

## Speech acts and speech events

Speakers do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words, they perform actions via those utterances.

Examples:

*You're fired. You're welcome. It's so delicious.*

Actions performed via utterances are generally called **speech acts** (e.g. compliments, expressions of surprise, complaints, invitations, apologies, promises). Descriptive terms for different kinds of speech acts apply to the speaker's communicative intention in producing an utterance. The speaker expects that his/her communicative intention will be recognized by the hearer. They are both helped in this process by the circumstances surrounding the utterance. These circumstances, including other utterances, are called the **speech event**. It is the speech event that determines the interpretation of an utterance as performing a particular speech act, as in:

*This tea is really cold!* (a wintry day vs. a really hot summer's day)

On any occasion, the action performed by producing an utterance consists of three related acts:

### locutionary act

The act of producing a meaningful linguistic expression.

### illocutionary act

While forming an utterance we have a certain kind of function in mind. The IA is performed via the communicative force of an utterance, which is generally known as **the illocutionary force** of the utterance (what it 'counts as', e.g. offer, invitation)

Speakers do not create utterances with functions without intending them to have an effect. They assume that their hearers will recognize the effect intended. This third dimension is

### perlocutionary act

Speakers utter something on the assumption that hearers will recognize the effect intended. This is generally known as **the perlocutionary effect**.

1. *I've just made some coffee.*

The same locutionary act (see Example 2a) can count as a prediction, a promise, or a warning (different illocutionary forces).

2a. *I'll see you later.* (=U)

b. (I predict that) U.

c. (I promise you that) U.

d. (I warn you that) U.

The most obvious device for indicating the illocutionary force is an expression of the type shown in Example 3 below where there is a slot for a verb that explicitly names the illocutionary act being performed. Such a verb can be called **performative verb** (Vp). Compare with the verb *predict*, *promise* and *warn* above in Examples 2abcd.

Example 3: *I (Vp) you that ...*

Example 4: Him: *Can I talk to Mary?*

Her: *No, she's not here.*

Him: *I'm asking you can I talk to her?*

Her: *And I'm telling you SHE'S NOT HERE!*

### felicity conditions

certain expected or appropriate circumstances for the performance of the speech act to be recognized as intended

Examples 5a: *I sentence you to six months in prison.*

5b: *I now pronounce you husband and wife.*

Examples 5ab are not appropriate if the speaker is not e.g. a judge in a courtroom.

**felicity conditions - general conditions** (e.g. speakers understand the language) - **content conditions** (e.g. a promise is a future act of the speaker) - **preparatory conditions** (e.g. with a promise, the event will not happen by itself and it will have a beneficial effect) - **sincerity conditions** (e.g. for a promise, the speaker genuinely intends to carry out the future action) - **essential conditions** (e.g. the utterance changes the speaker's state from non-obligation to obligation)

### **the performative hypothesis**

assumption that underlying every utterance (U) there is a clause containing a **performative verb (Vp)** which makes the illocutionary force explicit

the basic format of the underlying clause is shown in

Example 6:

**I (hereby) Vp you (that) U**

Examples:

7a. *Clean up this mess!*

b. *I hereby order you that you clean up this mess.*

8a. *The work was done by Mary and myself.*

b. *I hereby tell you that the work was done by Mary and myself.*

**Explicit performatives** are shown in Examples 7b and 8b above, whereas **implicit (primary) performatives** are in Examples 7a and 8a above.

### **speech event**

an activity in which participants interact via language in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome. It contains a central speech act that may include other utterances leading up to and subsequently reacting to that central action.

#### **Example of a speech event:**

Him: *Oh, Mary, I'm glad you're here.*

Her: *What's up?*

Him: *I can't get my computer to work.*

Her: *Is it broken?*

Him: *I don't think so.*

Her: *What's it doing?*

Him: *I don't know. I'm useless with computers.*

Her: *What kind is it?*

Him: *It's Mac. Do you use them?*

Her: *Yeah.*

Him: *Do you have a minute?*

Her: *Sure.*

Him: *Oh, great.*

The above conversation may be called a 'requesting' speech event without a central speech act of request. The analysis of speech events is clearly another way of studying **how more gets communicated than is said**.