that some poor people are lazy.

I *reply* that most poor people contribute to the economy.

I *reserve comment* on other issues raised by this bill.

We will call this kind of performative an *argumentative performative*. Studying such argumentative performatives can help us to understand what is going on in arguments (which is one main reason why we are studying performatives here).

In contrast to the above utterances, which pass the thereby test, none of the following utterances does:

I agree with you. (This describes one's thoughts or beliefs, so, unlike a performative, it can be false.)

I am sorry for being late. (This describes one's feelings and could be false.)

Yesterday I bid sixty dollars. (This is a statement about a past act and might be false.)

I'll meet you tomorrow. (This utterance may only be a prediction that can turn out to be false.)

Questions, imperatives, and exclamations are not explicit performatives, because they cannot sensibly be plugged into the thereby test at all. They do not have the right form, since they are not in the first-person singular indicative noncontinuous present.

**EXERCISE II**

Using the thereby test as described above, indicate which of the following sentences express explicit performatives (EP) and which do not express explicit performatives (N) in appropriate circumstances:

1. I pledge allegiance to the flag.
2. We pledge allegiance to the flag.
3. I pledged allegiance to the flag.
4. I always pledge allegiance at the start of a game.
5. You pledge allegiance to the flag.

*(continued)*

6. He pledges allegiance to the flag.
7. He doesn't pledge allegiance to the flag.
8. Pledge allegiance to the flag!
9. Why don't you pledge allegiance to the flag?
10. Pierre is the capital of South Dakota.
11. I state that Pierre is the capital of South Dakota.
12. I order you to leave.
13. Get out of here!
14. I didn't take it.
15. I swear that I didn't take it.
16. I won't talk to you.
17. I refuse to talk to you.
18. I'm out of gas.
19. I feel devastated.
20. Bummer!
21. I claim this land for England.
22. I bring you greetings from home.

## KINDS OF SPEECH ACTS

Recognizing explicit performatives helps break the spell of the idea that language functions only to transmit information. It also introduces us to a kind of act distinct from linguistic acts. We will call them *speech acts*.[4] They include such acts as stating, promising, swearing, and refusing. A speech act is the conventional move that a remark makes in a language exchange. It is what is done *in* saying something.

It is difficult to give a precise definition of a speech act, but we can begin by contrasting speech acts with linguistic acts. A linguistic act, we said, is the act of saying something meaningful in a language. It is important to see that the same linguistic act can play different roles as it occurs in different contexts. This is shown by the following brief conversations.

**A:** Is there any pizza left?

**B:** Yes.

**A:** Do you promise to pay me back by Friday?

**B:** Yes.

**A:** Do you swear to tell the truth?

**B:** Yes.

**A:** Do you refuse to leave?

**B:** Yes.

Here the same linguistic act, uttering the word "yes," is used to do four different things: to state something, to make a promise, to take an oath, and to refuse to do something.

We can make this idea of a speech act clearer by using the notion of an explicit performative. Explicit performatives provide a systematic way of identifying different kinds of speech acts. The basic idea is that different speech acts are named by the different verbs that occur in explicit performatives. We can thus use the thereby test to search for different kinds of speech acts. For example:

If I say, "I promise," I thereby promise. So "I promise" is a performative, and *promising* is a kind of speech act.

If I say, "I resign," I thereby resign. So "I resign" is a performative, and *resigning* is a kind of speech act.

If I say, "I apologize," I thereby apologize. So "I apologize" is a performative, and *apologizing* is a kind of speech act.

If I say, "I question his honesty," I thereby question his honesty. So "I question his honesty" is a performative, and *questioning* is a kind of speech act.

If I say, "I conclude that she is guilty," I thereby conclude that she is guilty. So "I conclude that she is guilty" is a performative, and *concluding* is a kind of speech act.

The main verbs that appear in such explicit performatives can be called *performative verbs*. Performative verbs name kinds of speech acts.[5]

Still, the same speech act can also be performed without any performative verb. I can deny my opponent's claim by saying either "I deny that" or simply "No way!" Both utterances perform the speech act of denying, even though only the former is a performative. The latter is not a performative and does not contain any performative verb, but it still performs a speech act. Similarly, I can assure you by saying either "I assure you that I am right" or "There's no doubt about it." Both utterances perform the speech act of assuring, even though only the former is a performative.

Thus far, we have emphasized that we do a great deal more with language than make statements, assert facts, and describe things—that is, we do more with language than put forward claims that are either true or false. But we also use language to do these things, so stating, asserting, and describing are themselves kinds of speech acts. This can be shown by using the thereby test:

If I say, "I state that I am a U.S. citizen," I thereby state that I am a U.S. citizen.

If I say, "I assert that the defendant was in Detroit at the time of the crime," I thereby assert that the defendant was in Detroit at that time.

If I say, "I describe him as being dark haired and just over six feet tall," I thereby describe him as being dark haired and just over six feet tall.

We now have a more accurate conception of the way in which language functions than the common conception that the function of language is to convey ideas. Making claims that are either true or false is one important kind of speech act, but we perform a great many other kinds of speech acts that are also important.

**EXERCISE III**

Which of the following verbs names a speech act?

1. *capture* the suspect
2. *assert* that the suspect is guilty
3. *stare* accusingly at the suspect
4. *find* the defendant guilty
5. *take* the defendant away
6. *punish* the defendant
7. *revoke* the defendant's driver's license
8. *welcome* the prisoner to prison
9. *order* the prisoner to be silent
10. *lock* the cell door

**EXERCISE IV**

Using a dictionary, find ten verbs that can be used to construct explicit performatives that have not yet been mentioned in this chapter.

## SPEECH ACT RULES

The distinctive feature of a performative utterance is that, in a sense we have tried to make clear, the saying constitutes a doing of something. In saying, "I pronounce you husband and wife," a minister is not simply describing a marriage ceremony, she is performing it. Here, however, an objection might arise. Suppose someone who is a supporter of family values goes about the streets pronouncing random couples husband and wife. Unless this person is a member of the clergy, a justice of the peace, a ship's captain, or the like, that person will have no right to make such pronouncements. Furthermore, even if this person is, say, a crazed member of the clergy, the pronouncement will still not come off—that is, the utterance will not succeed in making anyone husband and wife. The parties addressed have to say, "I do," they must have a proper license, and so on. This example shows that a speech act will *fail to come off* or will be *void* unless certain rules or conventions are satisfied. These rules or conventions that must be satisfied for a speech act to come off and not be void will be called *speech act rules*.

