Survey article

SPEECH ACT THEORY: THE STATE OF THE ART[1]

Stephen C. Levinson

University of Cambridge, England

0. Introduction

Of all the issues in the theory of language usage, speech act theory has probably aroused the most general interest; psychologists, for example, have suggested that the acquisition of speech acts may be a prerequisite for the acquisition of language in general (see e.g. Bruner, 1975; Bates, 1976), literary critics have looked to speech act theory for an illumination of textual subtleties (see e.g. Levin, 1976; Ohmann, 1971) philosophers have seen potential applications to, for example, the status of ethical statements (see e.g. Searle, 1969: ch. 8); and linguists have seen the notions of speech act theory as explicating problems in syntax (see e.g. Sadock, 1974), semantics (see e.g. Fillmore, 1971) and second language learning (see e.g. Jakobovitz & Gordon, 1974) and elsewhere. Meanwhile in linguistic pragmatics, speech acts remain, together with presupposition and implicature, one of the focal phenomena that any pragmatic theory must account for.

Given this widespread interest, there is an enormous technical literature on the subject, especially in linguistics and philosophy; it would be impossible adequately to reference this literature in an article of this size, and the devotee of speech act theory is directed to the excellent bibliographical listings in Gazdar, Klein and Pullum (1978). What is attempted here is simply a sketch of the historical developments and a laying out of some of the crucial issues, together with a prognosis for future developments.[2]

1. Thesis: speech acts are irreducible to matters of truth and falsity

The origins of speech act theory are philosophical, and the basic distinctions still employed are due to Austin (1962). Austin's doctrines are so well known that the briefest résumé will suffice. He distinguished between different kinds of acts one does in speaking: *locutionary* acts (the acts one does in uttering a sentence with determinable sense and reference), *perlocutionary* acts (the acts one does *through* saying something, the intended or unintended consequences of what one says, where these are intuitively not part of the conventional meaning of the utterance), and the *illocutionary* acts (the intended and conventional use of specific kinds of utterance types, for example, the use of 'I promise to *x*' to promise that the speaker will do *x*). The term 'speech act' has

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come to designate exclusively the latter kind of act; there remains though a sometimes misleading equivocation over whether, for example, *promising* is a speech act, or *promising that x* is a speech act. Austin noted that speech act types can be characterised in terms of their 'felicity conditions', that is the specifications of the way that the context has to be in order for a particular utterance of a speech act type to come off successfully.

We are now in a position to state Austin's basic thesis: illocutionary force (more loosely speech act specification like promising, christening, ordering, questioning, requesting and the like) is not reducible to matters of truth and falsity. That is, illocutionary force constitutes an aspect of meaning, broadly construed, that cannot be captured in a truth conditional semantics. Rather, illocutionary forces are to be described in terms of felicity conditions (henceforth FCs), interpreted as conditions for appropriate usage.

Austin's final position was that all sentences have an illocutionary component to their meaning, including assertions which only *appear* to be adequately described simply in terms of the conditions under which they are true (this final position is to be contrasted to an earlier one in which he toyed with a distinction between *performatives* – utterances endowed with illocutionary force – and *constatives* (assertions and the like) without such force; q.v. Austin, 1962, 1970, 1971). He noted that a distinction or at least a gradient could be noted between *explicit* performatives and *implicit* performatives, where the former have the syntactic form 'I hereby V_{perf} you (that) S'', S' is a complement sentence (of a sometimes restricted sort), and V_{perf} is a verb drawn from the demarcated set of performative verbs in the language, and conjugated in the simple present indicative active. Thus 'I promise to come on Tuesday', 'I permit you to vote for me', 'I tell you that China will go to war' are all explicit performatives, whereas 'I'll come on Tuesday for sure', 'You can vote for me', and 'China will go to war' are all implicit performatives. Austin believed that insight into the basic functions that language performs could come from a typology of the 3000-odd performative verbs that he estimated to be in the language.

Searle (1965, 1969, 1975, 1976, *in press*) has been responsible for an influential systematisation of Austin's ideas. For example, he has proposed a general typology of FCs, in terms of *preparatory* conditions (having to deal with real-world prerequisites), *sincerity* conditions (having to do with the speaker's sincere intentions), and *propositional content* conditions (having to do with restrictions on S' above: for example, for promises S' must be a future voluntary action by the speaker). More importantly, he has suggested a simple typology of possible speech acts based on FCs instead of, in Austin's manner, on performative verbs. On the basis of this, Searle (1976) claims that there are just five basic kinds of things that language can do.[3] Finally, Searle has claimed that the reduction of the illocutionary aspect of meaning

to usage conditions can be promoted to a general theory of semantics, a claim that Austin seems to have been careful to avoid. There are many objections to such a theory and the reader is referred to the discussion in Kempson, 1977, for some of them; we shall continue here to be interested in a theory of speech acts solely as a theory of illocutionary force.

