

# Talk at work

Interaction in institutional settings

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## Activity types and language

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### 1 Introduction

Wittgenstein in a number of places (1958b; 1958a: I, 23) suggests that understanding a language, and by implication having a grasp of the meaning of utterances, involves knowing the nature of the activity in which the utterances play a role. This, of course, is part of the well-known doctrine of “language games,” which by the later writings had “come to mean the study of any form of use of language against a background context of a form of life” (Kenny 1973: 166).

Now part of what Wittgenstein was getting at has since been captured in the concept of speech acts, although there is, of course, considerable disagreement about how to handle speech acts theoretically. Some (Searle 1969, for example) would try to reduce the rest of language to speech acts. Others would try to reduce speech acts to the frameworks of analysis that handle the propositional core of language (e.g. Lewis 1972; Sadock 1974; Lakoff, 1975). Yet others would accept a fundamental distinction between speech acts and propositional context, and apply Wittgenstein’s “language games” mode of analysis only to the former (for an elegant version of such an account see Stenius 1967). In any case, the majority of linguists, and philosophers too, would reject the later Wittgenstein’s reduction of meaning to usage in favor of the earlier Wittgenstein’s

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semantical theory, complemented, if needs be, by a pragmatic theory of speech acts.

But there is more implied in Wittgenstein's language-games analogy than can be captured in a theory of speech acts: the list of language games given by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* includes describing objects, giving measurements, constructing an object from a measurement, telling jokes, acting plays, praying, guessing riddles, greeting, and so on (see also Kenny 1973: 165).

The intuitions that underlay Wittgenstein's emphasis on the embedding of language within human activities have not been accounted for in any modern theory of how language is used and understood. The purpose of this chapter is to document from empirical materials that Wittgenstein's intuitions have a basis in fact, and moreover that his failure to make the distinction between speech acts and speech activities was not just an oversight – the two are interconnected in such fundamental ways that only a thorough-going pragmatic theory will be adequate to describe both phenomena.

To see the force of Wittgenstein's preoccupations with the matrix activity within which language usage takes place, consider a simple case that should jog the intuitions. In a game of cricket there is a general rule of silence during play, but there are a number of distinct cries that punctuate the proceedings, for example *howzat*, *LBW*, *over* (there are also appreciations of play, and instructions from the captain to the team, of the sort *John, the slips*). Now it would be simply and straightforwardly impossible to describe the meaning or the function of these cries without referring to aspects of the game and their role within the game – so, for example, *howzat* functions as a claim directed to the umpire by one of the fielding side that one of the batsmen is “out,” while *over* functions as both a statement that six turns at bowling have now transpired since the last such cry and as an instruction to reverse the direction of bowling, and so on.

The immediate reaction to such cases will no doubt be that they are exceptional, in no way typical of language usage or indeed of language, and parasitic on more ordinary uses of language. And certainly the reduction of meaning to moves within a language game is not going to provide us with any account of the key intui-

tion that sentences have meanings partially independent (not totally, of course) of the circumstances in which they are used. But holding a more conservative and traditional theory of meaning (of the sort that pairs meanings with well-formed formulae, *in vacuo*) is not going to rescue us from the dilemma that many, indeed probably most, situations in which language is used have an aspect precisely similar to the cricket case. The common feature, of course, is the extent to which the understanding of what is said depends on understanding the "language game" in which it is embedded, over and beyond whatever meaning the words or sentences may have *in vacuo*.

As an intermediate case consider the following utterances recorded during a basketball game:

- (1) 1 Alright Peter.  
 2 Here!  
 3 Farewell people.  
 4 C'mon Peter.  
 5 Beautiful tip!  
 6 Right over here.

Now understanding these utterances seems to require two things in particular: we need to know the meaning of the words; and we need to know the kind of utterances that typically occur in such a game. It would be helpful, of course, to have a visual picture of the state of play at each utterance, but lacking this we can still reconstruct the probable function given the two kinds of knowledge above. So utterances 1, 2, 4, and 6 could function as claims that the speaker is in a good position to have the ball passed to him, and thus as requests to do so; while utterance 5 is an appreciation of another player's move, and 3 something more like a war cry, a shout of defiance by the player with the ball.<sup>1</sup> In assigning functions to the utterances (signals to pass, exhortations, applause, and so on) we depend both on the meaning of the words which serve to differentiate the utterances, and on the possible roles that utterances can play within such a game. In this case we can see that the main reason that we have to rely on information about the game is massive ellipsis, but, as we shall see, this is only one source of such contextual dependence.