The main types of speech act rules can be discovered by considering the following questions:

1. *Must the speaker use any special words or formulas to perform the speech act?*

Sometimes a speech act will come off only if certain words or formulas are used. In baseball the umpire must say, "Strike two," or something very close

to this, in order to call a second strike. In a pickup game it might be all right to say instead, "Hey, that's two bad ones on you, baby!" but that way of calling strikes is not permitted in serious play. Similarly, certain legal documents are not valid if they are not properly signed, endorsed, notarized, and so forth.

2. *Is any response or uptake by the audience needed in order to complete the speech act?*

Sometimes a speech act will come off only if there is an uptake by another person. A person can *offer* a bet by saying, "I bet you ten dollars that the Angels will win today," but this person will have *made* a bet only if the other person says, "Done" or "You're on," shakes hands, or in some other way accepts the bet. A marriage ceremony is completely void if one of the parties does not say, "I do," but instead says, "Well, maybe I should think about this for a while."

3. *Must the (a) speaker or (b) audience hold any special position or role in order for the speaker to perform the speech act?*

Sometimes a speech act will come off only if it is performed by someone with an official position. We have already seen that, for someone to make two people husband and wife by pronouncing them husband and wife, that person must hold a certain official position. Similarly, even if a body is plainly dead when it arrives at the hospital, a janitor cannot pronounce it dead on arrival. That is the job of a doctor or a coroner. In the same way, although a shortstop can perform the linguistic act of *shouting*, "You're out," a shortstop cannot perform the speech act of *calling* someone out. Only an umpire can do that. Moreover, even an umpire cannot call out the catcher or a spectator, so sometimes the audience of the speech also needs to have some special position.

4. *Are any other special circumstances required for the speech act?*

Most speech acts also involve assumptions or presuppositions that certain *facts* obtain. A father cannot bequeath an antique car to his son if he does not own such a car. You cannot resign from the American Civil Liberties Union or the Veterans of Foreign Wars if you are not a member. These special circumstances might sometimes include the audience's desires. In promising someone to do something, for example, we usually do so in the belief that the person *wants* us to do it. For example, I will promise to drive someone to the airport only if I believe that person wants to go the airport and would like me to drive her there. Sometimes, however, we do promise to do things a person does not want done. I can promise to throw someone out if he doesn't behave himself. Here, however, I am making a threat, not a promise. Different answers to this question, thus, reveal differences among speech acts.

5. *What feelings, desires, or beliefs is the speaker expected to have?*

If we apologize for something, we are expected to feel sorry for what we have done. If we congratulate someone, we are usually supposed to be pleased with that person's success. If we state something, we are expected

to believe what we say. In all these cases—in apologizing, congratulating, and stating—if the speaker lacks the expected feelings, desires, or beliefs, the speaker still does succeed in performing the speech act, but that speaker and speech act are subject to criticism. In this respect, this rule differs from the preceding rules. Those preceding rules reflected conventions that must be satisfied for the speech act to come off (for it not to be void). In contrast, the person who says, "I apologize," has apologized even if he or she does not feel sorry. The speech act does come off and is not void, even though the apology can be criticized as insincere.

6. *What general purpose or purposes are served by this kind of speech act?*

This final question asks why a certain kind of speech act exists at all. Why, for example, is there the speech act of promising? That is a rather complicated question, but the primary reason for the institution of promising is that it helps people coordinate their activities. People who make promises place themselves under an obligation to do something. When promises are contractual, this obligation is a legal obligation. Promise making, then, increases the confidence we can have that someone will do what they said they will do, and, for legal promises at least, provides remedies when they do not. To cite another example of the purpose of a speech act, apologizing expresses regret for harming or insulting someone. One of its purposes is to normalize relations between the speaker and the person harmed or insulted.

Answering the six questions listed above for a particular kind of speech act is called giving a *speech act analysis*. For example, here is a brief speech act analysis of "to appoint," as in, "I appoint you to the judiciary committee":

1. Appointments are usually made by using the word "appoint," but other words can be used as well; for example, "name" and "designate" can also be used to do this job. You cannot, however, say, "I wish you were on the judiciary committee."
2. Sometimes further actions by others are necessary for an appointment to come off. Perhaps ratification is needed. Before ratification, the word "nominate" is often used. In such cases, only after the nomination is ratified has the appointment been made. Usually the appointment does not come off if the person declines the appointment.
3. Normally, someone who appoints a person to something must have the *power* to make such appointments. For example, Queen Elizabeth II does not have the power to appoint the commissioner of baseball.
4. This speech act presupposes a wide variety of facts, for example, that a position exists, that the person appointed to it is eligible for this appointment, and so on.
5. Appointments are often made with the belief that the person appointed will do a good job. This is not always the case, however, as appointments are made for all sorts of different reasons—rewarding an important supporter, for example.

6. An important purpose of an appointment is to explicitly designate someone to play a particular role. For example, it is often important to know who is in charge. It can also be important that the person who gains this role does so through regular, authorized procedures.

## EXERCISE V

Give a speech act analysis of the ten verbs below by writing two or three sentences in response to each of the six questions above. Speech act analyses can go on much longer, but your goal here is just to bring out the most interesting features of the speech act named by each verb.