Although Searle's name is as much associated with speech acts as Austin's, the basic approach remains thoroughly Austinian; indeed it may be argued that Searle's systematisation is responsible for the loss of some of the social and interactional insights to be found in Austin's work. In any case, *thesis* as a theory that proposes to handle illocutionary force in an entirely pragmatic way, using the notion of necessary and sufficient conditions (FCs) on appropriate usage, is a position identified with both Austin and Searle in particular.

2. Antithesis: The reduction of illocutionary force to syntax and semantics

Directly opposed to Thesis is a position that we may call Antithesis: according to Antithesis there is no need for a special theory of illocutionary force because the phenomena that taxed Austin are assimilable to standard theories of syntax and truth-conditional semantics.

The opening move here is to attack Austin's handling of explicit performatives. Basic to Austin's theory is the claim that 'I bet you sixpence' is simply not assessed, or sensibly assessable, in terms of truth and falsity: you either did or did not manage to bet successfully, and that depends on whether the FCs were met or not. To this early on there were strong dissenters (see e.g. Hedenius, 1963; Lemmon, 1962): why not claim instead that simply by uttering sentences of that sort the speaker makes them true? There seems to be nothing incoherent with this view held generally for explicit performatives; for example, if you say 'I order you to desist from breaking the rules' then what you have said is true – you have so ordered. Whatever Austin thought of as usage conditions for *bet*, *order* and the like are simply part of the meaning of those words.

To generalise the attack on Thesis, we may then bring in the *performative analysis* to handle implicit performatives. According to this hypothesis, which we may refer to as the PH (for performative hypothesis), every sentence has as its highest clause in deep or underlying structure a clause of the form 'I hereby V_{pert} you (that) S'' – that is a structure that corresponds to the overt prefix in the explicit performative, even if the sentence in question is in fact an implicit performative. Such an analysis can be put forward on what seem to be plausible independent grounds, namely that it captures a number of syntactic generalisations that would otherwise be lost (see Ross, 1970; Sadock,

1974). The syntactic arguments are of two major kinds. The first uses anaphoric processes along the following lines: some constituent x of a subordinate clause is licensed by another constituent y in the matrix clause, such that without y the presence of x will be blocked by syntactic processes. We now turn to some implicit performatives and find some xs in the matrix clause, unlicensed by an overt y. Either our generalisation about the y-dependency of x is wrong, or there is in fact a covert y in underlying structure. We then show that if the PH is assumed, i.e. there is a higher implicit performative clause, then there would in fact be a y in a higher clause, and our generalisation can be preserved. For example, in (1) the reflexive *himself* seems to be licensed by the anaphor *Carter*:

(1) Carter said that solar energy was invented by God and himself

but the *myself* in (2) seems to lack any anaphor.

(2) Solar energy was invented by God and myself.

Note that such usages are restricted – third person reflexives are unacceptable (at least at the beginning of a discourse);

(3) *Solar energy was invented by God and himself.

Therefore (2) seems puzzling; the puzzle disappears, according to PH, if we note that (4) is acceptable for just the same reasons (1) is, and if we claim that in fact (2) is derived from (4) by a regular process of performative clause deletion:

(4) I say to you that solar energy was invented by God and myself.

Another major kind of argument is based on the fact that there appear to be adverbs that modify performative clauses appearing in sentences without such overt performative clauses, as in (5) and (6):

(5) Frankly I prefer the white meat.
(6) What's the time, because I've got to go out at eight?

where a natural interpretation is that in (5) *frankly* is an adverb on the implicit 'I tell you' performative prefix, and in (6) the *because* clause is an adverb on 'I ask you'. For a discussion see Davison, 1975; Sadock, 1974; Lyons, 1977: 782 ff, and Boër & Lycan, 1978.

Armed with the PH, Antithesis theorists may now claim that they have a complete reduction of speech act theory to matters of syntax and truth-conditional semantics. That every sentence has an 'illocutionary force' is accounted for by the guaranteed presence of an underlying or overt performative clause, which has the peculiar property of being true simply by virtue of being said (hence the intuition that it makes no sense to consider its falsity). The particular 'felicity conditions' on different speech acts are simply part of the meaning of the implicit or explicit performative verbs, capturable in terms of entailment or semantic presupposition (see e.g. Lewis, 1972; and especially Lakoff, 1975). The

basic result is that illocutionary force is 'garden variety semantics' (Lakoff, 1972: 655).

3. Collapse of Antithesis

Antithesis is clearly an elegant theory, promising to reduce what seems to be an apparently irreducibly pragmatic aspect of meaning to relatively well understood areas of linguistic theory. However, it is now all but certain that Antithesis (at least in its full form) is untenable. For it runs into unsurmountable difficulties on both the semantic and the syntactic fronts.