But before proceeding, let us turn to clarify a concept that will be basic to what is to follow.

## 2 Activity types

I want to introduce as a term of art the notion of an "activity type." There are various terms that are employed by sociologists and anthropologists engaged in the study of language usage which are roughly equivalent, especially "speech event" and "episode" (see e.g. Gumperz 1972; Hymes 1972a). My notion is to be preferred for present purposes because it refers to any culturally recognized activity, whether or not that activity is coextensive with a period of speech or indeed whether any talk takes place in it at all (see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974 for some useful distinctions here). In particular, I take the notion of an activity type to refer to a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples would be teaching, a job interview, a jurat interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party, and so on.

The category is fuzzy because (as with bad examples of the color red – see Berlin and Kay 1969) it is not clear whether it includes a chat (probably) or the single telling of a joke (probably not). It appeals to the intuition that social events come along a gradient formed by two polar types, the totally prepackaged activity, on the one hand (e.g. a Roman Mass) and the largely unscripted event on the other (e.g. a chance meeting on the street). There is some (incomplete) correspondence between this gradient and another, that between the poles of a highly formal activity on the one hand and a very informal one on the other. However formality is properly described (and see here E. O. Keenan 1977; Irvine 1978), it certainly seems to involve greater levels of preplanning both in action and in speech together with greater social distance between participants. The evidence for this is that style changes accordingly: for example, the more elaborate higher diglossic varieties of a language with diglossia (Ferguson 1964) or address forms conventionally implicating social distance (see Levinson 1977) will tend to occur in formal situations. Thus my colleagues may address me as *Steve* in the common room, *Dr. Levinson* in a faculty meeting. So style or mode of address can be one index of a change of activity.

A further dimension on which activities vary clearly crosscuts

the other two: this is the degree to which speech is an integral part of each activity. On the one hand, we have activities constituted entirely by talk (a telephone conversation, a lecture, for example); on the other, activities where talk is nonoccurring, or if it does occur is incidental (a game of football, for instance). Somewhere in between (though this dimension of variation is not simply a linear scale like the other two) we have the placing of bets, or a Bingo session, or a visit to the grocers. And there are sometimes rather special relations between what is said and what is done, as in a sports commentary, a slide show, a cookery demonstration, a conjuror's show, and the like. Then there are the peculiarities of rituals, where words and acts are related and integrated in most complex ways (the best descriptions of exotic cases are still those of Malinowski in *Coral Gardens and their Magic*; 1966, vol. II).<sup>2</sup>

There is one discipline that has set itself the task of describing the different uses to which speech is put in different activities in different societies, namely the ethnography of speaking, as conceived originally by Hymes (1962) and exemplified by the collection of essays in Bauman and Sherzer (1974) (see also Blount and Sanches 1975). Hymes suggested eight key variables that would function as a classificatory grid for crosscultural comparison: each activity should be described, he suggests, as particular constraints on setting, participants, ends (or goals), acts (including specified sequences), key (or tone), instrumentalities (the varieties of language employed, in particular), norms (concerning, for example, attenuation or interruption), and genre (poetic, mythic, prosaic, etc.).

The results of such investigations are important for anyone interested in giving Wittgenstein's intuitions about "language games" some flesh. But there is a drawback to Hymes's taxonomic approach, for not all of the variables he adduces are of equal significance or importance. I would choose to divide the pie a little differently, making a first distinction between the *structure* of the event in question, and the *style* in which it is conducted. Only the former is germane to the issues raised in this chapter, and I deal with the latter elsewhere.

Elements of the structure of an activity include its subdivision into a number of subparts, or episodes as we may call them (e.g. a seminar usually involves first a presentation, followed by a dis-

cussion, while a court case is divided into a statement of the case, cross-examinations, the passing of sentence, etc.), and within each any prestructured sequences that may be required by convention, the norms governing the allocation of turns at speaking, and so on. There may, further, be constraints on the personnel and the roles they may take, on the time and the place at which the activity can properly take place. There are also more abstract structural constraints, having to do with topical cohesion and the functional adequacy of contributions to the activity.