1. to bet
2. to promise
3. to congratulate
4. to state
5. to apologize
6. to deny
7. to vote
8. to give up (in a fight)
9. to thank
10. to invite

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine that an actor on stage during a modern play screams, "Fire! No, I really mean it. " The audience realizes that he is just acting, so they laugh. Then the actor sees a real fire behind the stage out of view of the audience. The actor again screams, "Fire! No, I really mean it. *Fire*!" Which speech act, if any, does the actor perform in uttering these words the second time? Why? What does this show about speech acts?
2. *Do* the speech acts in which people get married presuppose that the people who are getting married are of different sexes? *Should* these speech acts presuppose this fact? Why or why not?
3. The importance of deciding what kind of speech act has been performed is illustrated by a classic case from the law of contracts, *Hawkins v. McGee*.[6] McGee performed an operation on Hawkins that proved unsuccessful, and Hawkins sued for damages. He did not sue on the basis of malpractice, however, but on the basis of breach of contract. His attorney argued that the doctor initiated a contractual relationship in that he tried to persuade Hawkins to have the operation by saying things such as "I will guarantee to make the hand a hundred percent perfect hand." He made statements of this kind a number of times, and Hawkins finally agreed to undergo the operation on the basis of these remarks. Hawkins's attorney maintained that these exchanges, which took place in the doctor's office on a number of occasions, constituted an offer of a contract that Hawkins explicitly accepted. The attorney for the surgeon replied that these words, even if uttered, would not constitute an offer of a contract, but merely

*(continued)*

expressed a *strong belief,* and that reasonable people should know that doctors cannot guarantee results.

It is important to remember that contracts do not have to be written and signed to be binding. A proper verbal offer and acceptance are usually sufficient to constitute a contract. The case, then, turned on two questions: (1) Did McGee utter the words attributed to him? In other words, did McGee perform the *linguistic act* attributed to him? The jury decided that he did. (2) The second, more interesting question was whether these words, when uttered in this particular context, amounted to an offer of a contract, as Hawkins's attorney maintained, or merely were an expression of strong belief, as McGee's attorney held. In other words, the fundamental question in this case was what kind of *speech act* McGee performed when trying to convince Hawkins to have the operation.

Explain how you would settle this case. (The court actually ruled in favor of Hawkins, but you are free to disagree.)

## CONVERSATIONAL ACTS[7]

In examining linguistic acts (saying something meaningful in a language) and then speech acts (doing something in using words), we have largely ignored some central features of language: It is usually—though not always—a *social* activity that takes place among people. It is also normally a *practical* activity with certain goals. We use language in order to inform people of things, get them to do things, amuse them, calm them down, and so on. We can capture these social and practical aspects of language by introducing the notion of a *conversational exchange,* that is, a situation where various speakers use speech acts in order to bring about some effects in each other. We will call this act of using a speech act to cause a standard effect in another a *conversational act*.

Suppose, for example, Amy says to Bobbi, "Someone is following us." In this case, Amy has performed a linguistic act; that is, she has uttered a meaningful sentence in the English language. Amy has also performed a speech act—specifically, she has *stated* that they are being followed. The point of performing this speech act is to produce in Bobbi a particular belief—namely, that they are being followed. (Amy's utterance might also have other purposes, such as to alert Bobbi to some danger, but it accomplishes those other purposes by means of getting Bobbi to believe they are being followed.) If Amy is successful in this, then Amy has successfully performed the conversational act of producing this belief in Bobbi. Amy, of course, might fail in her attempt to do this. Amy's linguistic act could be successful and her speech act successful as well, yet, for whatever reason, Bobbi might not accept as true what Amy is telling her. Perhaps Bobbi thinks that Amy is

paranoid or just trying to frighten her as some kind of joke. In that case, Amy failed to perform her intended conversational act, even though she did perform her intended linguistic and speech acts.

Here are some other examples of the difference between performing a speech act and performing a conversational act:

We can *warn* people about something in order to *put them on guard* concerning it.
Here warning is the speech act; putting them on guard is the intended conversational act.

We can *urge* people to do things in order to *persuade* them to do these things.
Here urging is the speech act; persuading is the intended conversational act.

We can *assure* people concerning something in order to *instill confidence in them*.
Here assuring is the speech act; instilling confidence is the intended conversational act.

We can *apologize* to people in order to *make them feel better about us.*
Here apologizing is the speech act; making them feel better about us is the intended conversational act.

In each of these cases, our speech act may not succeed in having its intended conversational effect. Our urging, warning, and assuring may, respectively, fail to persuade, put on guard, or instill confidence. Indeed, speech acts may bring about the opposite of what was intended. People who brag (a speech act) in order to impress others (the intended conversational act) often actually make others think less of them (the actual effect). In many ways like these, we can perform a speech act without performing the intended conversational act.

The relationship between conversational acts and speech acts is confusing, because both of them can be performed at once by the same utterance. Suppose Carl says, "You are invited to my party." By means of this single utterance, he performs a linguistic act of uttering this meaningful sentence, a speech act of inviting you, and perhaps also a conversational act of getting you to come to his party. Indeed, he would not be able to perform this conversational act without also performing such a speech act, assuming that you would not come to his party if you were not invited. He would also not be able to perform this speech act without performing this linguistic act or something like it, since he cannot invite you by means of an inarticulate grunt or by asking, "Are you invited to my party?"

As a result, we cannot sensibly ask whether Carl's utterance of "You are invited to my party" is a linguistic act, a speech act, or a conversational act. That single utterance performs all three acts at once. Nonetheless, we can distinguish those kinds of acts that Carl performs in terms of the verbs that describe the acts. Some verbs describe speech acts; other verbs describe

conversational acts. We can tell which verbs describe which kinds of acts by asking whether the verb passes the thereby test (in which case the verb describes a speech act) or whether, instead, it describes a standard effect of the utterance (in which case the verb describes a conversational act).

### EXERCISE VI

Indicate whether the verbs in the following sentences name a speech act, a conversational act, or neither. Assume a standard context. Explain your answers.

1. She *thought* that he did it.
2. She *asserted* that he did it.
3. She *convinced* them that he did it.
4. She *condemned* him in front of everyone.
5. She *challenged* his integrity.
6. She *embarrassed* him in front of them.
7. He *denied* doing it.
8. They *believed* her.
9. They *encouraged* him to admit it.
10. She *told* him to get lost.
11. He *praised* her lavishly.
12. His praise *made* her happy.
13. He *threatened* to reveal her secret.
14. He *submitted* his resignation.
15. Her news *frightened* him half to death.
16. He *advised* her to go into another line of work.
17. She *blamed* him for her troubles.
18. His lecture *enlightened* her.
19. His jokes *amused* her.
20. His book *confused* her.