Amongst the semantic problems are these. Although a widely held belief is that truth-conditional semantics cannot deal with non-assetoric utterances, using the PH and the notion that performative sentences are verified simply by their use, such a semantics handles non-assertions without too much difficulty. Paradoxically enough where the problems arise is with assertions and declaratives. Consider for example (7):

(7) I state to you that the world is flat.

On the normal Antithesis assumption, such a sentence will have the value *true* simply by virtue of being uttered. Also by Antithesis, (8) will have as its underlying form something corresponding closely to (7):

(8) the world is flat.

Ex hypothesi (7) and (8) should have the same truth conditions, so (8) will also be true just in case the speaker so speaks. But clearly such an argument amounts to a *reductio ad absurdam*. For whatever our intuitions about (7), (8) is, given the way the world is, simply false. (See Lewis, 1972, for the full argument).

To this difficulty Lakoff (1975) had a response. Let us say that an assertion is true if, and only if, both the performative clause and its complement clause are true. However, the response lands one in further difficulties (as Gerald Gazdar pointed out to me in personal communication). Consider (9):

(9) I stated to you that the world is flat.

Here it is sufficient for the truth of (9) simply that I did so state. Hence the non-performative usages (as in (9)) of performative verbs like *state* seem to have different truth-conditions from the performative usages of the same verb. But in that case, we have in fact *failed* to reduce performative usages to straightforward applications of uniform semantical procedures.

There are further difficulties. Take, for examples, the reduction of FCs to aspects of the meaning of the performative verbs they are associated with. It soon becomes clear that the relevant aspects of

meaning cannot be truth-conditional. Consider, for example, (10), or its corresponding implicit performative version (11):

  (10) I request you to please close the door.
  (11) please close the door

Due to an explicit or implicit verb of requesting, these would have the FC in (12):

  (12) The door is not closed (or will not be closed at the time the request is complied with).

If (12) was an entailment from (10) or (11), simply by virtue of the meaning of *request*, then (13) should entail (14), and (15) be a contradiction. Again, these are the wrong results, and by *reductio* we must abandon the assumption that FCs can be captured truth-conditionally as part of the semantics of the verbs in question.

  (13) John requested Bill to close the door.
  (14) At the time the action was to be carried out, the door was not closed.
  (15) John requested Bill to close the door, but it was already closed.

(One might try to assimilate FCs to the category of pragmatic presuppositions, but not all FCs would so assimilate – see Rogers (1978) – and in any case the properties of FCs are far too general to be attributed to the meanings of particular lexical items).

Finally, even if it turned out that performative sentences, implicit and explicit, could be simply handled within a truth conditional framework, some of the basic intuitions that underlay Austin's work would still not have been accounted for. For the notion of illocutionary force was specifically directed to the action-like properties of utterances, and these would in no way be captured by such a treatment. For essentially an utterance like (16) would not be treated as basically different in kind from (17); both would be reports of events, but the first would simply be concurrent with the utterance:

  (16) I bet you sixpence I'll win the race.
  (17) I betted you sixpence that I'd win the race.

Our sense is that there is something over and above a mere concurrent report in (16), which is curiously lacking in (18).

  (18) I am betting you sixpence I'll win the race.

That utterances have action-like properties is clear from observations like the following: some utterances (e.g. requests, promises) have actions as rule-governed consequences; actions can substitute for many utterances and vice versa (consider, for example, the utterances accompanying a small purchase in a shop); some utterances do rely, as Austin insisted, on elaborate non-linguistic arrangements, tieing into

sequences of actions (consider christening a ship, performing a marriage service, etc.). Finally Austin correctly attached some importance to what he called *illocutionary uptake*; what he had in mind was that if I utter (16) in such a way that you fail to hear, it is fairly clear that (17) would be false as a report of what had transpired. It seems therefore that in order for a speech act to 'come off', it is ordinarily required that the addressee(s) may be supposed to have heard, registered and in some cases (like (16)) responded to what has been said (exceptions are things like curses, invocations, blessings, perhaps).

In addition to these semantic incoherencies and inadequacies, the PH required by Antithesis is assailed by syntactic problems. We can do no more than indicate the scope of these here, and the reader is referred to Anderson, 1971; Fraser, 1974; Gazdar, 1976; Leech, 1976 for further detail. But here is a sample of the problems. First, as Austin himself noted, there are many cases where explicit performatives do not refer to the speaker, as in (19) and (20):

(19) The company hereby undertakes to idemnify all genuine errors.
(20) It is herewith disclosed that the value of the estate left by Marcus T. Bloomingdale was $4,000,768.48.

and others where the addressee is not the 'illocutionary target' (as Fillmore, 1975 makes the distinction), for example (21):

(21) Johnny is to come in now.

