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Objective requirements of speech acts and the structure of conversation

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Abstract: This commentary argues that, although the Austinian theory of speech acts does not by itself provide a comprehensive model of conversational dynamics, it can nevertheless illuminate important aspects of conversational structure when integrated with conversational analysis. Building on Marina Sbisà's notion of objective requirements, I claim that speech-act types are defined not only by felicity conditions but also by standards of objective assessment, which determine how conversational moves may be challenged and thereby reveal participants' uptake. Through analyses of three examples discussed by Stephen Levinson, I show that notions such as felicity conditions, objective requirements, uptake, and perlocutionary objects help explain double-barrelled conversational turns, proposal–challenge relations, and the recognition of unvoiced requests within conversational interaction.

Keywords: speech acts; conversational analysis; objective requirements; uptake; conversational structure

In “Why speech acts can’t be reduced to matters of context change”, Stephen Levinson (this volume) claims that “a model combining a theory of common ground with an Austinian account of speech acts, each with their felicity conditions,” does not “amount to a satisfactory account of conversational contributions” (p. 13). He argues that “the actual conduct of conversation doesn’t look Austinian” (p. 17) and that John L. Austin’s (1975) theory of linguistic practice, which is a product of philosophical reflection, requires re-elaboration within the empirically informed framework of conversational analysis, which identifies different categories of interactional moves construed as recognisable social actions performed within conversational sequences. According to Levinson, this framework enables us to account for the following four characteristic features of conversational discourse, which seem to defy speech act-theoretic description: (i) most, if not all, conversational turns are double-barrelled, with some of their functions being difficult to describe in terms of indirect speech acts; (ii) actions performed in conversational turns are not

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represented in the natural-language inventory of illocutionary verbs and nouns; (iii) most conversations are highly structured, involving nested and embedded contributions; and (iv) quite often, conversational participants address not the actions actually performed by their interlocutors, but unvoiced plans these actions manifest or render recognizable.

Levinson's diagnosis is largely correct. The Austinian theory of speech acts is neither fundamental nor universal, in the sense that it does not offer a ground-level framework within which we can adequately describe and explain key phenomena germane to conversation. Its actual goal is more modest: we use it to account for the discursive mechanisms responsible for bringing about changes in the network of normative relations between the participants in social life (Heal 2013; Sbisà 2002, 2009; Witek 2022). The range of contextual factors relative to which our utterances are evaluable as felicitous and correct illocutionary acts – as well as the range of factors that these acts serve to modify – is relatively narrow. Crucially, these factors can be singled out by reference to speech act rules and norms, including felicity conditions and other standards of assessment, and represented by means of a limited, precisely defined set of score parameters (Sbisà 2002, 2019; Witek 2015). To arrive at a more comprehensive model of our discursive practices, then, we need to integrate elements of the Austinian theory into the framework of conversational analysis, which enables us to examine speech acts as they occur within naturally unfolding conversational interaction.

However, the contribution that speech act theory may make to our understanding of conversation activity is somewhat greater than Levinson seems to envisage. At least in some cases, the speech act-theoretic framework can help us better understand the sequential structure of a conversational discourse as it is outlined by conversational analysis. Crucially, Austinian speech-act types are defined not only in terms of felicity conditions, but also in terms of what Marina Sbisà calls objective requirements: “standards of assessment (specific to each illocutionary act type) that the speech act performed should meet, irrespective of the perspective of the participants, in order to qualify as correct (or proper, or good, or if suitable, true)” (Sbisà 2019: 24). In this commentary, I focus on three conversational examples discussed by Levinson and argue that a promising way to account for their structure and dynamics is to take into account both the felicity conditions and the objective requirements of their constituent moves. The results of my analyses suggest that the Austinian framework may have a role to play in accounting for at least some of the phenomena identified in (i)–(iv).

Let me begin with a brief discussion of the idea of *objective requirements*. In Lecture XI, “Statements, Performatives, and Illocutionary Force”, John L. Austin argues that not only felicitous statements, but also other illocutionary acts, when *successfully* performed – or, as he puts it, *accomplished* – are subject to objective

assessment that has “something to do in complicated ways with facts” (Austin 1975: 142). For instance, we assess praises and congratulations as merited or unmerited, acts of blaming as justified or unjustified, warnings as correct or incorrect, and pieces of advice as good or bad. Generally, each of these speech acts can be evaluated by considering whether – given its content and force, as well as certain objective features of the situation in which it is performed – it constitutes the *right* or *correct* conversational move to make. As Marina Sbisa notes, such an evaluation is not merely a matter of the speaker’s beliefs, “but also, and primarily, [of] how the world actually is” (Sbisa 2019: 32).

In sum, types of illocutionary acts can be defined not only by reference to their felicity conditions, but also by reference to their characteristic objective requirements: the specific ways in which their rightness depends on facts. What is more, the objective requirements that apply to a given speech act by virtue of its type determine how this act can be challenged, that is, how its rightness can be questioned or contested by the speaker’s conversational partner. Accordingly, the way in which conversational partner *P* challenges speaker *S*’s conversational move reveals *P*’s uptake and, as a result, helps conversational analysts identify the type of action performed by *S*. Generally, it enables us to better understand the mechanisms shaping the structure of the conversation under scrutiny.