In general, wherever possible I would like to view these structural elements as rationally and functionally adapted to the point or *goal* of the activity in question, that is the function or functions that members of the society see the activity as having. By taking this perspective it seems that in most cases apparently *ad hoc* and elaborate arrangements and constraints of very various sorts can be seen to follow from a few basic principles, in particular rational organization around a dominant goal. This analytic approach is distinct from the taxonomic and descriptive one employed in the ethnography of speaking. The dangers of the latter can be most clearly seen in the extreme atomism and particularism in applications to problems of second-language teaching, where it is considered necessary to teach the pupil studying the foreign language in its culture each and every structural detail of some activity, even though these details are often direct and simple means of achieving the relevant goals (see e.g. Munby 1978).

But for present purposes our interest in the structure of activities can be confined to one particular important question: *in what ways do the structural properties of an activity constrain (especially the functions of) the verbal contributions that can be made towards it?* This will be one dominant theme of the succeeding discussion, and it will be useful to have a paradigm case in mind. A simple example is provided by Labov's (1972b) description of the activity of "sounding" among the Black community of New York. Essentially, this consists in the competitive exchange of ritual insults governed by structural constraints of two types. The first of these is that "sounds" or turns at ritually insulting should be constructed in a specific fashion, which Labov (1972b: 153) represents as follows:

T(B) is so X that P



where T is the target of the sound, normally a relative (typically the mother) of B, the addressee, X is a pejorative attribute like *fat*, *poor*, *dirty*, etc., and P is some proposition that must, when applied to T, be false (otherwise the ritual insult would become a genuine insult). The second type of structural constraint governs appropriate sequencing: if A sounds on B, B should reply with a sound based on A's sound but which "tops" it (i.e. is considered more ingenious), and, if possible, A should then try to top that, or alternatively try another kind of sound. After each stage the audience makes a vocal assessment of the sound (ibid.: 146). So an exchange might begin as follows:

- (2) A: your mother so old she got spider webs under her arms.  
 C: awww!  
 B: your mother so old she fart dust  
 C: Ho lawd!

The point here is that there are strict constraints on what counts as a sound: the target should not be the addressee directly nor should the proposition describing the target be true, for example. Moreover, sounds should relate to prior sounds in specific ways if they are to be positively evaluated. If these constraints are not met, the activity breaks down.

### 3 Activity types and inference

One important fact about activity types, then, is that there are constraints on what will count as allowable contributions to them.<sup>3</sup> Now there is another important and related fact, in many ways the mirror image of the constraints on contributions: namely, the fact that to each and every clearly demarcated activity there is a corresponding set of *inferential schemata*. These schemata are tied to (derived from, if one likes) the structural properties of the activity in question.

Let us start with some straightforward examples. As Turner (1972) has pointed out, the possible ways of starting an activity are contingent on aspects of its structural organization. So an utterance like:

- (3) It's five past twelve.

can serve to start proceedings just in case the activity is scheduled to begin by then and all necessary personnel are present. Notice that if the activity was a university lecture then (3) could only function as the initial utterance of the activity if it was uttered by the lecturer (or his introducer if he was a visitor), who we can designate the "pivotal person" in this activity; in addition there would have to be at least some partial complement of listeners. Now contrast:

(4) We seem to all be here.

which could only serve to initiate a different kind of activity: namely, one in which a full complement of persons is required (e.g. a committee meeting). Now, as Turner points out, if activities were bounded by silence there would be no problem: the first turn at talking would initiate the proceedings. But such is not the case; normally, there is talk of another kind right up to the moment the activity begins. The problem then is to account for the fact that utterances like (3) and (4) have the *force* of announcing the beginning of an activity, and whatever the details of the account it will clearly have to refer to the mutual knowledge among participants of the particular conditions that must be met in order for the specific activity to begin. Exactly the same sort of remarks, of course, can be made about ways of terminating a given activity. The following three utterances could function as ways of ending a seminar, a lecture, and a committee meeting respectively:

(5) It's one o'clock.

(6) Next week I'll be looking at another approach to the same problem.

(7) Jim's got to go.

These examples are both like and unlike the initial and terminal whistles in a soccer game; they are alike because they have the same sort of force, and they are unlike in that they do so via referring to the necessary prerequisites of the activity in question, thereby making a knowledge of those prerequisites essential for the understanding of their function.