However such examples were handled they would considerably complicate the PH. Further problems involve the fact that many sentences seem to involve more than one illocutionary force (see Lakoff, 1974 for discussion), for example:

(22) Does John, who could never learn the calculus, really intend to do a Ph.D in mathematics?

where a non-restrictive relative clause is clearly assetoric in force despite being embedded in a question; or:

(23) Harry is an Englishman, isn't he?

where the tag modifies the assetoric force of the declarative. It is possible to hypothesise sources for such sentences consisting of two conjoined speech acts, such that, for example, (24) get an analysis along the lines of (25) (Sadock, 1970; but see Green, 1975):

(24) Why don't you become an astronaut?
(25) I ask you why you don't become an astronaut and I suggest that you do.

but clearly a better paraphrase is something of the sort:

(26) I ask you why you don't become an astronaut and if you can think of no good reasons, I hereby suggest you do.

Yet clearly (26) is not *syntactically* related to (24). There therefore seem
to be distinct limits to the extent to which one can hope for illocutionary
force to be syntactically mirrored.

However, the major syntactic objections to the PH are these. Firstly,
it would require an otherwise atypical and unmotivated rule of per-
formative clause deletion in the majority of cases (for all implicit
performatives); and much more complex unmotivated rules to deal with
the cases (22)–(24). Secondly, and this is the crucial point, exactly the
same reasoning that led to the positing of the performative clause in the
first place leads to arguments that undermine it. For example, the same
anaphoric arguments that were discussed above as motivations for the
performative analysis, lead to the conclusion that there must in fact be
a clause still higher than the performative clause, and thence one still
higher than that, and so on *ad infinitum*. Finally, as we shall indicate
when we come to talk of *indirect speech acts*, the syntactic mechanisms
that are required to handle those phenomena are powerful enough to
entirely replicate the effects of the PH without actually having per-
formative clauses (see Sadock, 1975).

For all these reasons, and others, it seems inescapable that Antithesis
collapses as an adequate theory of illocutionary force. It fails both on
internal grounds, because it leads to semantic and syntactic incoher-
encies, and on external grounds because it fails to capture the basic
intuitions that led to the theory of speech acts in the first place. The
collapse of Antithesis leaves Thesis unassailed. However there are
reasons to doubt the adequacy of Thesis too, and there is at least one
elegant alternative way of thinking about speech acts. Before proceeding
to it, let us discuss a substantial phenomenon that is a serious problem
for both Thesis and Antithesis as they are classically put forward.

4. Indirect speech acts: a problem for Thesis and Antithesis

A major problem for both Searle's approach (Thesis) and PH (Antith-
esis) is constituted by the phenomenon known as *indirect speech acts* (or
ISAs for short). The notion only makes sense if one subscribes to the
notion of a *literal* force, i.e. the view that illocutionary force is built into
sentence form. Let us call this the *literal force hypothesis* (LFH). LFH
will amount to subscribing to the following:[4]

(*a*) explicit performatives have the force named by the performative
verb overt in the matrix clause;

(*b*) the three major sentence types in English, imperative, interrog-
ative and declarative, have the forces traditionally associated with them,
namely ordering, questioning and stating respectively.

It is clear that Antithesis theorists have to subscribe to LFH by virtue
of their commitment to PH (wherein the three basic sentence types will
be reflexes of underlying performatives verbs of ordering, questioning
and stating). However Thesis theorists are also committed to LFH in

so far as they think they are engaged in a semantical exercise characterising the meaning of 'illocutionary force indicating devices', which clearly include (a) and (b) above. Certainly Searle is overtly committed to LFH, and Austin's emphasis on the 'conventional' nature of illocutionary force and its indicators seems also to commit him to LFH.

Given the LFH, any sentence that fails to have the force associated with it by rule (a) and (b) is a problematic exception, and the standard line is to claim that, contrary to first intuitions, the sentence does in fact have the rule-associated force as its *literal* force, but simply has in addition an inferred *indirect* force. Thus any usages other than those by (a) or (b) are ISAs.

The basic problem that then arises is that *most* usages are indirect. For example, we could construct an indefinitely long list of ways of requesting an addressee indirectly to shut the door; for example:

(27) a. I want you to close the door.
　　　　 I'd be much obliged if you'd close the door
　　　 b. Can you close the door?
　　　　 Are you able by any chance to close the door?
　　　 c. Would you close the door?
　　　　 Won't you close the door?
　　　 d. Would you mind closing the door?
　　　　 Would you be willing to close the door?
　　　 e. You ought to close the door
　　　　 It might help to close the door
　　　　 Hadn't you better close the door?
　　　 f. May I ask you to close the door?
　　　　 Would you mind awfully if I was to ask you to close the door?
　　　　 I am sorry to have to tell you to please close the door
　　　 g. Did you forget the door?
　　　　 Do us a favour with the door love
　　　　 How about a bit less breeze
　　　　 Now Johnny, what do big people do when they come in?
　　　　 Okay, Johnny, what am I going to say?