Let us use the framework outlined above to examine three examples – (1), (4), and (8) – discussed by Stephen Levinson: namely, the dispute between Virginia and her mother over a pocket-money raise, the exchange between a shopkeeper and a customer wishing to buy a bottle of Mich, and the phone conversation between a bank manager and one of their acquaintances, respectively. Each of these interactions involves a request made by one participant, followed by a challenge produced by another, the challenge addressing part of what the rightness of the request requires.

Before going into the details of these analyses, however, let me first consider the conditions under which one can perform a felicitous and correct – that is, justified and feasible – request. (I use ‘feasible’ to refer to actions whose performance lies within the addressee’s power and control.) Roughly, a request is felicitous only if (a) the speaker believes that she would benefit from the hearer’s performing the requested action and (b) it is not obvious to both the speaker and the hearer that the hearer will perform this action in the normal course of events; failure of either condition renders the purported request infelicitous. It is objectively correct and justified – that is, the right request to make – only if (c) the speaker deserves or is entitled to the requested benefit; otherwise, the request, though felicitous, is incorrect and unjustified, and not the right illocution to perform. Moreover, it is objectively feasible only if (d) the performance of the requested action lies within the limits of the hearer’s power or, in other words, that there are no objective obstacles

that would render such performance impossible. Importantly, requirement (d) has its *subjective* – or, as Harnish (2005) would put it, *internalist* – counterpart: the condition that (e) the speaker believes the requested action to be within the limits of the hearer's power. Points (a), (b), and (e) identify three felicity conditions for requesting, which Searle (1969) would characterize as preparatory. Requirements (c) and (d), in turn, correspond to two standards of objective assessment to which each felicitous request is subject. Crucially, the question of whether an utterance is correct *qua* request – that is, justified and feasible – arises only if it is a felicitous illocution of that type.

Let us consider exchange (1). In saying “I think \$10 would be good”, Virginia performs an action that conversational analysts call a *proposal*. This proposal, in turn, is *challenged* by Mom in her utterance “Just to throw away?”. In short, the structure of exchange (1) involves a proposal followed by a challenge. One may ask, however, what constitutes the intuitively felt relation between these two conversational turns. In other words, what makes Mom's utterance of “Just to throw away?” a challenge to Virginia's proposal? In my view, a promising way to address this question is to describe the exchange within the speech act-theoretic framework. Viewed from the Austinian perspective, Virginia's utterance of “I think \$10 would be good” constitutes an *upward* request – that is, a request addressed to someone occupying a higher social position. This utterance is preceded by a question suggesting that Virginia believes that her request is feasible, thereby indicating that one of the felicity conditions on requesting – namely, condition (e) – is satisfied. Moreover, Mom's utterance of “Just to throw away?” counts as a challenge to Virginia's request in that it suggests that Virginia does not deserve the raise and that, as a result, her request is incorrect and unjustified in the light of requirement (c). Accordingly, Mom's challenge manifests her uptake: the fact that she takes Virginia's proposal to constitute a request.

Importantly, the speech act-theoretic framework does not, as such, provide a sufficient basis for describing and explaining exchange (1). However, it enables us to put forth at least three hypotheses that may help us better understand the structure and dynamics of the exchange. First, the turns “I think \$10 would be good” and “Just to throw away?” are double-barrelled: the former counts both as a proposal and an upward request, whereas the latter functions both as a challenge to the proposal and a negative evaluation of the rightness of the request. Second, Mom's utterance of “Just to throw away?” questions the objective rightness of Virginia's utterance of “I think \$10 would be good” understood as a request, thereby manifesting Mom's uptake of Virginia's speech act. Third, what underlies the observed proposal-challenge relation between these two turns is the fact that they implement two complementary moves in an illocutionary game: making a request and undermining its rightness.

Let us now focus on exchange (4). The point of B's question "Are you twenty one?" is to determine whether A's utterance satisfies one of the objective requirements – namely, requirement (c) – imposed on acts of requesting. In other words, by asking this question, B manifests that they take A's opening turn to constitute a request. Contrary to what Stephen Levinson seems to suggest (p. 14f.), then, it is the second turn of this exchange, not the fourth, that provides the Austinian uptake of the opening turn. In other words, even hierarchically structured exchanges allow us to play what Levinson calls the *Austinian ping-pong*: "the stately exchange of well-formulated speech acts" (p. 17).

Finally, consider exchange (8), which in certain respects resembles the well-known *Garage* scenario discussed by Grice (1989: 32): in each case, the point of speaker A's opening turn – "My car is stalled" and "I'm out of petrol", respectively – is to signal the problem the speaker is facing and thereby express the perlocutionary goal behind the utterance. Speaker A in exchange (8) intends their acquaintance to help them to get to the bank by giving them a ride. Analogously, speaker A in the *Garage* scenario intends speaker B to assist them in finding petrol for their car. Importantly, each of these goals can be described as the "perlocutionary object" (Austin 1975: 118) of requesting, namely, the response that an illocution "invites by convention" (Austin 1975: 117) qua an act of requesting. Moreover, by saying "but I have gotta leave in about 5 min", speaker B in exchange (8) signals that the unvoiced but discernible request made by speaker A fails to satisfy requirement (d), that is, that the requested action is not feasible. In doing so, B provides uptake: they manifest their understanding of the force and meaning of A's conversational contribution.

To conclude, even though the Austinian theory of speech acts, as such, does not provide a sufficient basis for explaining conversational dynamics, elements of the Austinian framework – namely, notions such as "felicity conditions", "objective requirements", "uptake", and "perlocutionary object" – enable us to shed light on some of the sequential phenomena identified by conversational analysts.

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