## CONVERSATIONAL RULES

Just as there are rules that govern linguistic acts and other rules that govern speech acts, so too there are rules that govern conversational acts. This should not be surprising, because conversations can be complicated interpersonal activities in need of rules to make them effective in attaining their goals. These underlying rules are implicitly understood by users of the language, but the philosopher Paul Grice was the first person to examine them in careful detail.

We can start by examining standard or normal conversational exchanges where conversation is a cooperative venture—that is, where the people involved in the conversation have some common goal they are trying to achieve in talking with one another. (A prisoner being interrogated and a shop owner being robbed are *not* in such cooperative situations.) According to Grice, such exchanges are governed by what he calls the *Cooperative Principle*. This principle states that the parties involved should use language in a way that contributes toward achieving their common goal. It tells them to cooperate.[8]

This general principle gains more content when we consider other forms of cooperation. Carpenters who want to build a house need enough nails

and wood, but not too much. They need the right kinds of nails and wood. They also need to put the nails and wood together in the relevant way—that is, according to their plans. And, of course, they also want to perform their tasks quickly and in the right order. Rational people who want to achieve common goals must follow similar general restrictions in other practical activities. Because cooperative conversations are one such practical activity, speakers who want to cooperate with one another must follow rules analogous to those for carpenters.

Grice spells out four such rules. The first he calls the rule of *Quantity*. It tells us to give the right amount of information. More specifically:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

and possibly:

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Here is an application of this rule: A person rushes up to you and asks, "Where is a fire extinguisher?" You know that there is a fire extinguisher five floors away in the basement, and you also know that there is a fire extinguisher just down the hall. Suppose you say that there is a fire extinguisher in the basement. Here you have said something true, but you have violated the first part of the rule of Quantity. You have failed to reveal an important piece of information that, under the rule of Quantity, you should have produced. A violation of the second version of the rule would look like this: As smoke billows down the hall, you say where a fire extinguisher is located on each floor, starting with the basement. Eventually you will get around to saying that there is a fire extinguisher just down the hall, but you bury the point in a mass of unnecessary information.

Grice's second rule is called the rule of *Quality*. In general: Try to make your contribution one that is true. More specifically:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

In a cooperative activity, you are not supposed to tell lies. Beyond this, you are expected not to talk off the top of your head either. When we make a statement, we can be challenged by someone asking, "Do you really believe that?" or "Why do you believe that?" That a person has the right to ask such questions shows that statement making is governed by the rule of Quality.

In a court of law, witnesses promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The demand for *nothing but the truth* reflects the rule of Quality. The demand for *the whole truth* roughly reflects the rule of Quantity. Obviously, nobody really tells every truth he or she knows. Here the *whole* truth concerns all the known truths that are relevant in the context.

This brings us to our next rule, the rule of *Relevance*. Simply stated, the rule of Relevance says:

Be relevant!

Though easy to state, the rule is not easy to explain, because relevance itself is a difficult notion. It is, however, easy to illustrate. If someone asks me where he can find a doctor, I might reply that there is a hospital on the next block. Though not a direct answer to the question, it does not violate the rule of Relevance because it provides a piece of useful information. If, however, in response I tell the person that I like his haircut, then I have violated the rule of Relevance. Clear-cut violations of this principle often involve *changing the subject*.

Another rule concerns the manner of our conversation. We are expected to be clear in what we say. Under the general rule of *Manner* come various special rules:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

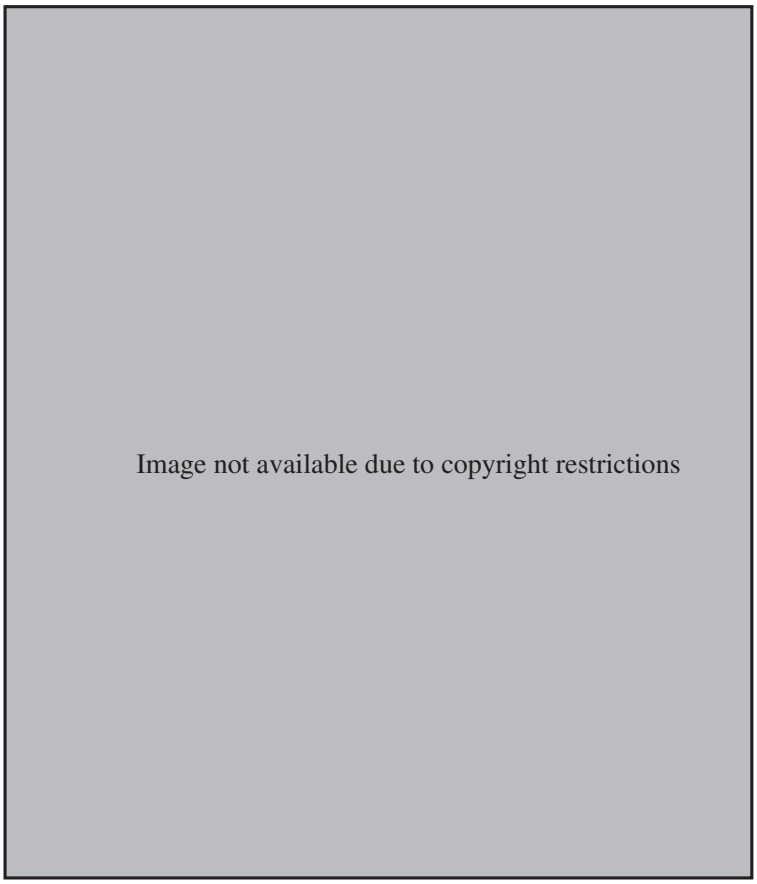
As an example of the fourth part of this rule, when describing a series of events, it is usually important to state them in the order in which they occurred. It would certainly be misleading to say that two people had a child and got married when, in fact, they had a child after they were married.

Many other rules govern our conversations. "Be polite!" is one of them. "Be charitable!" is another. That is, we should put the best interpretation on what others say, and our replies should reflect this. We should avoid quibbling and being picky. For the most part, however, we will not worry about these other rules.