Given that the primary function of each of these could, in the right circumstances, amount to a request to close the door, the LFH theorist has to devise some way of deriving their request force from sentence forms that (according to rule (b) above) are prototypically assertions and questions rather than imperatives. Two basic kinds of theory have been proposed to rescue LFH, what we may call *idiom* theory and *inference* theory.

According to idiom theories, the 'indirectness' in many putative cases of ISAs is really only apparent. Forms like those in (27)a. through (27)d. are in fact all *idioms* for, and semantically identical to, 'I hereby request you to close the door', in just the same way that *kick the can* is an idiom for *die* (i.e. they are not compositionally analysed, but merely

entered whole in the lexicon with the appropriate semantic equivalence). As a point in their favour, idiom theorists can point to some ways in which the alleged idioms behave syntactically like their corresponding non-idiomatic direct expression. For example, just as one can insert the highly restricted pre-verbal *please* in 'I hereby request you to please close the door', so one can in (27)a–d. On the idiom theory the syntactic constraint can be simply captured: pre-verbal *please* can be inserted just in case there is a verb of requesting in the highest clause of the underlying structure or semantic representation (the actual mechanisms involved are dependent, of course, on views of the relations between syntax and semantics).

Idiom theory has been seriously and energetically maintained, especially by Sadock (1974, 1975).[5] However, there are overwhelming problems for it. Firstly, responses to utterances like those in (27) can attend to both the 'literal force' (i.e. that signalled by the sentence form) and the alleged idiomatic force, as in (28):

(28) A: Can you please lift that suitcase down for me?
      B: Sure I can; here you are.

This suggests at least that both readings are simultaneously available and utilised. Secondly, the argument that idiom theory is the only way to get the syntax right for phenomena like pre-verbal *please* has the embarrassment that whenever there's a grammatical reflex of indirect force, idiom theorists must claim an idiom. It follows that almost every sentence with preverbal *please* must be an idiom with requesting force, e.g. those sentences in (29):

(29) I'd like to ask you to please X.
      May I remind you to please X.
      Would you mind if I asked you to please X.
      I am sorry that I have to tell you to please X.

Unfortunately this list seems to be of indefinite length, so if we are to treat these forms as idioms for 'I request you to X', the lexicon will have to contain an indefinite number of such forms. But lexicons are strictly finite, and this suggests that forms like those in (29) are not really idioms at all.

Thirdly, idiom theory suggests that there should be a vast comprehension problem. Forms like 'Can you VP, 'Will you VP' will each be n-ways ambiguous. How does a listener know what's meant? In effect there will have to be a powerful pragmatic theory to get you from what is said to what is meant; but if that is needed anyway we don't need idiom theory at all, because we will in effect have an inference theory (see below). Similarly, since idiom theory could at most handle cases like (27)a–d (and not e–f), we would need an independent inference theory to get the rest of the ISAs, in which case again we could use it to do what idiom theory does.

Finally, idioms are by definition non-compositional and therefore as idiosyncratic to speech communities as lexical items. However, most of the basic ISA structures translate across languages, and where they don't it is usually for good semantic or cultural reasons (see Brown & Levinson, 1978). So this constitutes *prima facie* evidence that ISAs are not idioms.

We are left with inference theories as the only way of maintaining LFH. The basic tack here is to claim that ISAs have the literal force associated with the surface forms by rules (*a*) and (*b*) above; so 'Can you VP' has the literal force of a question; it may also in addition have the conveyed or indirect force of a request – this by virtue of an inference made taking context into account. One can think of the additional indirect force variously as a perlocution, a Gricean implicature, or an additional conventionally specified illocution.

There are a number of distinct inference theories but they share the following properties:

(i) the literal meaning and the literal force of an utterance is computed by and available to participants;

(ii) there must be an inference-trigger, that is, some indication that the literal meaning and force are conversationally inadequate in the context and must be 'repaired' by some inference;

(iii) there must be specific principles or rules of inference that derive indirect force;

(iv) there must be pragmatically sensitive linguistic rules, that allow, for example, *please*-insertion to be governed by indirect force.