Now let us consider an example of a slightly different kind, that can be found in the following exchange recorded in a grocer's shop (where S is the shop-assistant and C the customer):

- (8) S: (to last customer): Bub-bye.  
 C: Some apples please. Just help myself is that alright?  
 S: Yes they're all fine.  
 C: Yes they look good.  
 S: // // There, that's eighteen, orright?  
 C: uhuh. You've just got the one kind of lettuce?  
 S: Yes. Cos.  
 C: That's a nice one.  
 S: Yes. *They are getting proper now aren't they. Thirty six please.*  
 // // thank you very much.  
 C: Thanks. Goodbye.

The utterance of interest here is C's "That's a nice one," which was accompanied by a gesture of pointing. The interesting thing is that this utterance *counted as* selecting a lettuce, requesting that it be wrapped, and undertaking to pay for it. As one can see there were no further negotiations about the lettuce. *How did the utterance function in the way that it did?* The answer is that it had the force that it had by virtue of the expectations governing the activity of shopping in small stores, here specifically the expectation that the customer will only pick out and select goods that he intends to buy. The corollary is that the shop-assistant can take any identification of a piece of merchandise as a selection with intent to purchase, unless there are contrary indications.

With these examples in mind let us turn to the theoretical implications of these observations. *There are at least four main approaches to the study of inference in discourse which are worth reviewing as a background to this study.* The first of these is Grice's (1975) attempt to isolate some basic background assumptions of cooperation that underlie talk across differing situations. These general assumptions are so strong that apparent violations give rise to inferences that would preserve them. Another approach, in part inspired by Grice's, has been current in linguistics, where to handle inferences to indirect illocutionary force specific rules for formulating indirect expressions of particular kinds have been proposed (see e.g. Gordon and Lakoff 1975; Heringer 1972; Fraser 1975). In fact, as suggested by Searle (1975) and Brown and Levinson (1978), these specific principles can generally be reduced to Grice's more general principles. A third distinct approach is current in artificial intelligence, where the emphasis is on using massive amounts of detailed factual knowledge about the world as extra premises to

derive inferences made in discourse (see e.g. Charniak 1972). A problem that then has to be solved is how to bring the relevant facts in at the right moment, a solution to which seemed to be Minsky's idea of a "frame" or block of knowledge that could be called up (see articles in Schank and Nash-Webber 1975). And finally, the fourth and very different approach comes from analyses of conversation by ethnomethodologists, and especially by Sacks, Schegloff, and their associates (see e.g. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Turner, 1974; Schegloff 1984). The emphasis here is on structural information about conversational organization, and the way in which such information predisposes participants to see utterances as fulfilling certain functions by virtue of their structural location. There are inferences, then, from the structure of a conversation to the role that any one utterance plays within it.

I suspect that, with the possible exception of the second, each of these approaches catches some aspects of the nature of inference in discourse. On methodological grounds, though, there are reasons to prefer the approaches favored by Grice and Sacks and Schegloff to that favored by workers in artificial intelligence. For the former focus on structural properties of talk as the source of inferences, while the latter concentrate on the substantive content of background beliefs. And there is reason to presume that such structural properties are fewer and simpler than participants' general belief and knowledge of the world, and thus both more conducive to study and more likely to be the sort of thing that participants have to learn initially in order to converse. (Of course, there is no reason why these structural kinds of knowledge cannot be subsumed within the artificial intelligence, and in particular the frames, approach, provided that the special role they play in inferences can be captured; but so far this has not been done.)

Let us return now to the kinds of inferences that are tied to the structural organization of particular activities. The knowledge that is required to make the appropriate inferences is clearly not provided by Grice's maxims alone, for these are (implicitly) supposed to hold across different kinds of activity. Nor is it provided by the general structural expectations that have on the whole been the focus of work by Sacks, Schegloff, and their colleagues. The knowledge in question, rather, seems to be a distinct and further kind of structural expectation that lies behind inference in dis-

course. The knowledge is much more specific than the kind that Grice had in mind, but much more general than the immense array of facts that workers in artificial intelligence generally assume to be involved in inference.