### EXERCISE VII

Indicate which, if any, of Grice's conversational rules are violated by the italicized sentence of each of the following conversations. Assume a standard context. More than one rule might be violated.

1. "What did you get on the last test?" "*A grade.*"
2. "Did you like her singing?" "*Her costume was beautiful.*"
3. "*The governor has the brains of a three-year-old.*"
4. "*The Lone Ranger rode into the sunset and jumped on his horse.*"
5. "*Without her help, we'd be up a creek without a paddle.*"
6. "Where is Palo Alto?" "*On the surface of the Earth.*"
7. "*It will rain tomorrow.*" "How do you know?" "I just guessed."
8. "*Does the dog need to go out for a W-A-L-K* [spelled out]?"
9. "Why did the chicken cross the road?" "*To get to the other side.*"
10. Psychiatrist: "You're crazy." Patient: "I want a second opinion." Psychiatrist: "Okay. *You're ugly,* too."




## CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATION

In a normal setting where people are cooperating toward reaching a shared goal, they often conform quite closely to Grice's conversational rules. If, on the whole, people did not do this, we could not have the linguistic practices we do. If we thought, for example, that people very often lied (even about the most trivial matters), the business of exchanging information would be badly damaged.

Still, people do not always follow these conversational rules. They withhold information, they elaborate needlessly, they assert what they know to be false, they say the first thing that pops into their heads, they wander off the subject, and they talk vaguely and obscurely. When we observe actual conversations, it is sometimes hard to tell how any information gets communicated at all.

The explanation lies in the same conversational rules. Not only do we usually follow these conventions, we also (1) implicitly realize that we are following them, and (2) expect others to assume that we are following them. This mutual understanding of the commitments involved in a conversational act has the following important consequence: People are able to convey a great deal of information without actually saying it.

A simple example will illustrate this point. Again suppose that a person, with smoke billowing behind him, comes running up to you and asks,

"Where's a fire extinguisher?" You reply, "There's one in the lobby." Through a combination of conversational rules, notably relevance, quantity, and manner, this commits you to the claim that this is the closest, or at least the most accessible, fire extinguisher. Furthermore, the person you are speaking to assumes that you are committed to this. Of course, you have not actually *said* that it is the closest fire extinguisher; but you have, we might say, *implied* this. When we do not actually say something but imply it by virtue of a mutually understood conversational rule, the implication is called a *conversational implication*.

It is important to realize that conversational implication is a pervasive feature of human communication. It is not something we employ only occasionally for special effect. In fact, virtually every conversation relies on these implications, and most conversations would fall apart if people refused to go beyond literal meanings to take into account the implications of saying things. In the following conversation, *B* is literal-minded in just this way:

**A:** Do you know what time it is?

**B:** Not without looking at my watch.

*B* has answered *A*'s question, but it is hard to imagine that *A* has received the information she was looking for. Presumably, she wanted to know what time it was, not merely whether *B*, at that very moment, knew the time. Finding *B* rather obtuse, *A* tries again:

**A:** Can you tell me what time it is?

**B:** Oh, yes, all I have to do is look at my watch.

Undaunted, *A* gives it another try:

**A:** Will you tell me what time it is?

**B:** I suppose I will as soon as you ask me.

Finally:

**A:** What time is it?

**B:** Two o'clock. Why didn't you ask me that in the first place?

Notice that in each of these exchanges *B* gives a direct and accurate answer to *A*'s question; yet, in all but the last answer, *B* does not provide *A* with what *A* wants. Like a computer in a science-fiction movie, *B* is taking *A*'s questions too literally. More precisely, *B* does nothing *more* than take *A*'s remarks literally. In a conversational exchange, we expect others to take our remarks in the light of the obvious purpose we have in making them. We expect them to share our commonsense understanding of why people ask questions. At the very least, we expect people to respond to us in ways that are *relevant* to our purposes. Except at the end, *B* seems totally oblivious to the point of *A*'s questions. That is what makes *B* unhelpful and annoying.

Though all the conversational rules we have examined can be the basis of conversational implication, the rule of Relevance is particularly powerful in this respect. Normal conversations are dense with conversational implications

that depend on the rule of Relevance. Someone says, "Dinner's ready," and that is immediately taken to be a way of asking people to come to the table. Why? Because dinner's being ready is a transparent *reason* to come to the table to eat. This is an ordinary context that most people are familiar with. Change the context, however, and the conversational implications can be entirely different. Suppose the same words, "Dinner's ready," are uttered when guests have failed to arrive on time. In this context, the conversational implication, which will probably be reflected in an annoyed tone of voice, will be quite different.

To cite another example of context dependence, if someone says, "I broke a finger," people will naturally assume that it is the speaker's own finger that was broken. Why? Because when people break fingers, it is almost always their own fingers that they break. That is the standard context in which this remark is made. If, however, we shift the context, that conversational implication can be lost and another can take its place. Suppose the speaker is a mobster in an extortion racket, that is, someone who physically harms people who do not pay protection money. Among his fellow extortionists, the conversational implication of "I broke a finger" is likely to be that it was someone who refused to pay up who had his finger broken. (We can imagine the extortionist canceling this implication by saying, "No, no, it was *my* finger that got broken when I slugged the guy.")

### Exercise VIII

Assuming a natural conversational setting, what might a person intend to conversationally imply by making the following remarks? Briefly explain why each of these conversational implications holds; that is, explain the relationship between what the speaker *literally* says and what the speaker intends to convey through conversational implication. Finally, for each example, find a context where the standard conversational implication would fail and another arise in its place.