The first such inference theory was that proposed by Gordon and Lakoff (1975, (1971)). In that theory, property (i) was met by assuming the PH; while the trigger in (ii) was provided whenever the literal force of an utterance was blocked by the context, i.e. did not go through. For property (iii), some specific inference rules were offered, 'conversational postulates', modelled on Carnap's meaning postulates (which state analytic equivalences not captured elsewhere in a semantical system) but with reference to contextual factors. Thus there would be a rule that stated that to say 'Can you VP' (or anything that expressed the same concepts) in a context in which a question reading was blocked, would be equivalent to saying 'I request you to VP'. So far this was merely a descriptive enterprise, but Gordon and Lakoff went on to note a compact generalisation: to state or question a FC on a speech act (with some restrictions), where the literal force of such a statement or question is blocked, counts as performing that speech act. Such a general principle elegantly captures the kinds of examples of ISAs illustrated in (27)a–d. Thus the a. examples are statements of the sincerity condition on requests, that one sincerely want what one requests; the b. examples are questionings of the ability (preparatory) condition on requests, that one believes that the addressee has the ability to do the thing requested; the c. examples are questionings of the propositional

content condition on requests, that the propositional content be a future
act of the addressee's; and the d. examples are questionings of the FC
that distinguishes requests from orders or demands, that the speaker
believes that the addressee might not mind doing the act requested (here
see Heringer, 1972).

The success of this general principle in predicting ISAs across
languages is very satisfying; it is important to note, though, that it does
not predict (27)e–g. Moreover the general principle makes the
'conversational postulates' redundant, for there will be no need for
such specific idiosyncratic rules of inference to be individually learned.

Finally, to handle property (iv), Gordon and Lakoff suggested the use
of 'context-sensitive transderivational constraints'. Transderivational
constraints were rules proposed in Generative Semantics that allowed
one derivation to be governed by reference to another, and could thus
be used to block, for example, certain ambiguities (see Lakoff, 1973).
These could now be used to govern processes like *please*-insertion in
indirect requests by references to the parallel derivation of the explicit
performative or direct request. Thus 'Can you please pass the salt' is
not blocked, just because one can also insert a *please* before the verb
in 'I request you to please pass the salt', a sentence related by a
conversational postulate (a context-sensitive rule of interpretation).

However, there appear to be serious problems with such rules. In the
first place, they appear to belong to the now defunct framework of
Generative Semantics. This turns out to be remediable; they can
equally well be stated as pragmatic filtering conditions on syntactic
strings as shown by Gazdar and Klein (1977). More problematic is a
methodological objection: such rules are so powerful that they are
undermine, for example, all the arguments for the PH (see Sadock,
1975). It is arguable, though, that the elimination of the PH is a
desirable result, as we have tried to show above.

Another version of inference theory is suggested by Searle (1975).
Property (i) will be handled by his version of speech act theory; property
(ii), the trigger requirement, will be provided by Grice's theory of
conversational co-operation (Grice, 1975) – here though the literal force
will not be blocked but will be judged inadequate alone, requiring an
additional inferred force; and property (iii), the inference principles,
will be provided by Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature.
Since the latter is a general theory of pragmatic inference, this approach,
unlike Gordon and Lakoff's, proposes to assimilate ISAs to a broad
range of other phenomena that includes metaphor, irony and the like.
Such an approach has the great advantage of promising to explain ISAs
that are not directly based on FCs, as in (27)e–g, and thus seems to offer
more than a mere partial solution to the ISA problem. It then becomes
necessary though to explain why those ISAs based on FCs are so
prevalent and successful – which Searle fails to do satisfactorily. (Here
see an alternative inference theory outlined in Brown and Levinson,
1978).

However, there is a third more radical solution to the problem of indirect speech acts, and that is to reject the fundamental assumption (LFH) that sentences have literal forces at all. It will follow that there are no ISAs, and thus no ISA problem, but merely a general problem of mapping speech act force onto sentences in context. Illocutionary force is then entirely pragmatic, and has no direct and simple correlation to sentence form and meaning. But what would such a theorist say about explicit performatives and the major sentence types or moods, for these seem semantically and syntactically to embody the corresponding illocutionary forces? What he must say is something along the following lines. The three major sentence types in English must be given a distinguishing truth-conditional characterisation of a very general (non-informative) sort. For example, the meaning of the interrogative form can be an open proposition closed by the set of appropriate answers (see Hull, 1975), or a particular interrogative may be held to denote the set of its true answers (see Karttunen (1977); and see Schmerling (1978) for a similar approach to imperatives). Such meanings are intendedly general and consistent with quite different illocutionary forces. Thus interrogatives can be used with the illocutionary forces of 'real' questions, 'exam' questions, 'rhetorical' questions, requests, offers, suggestions, threats and for many other functions without overriding some 'literal force' (see Levinson (1979) for many illustrations of this). In a similar way, explicit performatives can be assigned truth conditions that are more general than the illocutionary forces that would be assigned by LFH, perhaps along the lines worked out by Åqvist (1972).