1. It's getting a little chilly in here. (Said by a visitor in your home)
2. Do you mind if I borrow your pen? (Said to a friend while studying)
3. We are out of soda. (Said by a child to her parents)
4. I got here before he did. (Said in a ticket line)
5. Don't blame me if you get in trouble. (Said by someone who advised you not to do it)
6. Has this seat been taken? (Said in a theater before a show)
7. These sweet potatoes are very filling. (Said when the cook asks if you want more)
8. Don't ask me. (Said in response to a question)
9. Does your dog bite? (Said to a man standing next to a dog)
10. I will be out of town that day. (Said in response to a party invitation)

## VIOLATING CONVERSATIONAL RULES

If we look at basic conversational rules, we notice that these rules sometimes clash, or at least push us in different directions. The rule of Quantity encourages us to give as much information as possible, but this is constrained by the rule of Quality, which restricts our claims to things we believe to be true and can back up with good reasons. The demands of the rule of Quantity can also conflict with the demand for brevity. In order to be brief, we must sometimes simplify and even falsify, and this can come into conflict with the rule of Quality, which demands that we say only what we believe to be true. Sometimes it is not important to get things exactly right; sometimes it is. An ongoing conversation can be a constant series of adjustments to this background system of rules.

Because conversational rules can come into conflict with one another, speakers can sometimes *seem* to be violating the Cooperative Principle by violating one of its maxims. This can happen when one conversational rule is overridden by another. Grasping the resolution of such a conflict can generate interesting conversational implications. This may sound complicated, but an example from Grice should make it clear. Suppose *A* tells *B*, "I'm planning to visit *C*; where does he live?" *B* replies, "Somewhere in the south of France." If *A* is interested in visiting *C*, then *B*'s reply really does not give her the information she needs and thus seems to violate the first part of the rule of Quantity. We can explain this departure on the assumption that *B* does not know *exactly* where *C* lives and would thus violate the rule of Quality if he said anything more specific. In this case, *B*'s reply conversationally implies that he does not know exactly where *C* lives.

In a more extreme case, a person may even *flout* one of these conventions, that is, may openly violate a conversational rule without, as in the previous example, there being any other conversational rule that overrides it. Here is an adaptation of one of Grice's examples and his explanation of it:

> *A* is writing a letter of recommendation about one of his students who is applying to law school, and the letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir: Mr. *X*'s command of English is excellent, and his attendance in class has been regular. Yours, etc." (Gloss: *A* cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the person is his student; moreover, he knows that more information is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is only tenable on the assumption that he thinks that Mr. *X* is not a good student. This, then, is what he is implicating.)

This is a case of *damning with faint praise*. Faint praise can be damning because, under the first part of the rule of Quantity, it conversationally implies that no stronger praise is warranted.

We can intentionally violate the rule of Relevance by pointedly changing the subject. Here is variation on another one of Grice's examples:

> Standing outside a classroom, *A* says, "Professor *X* is a moron." There is a moment of shocked silence; then *B* says, "Nice day, isn't it?"

*A* would have to be fairly dim not to realize that Professor *X*, whom he has just called a moron, may be somewhere nearby. Why else would *B* reply in such an irrelevant manner? So in saying, "Nice day, isn't it?" *B* conversationally implies that Professor *X* is nearby.

Winston Churchill reportedly provided a famous example of intentionally violating the rule of Manner. When criticized for ending a sentence with a preposition, he is said to have replied, "That is the type of criticism up with which I will not put."

### EXERCISE IX

These sentences appeared in Exercise VII. For each, explain what the speaker is conversationally implying and how that conversational implication is generated.

1. "What did you get on the last test?" "*A grade*."
2. "Did you like her singing?" "*Her costume was beautiful.*"
3. "*The governor has the brains of a three-year-old.*"
4. "*Does the dog need to go out for a W-A-L-K* [spelled out]?"

### EXERCISE X

For each of the following paired questions and answers, what do the answers conversationally imply in a normal context? Explain why these conversational implications hold. (Try to rely on the content of what is said, rather than on the tone of voice in which it is uttered. In particular, don't think of these remarks being uttered with heavy sarcasm.)

1. Are you going to vote for a Republican? I just might.
2. Are you going to vote for a Republican? You can bet on it.
3. Are you going to vote for a Republican? Not unless hell freezes over.
4. Are you going to vote for a Republican? Don't be silly.
5. Are you going to vote for a Republican? I am voting for an independent.
6. Are you going to vote for a Republican? There is no other choice.
7. Did you vote for a Republican? Maybe yes, maybe no.
8. Did you vote for a Republican? I voted for the winner.


## RHETORICAL DEVICES

Many rhetorical devices work by flouting conversational rules in order to generate conversational implications. Consider exaggeration. When someone claims to be hungry enough to eat a horse, it does not dawn on us to treat this as a literal claim about how much she can eat. To do so would be to attribute to the speaker a blatant violation of Grice's first rule of Quality—namely, do not say what you believe to be false. Consequently, her audience will naturally interpret her remark figuratively, rather than literally. They will assume that she is exaggerating the amount she can eat in order to conversationally imply that she is very hungry. This rhetorical device is called *overstatement* or *hyperbole*. It is commonly employed, often in heavy-handed ways.

We sometimes use the opposite ploy and attempt to achieve rhetorical effect by *understating* things. We say that something is pretty good or not too bad when, as all can see, it is terrific. In these cases the speaker is violating something akin to the rule of Quantity. He is not saying just how good something really is. He expects his audience to recognize this and say (inwardly, at least) something like this: "Oh, it is much better than that." Understatement is often used as a way of fishing for compliments.

Sometimes, then, we do not intend to have others take our words at face value. Even beyond this, we sometimes expect our listeners to interpret us as claiming just the *opposite* of what we assert. This occurs, for example, with *irony* and *sarcasm*. Suppose at a crucial point in a game, the second baseman fires the ball ten feet over the first baseman's head, and someone shouts, "Great throw." Literally, it was not a great throw; it was the opposite of a great throw, and this is just what the person who says "Great throw" is indicating. How do the listeners know they are supposed to interpret it in this way? Sometimes this is indicated by tone of voice. A sarcastic tone of voice usually indicates that the person means the opposite of what he or she is saying. Even without the tone of sarcasm, the remark "Great throw" is not likely to be taken literally. The person who shouts this knows that it was not a great throw, as do the people who hear it. Rather than attributing an obviously false belief to the shouter, we assume that the person is blatantly violating the rule of Quality to draw our attention to just how bad the throw really was.

Metaphors and similes are perhaps the most common forms of figurative language. A *simile* is, roughly, an explicit figurative comparison. A word such as "like" or "as" makes the comparison explicit, and the comparison is figurative because it would be inappropriate if taken literally. To say that the home team fought like tigers does not mean that they clawed the opposing team and took large bites out of them. To call someone as dumb as a post is not to claim that they have no brain at all.

With a *metaphor,* we also compare certain items, but without words such as "like" or "as." Metaphorical comparisons are still figurative because the vocabulary, at a literal level, is not appropriate to the subject matter. George Washington was not literally the father of his country. Taken literally, it hardly makes sense to speak of someone fathering a country. But the metaphor is so natural (or so familiar) that it does not cross our minds to treat the remark literally, asking, perhaps, who the mother was.

Taken literally, metaphors are usually obviously false, and then they violate Grice's rule of Quality. Again, as with irony, when someone says something obviously false, we have to decide what to make of that person's utterance. Perhaps the person is very stupid or a very bad liar, but often neither suggestion is plausible. In such a situation, sometimes the best supposition is that the person is speaking metaphorically rather than literally.

Not all metaphors, however, are literally false. In John Donne's Meditation XVII, "No man is an island" is literally true. We treat this remark as a metaphor because, taken literally, it is so obviously and boringly true that we cannot imagine why anyone would want to say it. Taken literally, it would make no greater contribution to the conversation than any other irrelevant, obvious truth—for example, that no man is a socket wrench. Taken literally, this metaphor violates the rule of Relevance and, perhaps, the second part of the rule of Quantity. Taken figuratively, it is an apt, if somewhat overworked, way of indicating that no one is isolated and self-contained.

### Exercise XI

Here are some more true metaphors. Explain what they mean and how they work.

1. "Blood is thicker than water."
2. "Cream rises to the top."
3. "People who live in glass houses should not throw stones."
4. Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" begins, "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood."
5. China's Chairman Mao Tse-tung is reported to have said, "A revolution is not the same as inviting people to dinner, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing fancy needle-work."
6. Cuba's Fidel Castro is supposed to have said, "A revolution is not a bed of roses. A revolution is a struggle between the future and the past." (Is this different from item 5?)

### EXERCISE XII

Identify each of the following sentences as irony, metaphor, or simile. For each sentence, write another expressing its literal meaning.

1. He missed the ball by a mile.
2. He acted like a bull in a china shop.
3. The exam blew me away.
4. He had to eat his words.
5. It was a real team effort. (Said by a coach after his team loses by forty points.)
6. They are throwing the baby out with the bathwater.
7. The concert was totally awesome.
8. A midair collision can ruin your whole day.
9. This is a case of the tail wagging the dog.
10. "Religion is the opiate of the masses." (Marx)

### EXERCISE XIII

Metaphors do not appear only in statements. They also appear in imperatives. For example, "Don't rock the boat" can be employed literally in a context where someone is moving around in a canoe in a way that could tip it. It can also be used metaphorically to tell someone not to do something that will cause a fuss. For each of the following metaphors, find a context where the imperative can be used in its literal way and another context where it is used metaphorically.

1. Keep your eye on the ball.
2. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.
3. Look before you leap.
4. Make hay while the sun shines.
5. Don't count your chickens before they hatch.
6. Don't change horses in midstream.

### EXERCISE XIV

Unpack the following political metaphors by giving their literal content.

1. We can't afford a president who needs on-the-job training.
2. It's time for people on the welfare wagon to get off and help pull.
3. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.
4. We need to restore a level playing field.
5. The special interests have him in their pockets.
6. The bill was passed through typical horse trading.
7. He's a lame duck.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A classic example of rhetoric occurs in Marc Antony's funeral oration in William Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar* (act III, scene ii). Brutus and other conspirators had killed Julius Caesar. At Caesar's funeral, Brutus first argued that they needed to kill Caesar to prevent him from becoming too powerful and taking away the freedoms of Roman citizens. Brutus concludes, "As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice in it; as he was valiant, I honor him. But as he was ambitious, I slew him." On the other side, Marc Antony sees Brutus as a traitor, but Brutus now has power, so Antony does not dare to call Brutus a traitor openly. The central part of Antony's speech is reprinted below. Indicate which lines are ironic, and comment on any other rhetorical devices in this speech. Why was it so effective (and famous) as a speech?

   Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
   He was my friend, faithful and just to me.
   But Brutus says he was ambitious,
   And Brutus is an honorable man.
   He hath brought many captives home to Rome,
   Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill.
   Did this in Caesar seem ambition?
   When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept—
   Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.
   Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
   And Brutus is an honorable man.
   You all did see that on the Lupercal
   I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
   Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?
   Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
   And, sure, he is an honorable man.
   I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
   But here I am to speak what I do know.
   You all did love him once, not without cause.
   What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?

2. At the start of the U.S. war with Iraq in 2003, some described Iraq as another Vietnam, while others described Saddam Hussein (Iraq's president) as another Hitler. Which metaphor was used by supporters of the war? Which was used by opponents? How can you tell? How do these metaphors work?

## DECEPTION

In the preceding examples, a speaker openly violates a conversational rule. The listeners recognize that a rule is being intentionally broken, and the

speaker knows that the listeners recognize the violation. At other times, however, speakers intentionally break conversational rules because they are trying to mislead their listeners. A speaker may violate the first part of Grice's rule of Quality by uttering something she knows to be false with the intention of producing a false belief in her listeners. That is called *lying*. Notice that lying depends on the general acceptance of the Cooperative Principle. Because audiences generally assume that speakers are telling the truth, speakers can sometimes get away with lying.

Flat-out lying is not the only way (and often not the most effective way) of intentionally misleading people. We can say something literally true that, at the same time, conversationally implies something false. This is sometimes called making a *false suggestion.* If a son tells his parents that he "has had some trouble with the car," that could be true but deeply misleading if, in fact, he had totaled it. It would be misleading because it would violate the rule of Quantity. In saying only that he has had some trouble with the car, he conversationally implies that nothing very serious happened. He conversationally implies this because, in this context, he is expected to come clean and reveal all that actually happened.