Such a radical solution is obviously more than just a way of handling ISAs; it is a general approach to speech acts in which semantics plays only a minimal role (by assigning general meanings to mood and performatives). What evidence can be adduced in favour of it? Firstly, it is consistent with the very general use to which the three basic sentence types are put in English and other languages. For example, imperatives are scarcely ever used to command or request in conversational English (see Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Brown & Levinson, 1978), but occur regularly in recipes and instructions, offers, welcomings, wishes ('Have a good time'), curses and swear words and so on (see Bolinger, 1967). On the alternative set of theories that subscribe to LFH, just about all the actual usages of imperatives in English will therefore have to be considered ISAs, whose understanding is routed through a determination of a literal request or order, quite irrelevantly. Even explicit performatives can be used with different illocutionary forces from those named by the performative verb, as in (30):

(30) Richard: Why are my parties always such a success?
      Liz: I promise to come.

Secondly, theorists who hold LFH will find themselves subscribing to an inference theory of ISAs (since the idiom theory has the difficulties outlined above). They therefore hold that the indirect force of an ISA

is calculated on the basis of the literal force. But there are a number of cases where this seems not only implausible (as with the use of imperatives in English), but quite untenable. For example, (31) would have to have the literal force of a request for permission to remind:

(31) May I remind you that jackets and ties are required if you wish to use the bar on 107th floor, sir.

Yet (31) cannot (felicitously) have that force, because reminding is done simply by uttering (31) without such permission being granted. LFH lands one in an awkward position on a number of such examples. (See Gazdar, *in press*).

For these and many other reasons, a very good case can be made for abandoning LFH. We are then thrown back on the need for an adequate pragmatic theory of speech acts, or at least one that subsumes whatever is valid in the intuitions that lay behind speech act theory in the first place.

5. The context-change theory of speech acts

One candidate for such a pragmatic theory of speech acts is a view that treats speech acts as operations (in the set-theoretic sense) on context, that is as functions from contexts into contexts. A context must be understood here to be a set of propositions, describing the beliefs, knowledge, commitments and so on of the participants in a discourse. The basic intuition here is very simple: when a sentence is uttered more has taken place than merely the expression of its meaning; in addition the set of background assumptions has been altered. The contribution that an utterance makes to this change in the context is its speech act 'force' or potential. Thus if I assert that p, I add to the context that I am committed to p.

On this view, most speech acts add some proposition to the context, for example assertions, promises, orders. We may express these as functions from contexts into contexts along the following lines:

(i) an assertion that p is a function from a context where S is not committed to p (and perhaps, where H does not know that p) into a context in which S is committed to the justified true belief that p (and, perhaps, into one in which H does know p);

(ii) a promise that p is a function from a context in which S is not committed to bringing about that p, into one in which S is so committed;

(iii) an order that p is a function from a context where H is not required by S to bring about p, into one in which he is so required.

Such analyses are capable of considerable refinement, and the reader is directed to work by Hamblin (1971), Stalnaker (1978), Ballmer (1978), and Gazdar (*in press*), for sophisticated treatments.

One should note that not all speech acts add propositions to the context; some remove them – for example, permissions, recantations, abolitions, disavowals. Thus, for example, we could characterise a permission as follows:

(iv) a permission that p is a function from a context in which p is prohibited, into one in which p is not prohibited;

thus capturing the intuition that it makes no sense to permit what is not prohibited.

One of the main attractions of the context-change theory is that it can be rigorously expressed using set theoretic concepts. There is no appeal, as there is in most versions of Thesis, to matters of intention and other concepts that resist formalisation.

The theory is only now becoming generally considered, and it is too early to assess its prospects with confidence. Important questions that arise, though, are the following:

(i) How general a theory is it? Can exhortations, curses, expletives, suggestions, remindings and the like all be adequately expressed in such a framework?

(ii) Can the full range of speech acts be accommodated with reasonable economy? That is, how large is the set of primitives like prohibition, commitment, obligation and the like that have to be marshalled in definitions like those above? The real interest of the theory really depends on how few of these are actually required.

(iii) Can such a theory capture the intuitive relations that we feel to exist between some pairs of speech acts, like requests and orders, suggestions and advice, questions and requests? Until we have theories in this area that are full scale we must await a judgement. Meanwhile the approach seems promising. There are, however, a number of reasons why one might be sceptical that any such theory of speech acts is viable in the long run, to which we now turn.

6. Beyond theories of speech acts

There are in fact some compelling reasons to think that speech act theory may disappear in favour of much more complex multi-faceted pragmatic approaches to the functions that utterances perform. The first set of these have to do with the internal difficulties that any speech act theory faces. Note that such a theory is basically into the job of mapping utterances into speech act categories, however those are to be defined. But not all utterances are sentences, nor do all sentences perform only one speech act, however that is defined. On examination it turns out that the relevant utterance units for speech act assignment cannot be independently characterised without reference to the speech acts they seem to perform. Thus it does not seem to be possible to specify a speech act assigning function, because neither the domain (the relevant

utterance units) nor the range (the relevant speech act units) are clearly defined, and the one is characterised partly in terms of the other (see Levinson *in press* for the full argument).