A more complex example of false suggestion arose in a lawsuit that reached the United States Supreme Court.

## BRONSTON V. UNITED STATES

**(409 U.S. 352, 1973)**

*MR. CHIEF JUSTICE BURGER delivered the opinion of the Court:*

Petitioner's perjury conviction was founded on the answers given by him as a witness at that bankruptcy hearing, and in particular on the following colloquy with a lawyer for a creditor of Bronston Productions:

**Q.** Do you have any bank accounts in Swiss banks, Mr. Bronston?

**A.** No, sir.

**Q.** Have you ever?

**A.** The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

**Q.** Have you any nominees who have bank accounts in Swiss banks?

**A.** No, sir.

**Q.** Have you ever?

**A.** No, sir.

It is undisputed that for a period of nearly five years, between October 1959 and June 1964, petitioner had a personal bank account at the International Credit Bank in Geneva, Switzerland, into which he made deposits and upon which he drew checks totalling more than $180,000. It is likewise undisputed that petitioner's answers were literally truthful. (i) Petitioner did not at the time of questioning have a Swiss bank account. (ii) Bronston

Productions, Inc., did have the account in Zurich described by petitioner. (iii) Neither at the time of questioning nor before did petitioner have nominees who had Swiss accounts. The government's prosecution for perjury went forward on the theory that in order to mislead his questioner, petitioner answered the second question with literal truthfulness but unresponsively addressed his answer to the company's assets and not to his own—thereby implying that he had no personal Swiss bank account at the relevant time.

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It is hard to read the witness's response to the second question in any other way than as a deliberate attempt to mislead the Court, for his response plainly suggests that he did not have a personal account in a Swiss bank, when, in fact, he did. But the issue before the Court was not whether he intentionally misled the Court, but whether in doing so he committed perjury. The relevant statute reads as follows:

> Whoever, having taken an oath before a competent tribunal . . . that he will testify . . . truly, . . . willfully and contrary to such oath states or subscribes to any material matter which he does not believe to be true, is guilty of perjury.
>
> (18 U.S.C. 1621)

The lower courts ruled that Bronston violated this statute and, thus, committed perjury. The Supreme Court reversed this decision, in part for the following reasons:

> It should come as no surprise that a participant in a bankruptcy proceeding may have something to conceal and consciously tries to do so, or that a debtor may be embarrassed at his plight and yield information reluctantly. It is the responsibility of the lawyer to probe; testimonial interrogation, and cross-examination in particular, is a probing, prying, pressing form of inquiry. If a witness evades, it is the lawyer's responsibility to recognize the evasion and to bring the witness back to the mark, to flush out the whole truth with the tools of adversary examination.
>
> (409 U.S. 352 at 358–359 [1973])

In other words, in a courtroom, where the relationship is typically adversarial rather than cooperative, not all the standard conversational rules are in force or fully in force. In particular, it would be unrealistic to assume that the rule of Quantity will be consistently honored in a courtroom clash; therefore, it becomes the task of the cross-examiner to force the witness to produce all the relevant facts.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Refer back to the dialogue quoted in *Bronston v. United States*. Because it is difficult to read the witness's second response as anything but a willful attempt to deceive, why should this case be treated differently from lying? Alternatively, why not even drop the demand that witnesses tell the truth and make it the responsibility of the lawyers to get at the truth itself (rather than just the whole truth) through "probing, prying, pressing" inquiry?

## SUMMARY

In this chapter we have developed a rather complex picture of the way our language functions. In the process, we have distinguished three kinds or levels of acts that are performed when we employ language. We have also examined the rules associated with each kind or level of act. The following table summarizes this discussion:

**THREE LEVELS OF LANGUAGE**

| Kinds of Acts | Governing Rules |
|---|---|
| A LINGUISTIC ACT is an act of saying something meaningful in a language. It is the basic act that is needed to make anything part of language. | Semantic rules (such as definitions) and syntactic rules (as in grammar). |
| A SPEECH ACT concerns the move a person makes *in* saying something. Different kinds of speech acts are indicated by the various verbs found in explicit performatives. | Speech act rules about special agents, formulas, circumstances, responses, and feelings appropriate to different kinds of speech acts, discovered by speech act analysis. |
| A CONVERSATIONAL ACT is a speaker's act of causing a standard kind of effect in the listener; it is what I do *by* saying something—for example, I persuade someone to do something. | Conversational rules (the Cooperative Principle; Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner). |

### EXERCISE XV

1. It is late, and *A* is very hungry. *A* asks *B,* "When will dinner be ready?" Describe the linguistic act, the speech act, and some of the conversational acts this person may be performing in this context.
2. Someone is trying to solve the following puzzle: One of thirteen balls is heavier than the others, which are of equal weight. In no more than three weighings on a balance scale, determine which ball is the heavier one. The person is stumped, so someone says to her: "Begin by putting four balls in each pan of the scale." Describe the linguistic act, the speech act, and the conversational act of the person who makes this suggestion.

## NOTES

[1] J. L. Austin used the phrase "locutionary act" to refer to a level of language closely related to what we refer to as a "linguistic act." See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 94–109.

[2] See, for example, J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words.*

[3] An example of the continuous present is "I bet ten dollars every week in the lottery." Since this sentence is not used to make a bet, this sentence and others with the continuous present do not pass the thereby test or express explicit performatives.

[4] Austin calls speech acts "illocutionary acts." See *How to Do Things with Words,* 98–132.

[5]Although performative verbs name kinds of speech acts, not every kind of speech act has a corresponding performative verb. For example, insulting seems to be a kind of speech act, but "insult" is not a performative verb, because you cannot insult someone simply by saying, "I insult you." We might have had a convention that enabled us to insult people just by saying, "I insult you." In English, however, we do not.

[6]Supreme Court of New Hampshire, 1929, 84 N.H. 114, A. 641.

[7]This discussion of conversational rules and implications is based on Paul Grice's important essay, "Logic and Conversation," which appears as the second chapter of his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). To avoid British references that an American reader might find perplexing, we have sometimes altered Grice's wording.

[8]Grice states the Cooperative Principle in these words: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."