Even if a well-defined function could be characterised, it is a procedure or algorithm that assigns speech acts to utterances, not a mere abstract function, that we would be interested in. And the intricacies of the sources that give rise to the assignment of purpose or function to utterances are of such an enormous order of complexity and of such interest in their own right (see e.g. Sacks & Schegloff, 1974; Schegloff, 1976; Brown & Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1979) that little will be left to the theory of speech acts.

If we ask why we should be interested in a theory of speech acts, a reasonable answer is that it promises to bridge the gap between an abstract linguistic theory and observations of how language is actually used. In that case, a theory of speech acts should tell us something interesting about actual usage. But in fact, if one looks even cursorily at a transcribed record of a conversation, it becomes immediately clear that we do not know how to assign speech acts to the utterances in a non-arbitrary way, and that even if we could do such assignment confidently, it would tell us very little about how conversations actually proceed. For conversational responses are based as much on 'perlocutions' as 'illocutions', and conversational sequencing is not regulated by rules statable over speech act categories (see Levinson *in press*). Conversational structure is now known to have its own elaborate architecture, and the functions that utterances perform are in large part due to the place they have within specific conversational sequences (see especially Sacks & Schegloff, 1974; Schegloff, 1976; Turner, 1974).

The theory of speech acts is thus being currently undermined from the outside by the growth of empirical disciplines concerned with the study of natural language usage. Three lines of work in particular stand out. The first, and perhaps the most important, is the rigorous work on recorded natural conversation pioneered by Sacks and Schegloff, and now a vigorous and productive tradition (see e.g. the collections of research papers in Schenkein, 1978, and Psathas, 1979). This work shows clearly that the linguists' reliance on intuition for data and deductive methods of theory construction must give way in the area of language usage to studies based on recorded data and induction from collections of instances.[6]

Another major empirical tradition, the ethnography of speaking, has been concerned with the cross-cultural study of language usage (see e.g. the papers in Bauman & Sherzer, 1974). It has considerable application to the issues that gave rise to the theory of speech acts (see e.g. Gumperz, 1979; Levinson, 1979), a point noted by researchers in second-language learning (see, e.g. Munby, 1978 and references therein).

The third important development has been the extensive study of first-language acquisition from a pragmatic point of view. This empirical

work has important implications for theories concerned with the attribution of intents, purposes and functions to utterances (see the collections in *Language in Society*, 7, 3, 1978; Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977). All three developments, while addressing the issues at the heart of speech act theory, take us well beyond it.

It seems quite likely, then, that in the long run the notion of the speech act will turn out to be a transitional concept, a ladder (to employ a famous metaphor) by means of which we shall have climbed out of the pit of one-sided theories of language, but which we will then be free to throw away in favour of much more sophisticated and empirically based theories of the ways in which we actually communicate.[7] And such, of course, is the fate of many philosophical concepts; originated to solve philosophical puzzles they become used temporarily as proto-scientific concepts, and end up by being replaced with full-blown empirical theories.

[1] I wish to record my warmest thanks to the Dill Foundation for Fundamental Research, South Salem, New York, for the provision of a lake and a computer in close proximity, stimulating company and excellent accommodation. My understanding of the basic issues reviewed here has been greatly enhanced by many conversations with Penelope Brown, Gerald Gazdar, John Gumperz, Emmanuel Schegloff, and less recently with Charles Fillmore, George Lakoff, Jerrold Sadock and John Trim.

[2] There is a surprising lack of such general reviews, but see Lyons (1977, chapter 16) and Wunderlich (1979, chapter 9). There are two major linguistic monographs: Sadock (1974) though partisan (to the performative analysis and the idiom theory of indirect speech acts) is extremely useful as a summary of the linguistic issues; Katz (1977) is much less useful since the discussion is tied to an idiosyncratic semantic theory and lacks adequate reference to contemporary research. There are many philosophical works that discuss the issues raised by Austin at length, see e.g. Searle (1971) and references therein. Monographic treatments of Austin's work may be found in Furberg 1971 and Graham 1977.

[3] There has in fact been considerable interest in this classificatory enterprise, shown by both linguistics and philosophers; the most recent contribution (Hancher, 1979) references the best of this extensive literature.

[4] The discussion here owes a considerable debt to the exceptionally clear and precise arguments in Gazdar (*in press*). Readers will also find there a very useful reformation of the sloppy terminology usually used in discussions of speech act theory.

[5] See also the careful arguments by Green (1975).

[6] Schegloff, in a presentation to the Pragmatics conference held at Urbino in July 1979, was able to show that speech act theory made precisely the wrong predictions about actual usage in a wide range of cases.

[7] The sentiment expressed here I first imbibed from conversations with Emmanuel Schegloff.

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Abbreviations: CLS n = Papers from the *n*th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society; IULC = mimeo circulated by the Indiana University Linguistics Club; *L in S* = Language in Society.

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