Now there may, in fact, be some relation between Grice's maxims of conversation and particular expectations associated with particular activities. Grice's maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner are supposed to outline preconditions for the rational cooperative exchange of talk. But one thing we can observe is that not all activity types are deeply cooperative. Consider an interrogation: it is unlikely that either party assumes the other is fulfilling the maxims of quality, manner, and especially quantity (requiring that one say as much as is required by the other). Inferences that in fully cooperative circumstances would go through (namely conversations implicatures) may no longer do so. Consider the following extract from Haldeman's testimony before the Senate committee that conducted the Watergate hearing (*New York Times* 1973: 577).

- (9) Q: You saw all of the papers that were being reviewed, did you not?  
 A: Not all the working papers of the committee. I saw the recommendations that went to the President.  
 Q: Did you read the recommendations that went to the President?  
 A: I am not sure I did or not. If I did it was not in any detail.

Now I take it that in more cooperative and perhaps more normal circumstances the following exchange is bizarre (or has specific implicatures different from those in (9)):

- (10) A: Did you see last week's Newsweek?  
 B: Part of it.  
 A: Did you read that part of it?  
 B: I'm not sure whether I did or not.

What is strange about (10), of course, is that if X says he *saw* some reading matter then he generally implicates that he *read* it, the rationale for a stronger reading being that the questioner is much more likely to be interested in whether the respondent knows something about the content rather than the visual form of the reading matter, and, this being mutually assumed, it would be uncooperative to understand the question in the other way, so that an answer to the question can be taken to be an answer as to whether or not

the respondent *read* the material in question. Hence A's second question is redundant, and thus conversationally bizarre by Grice's maxim of quantity; while B's response to the second question treats it as nonbizarre, thus doubly confusing the reader trying to understand this as an ordinary conversation.

Now the point is that strange as (10) is, it is precisely parallel to (9). So that in understanding (9) we have to cancel the implicature from X *saw* some reading matter to X *read* it. And we understand the implicature to be cancelled because, given our understanding of legal inquiries, we know it is often not in the interests of a defendant to cooperate beyond the minimum required to escape contempt of court.<sup>4</sup> In particular, we know that he may try to avoid committing himself to any definite statement of fact; knowing which, the interrogator cannot be content with implicatures that can later be denied – hence he has to ask the second question, that seeks assent for the inference from *saw* to *read*. That the inference is not assented to by Haldeman is further indication of the extent to which these proceedings are more like zero-sum games than games of pure coordination (see Luce and Raiffa 1957; Lewis 1969, respectively).

The example indicates that there could be some quite interesting relations between Grice's maxims and different kinds of activities, of a sort where some of the maxims are selectively relaxed to varying degrees in activities of specific types. To take another simple, but rather extreme example, consider the kind of talk that takes place in group-therapy sessions. Here is an extract from Perls (1969: 189):

- (11) M: I said within myself "You know, you don't matter so what are you talking to me for?" And the other one was I felt.  
 F: What was the sentence "You don't matter?"  
 M: I felt I didn't talk directly to you.  
 F: You said some words like, "You don't matter".  
 M: Yes. This is what I said to myself.  
 F: I know. Can you say it again, "You don't matter?"  
 M: Yes. You don't matter.  
 F: Say this again.  
 M: You don't matter at all.  
 F: Say it again.  
 M: You don't matter at all.  
 F: Say it to a few more people.  
 M: You don't, you don't really matter...

There are a number of features that make this very different from ordinary conversation. The repetition of “You don’t matter” is a violation of the nonredundancy required by Grice’s maxim of quantity. More complex is some violation of ordinary notions of relevance; for example, the third utterance is in no way directly tied to the preceding query. And there seem, in fact, to be for such activities some rules of precedence that allow statements about feelings, especially feelings about what has been said, to supersede direct responses. In other cases the notion of relevance may be preserved intact while complex additional premises (the therapeutic theory) that are unstated link what are apparently unconnected utterances.

Now, although these may be extreme examples, paler things of the same sort seem to go on in ordinary everyday activities. For example, in a casual encounter harmless simplifications may be untruths that, strictly speaking, violate the maxim of quality (see e.g. Sacks 1975). And at the dinner table a question may be responded to with an unrelated *Would you like some more soup?* These “violations” are principled in the sense that the degree of cooperation, the ranking or precedence of topics, and so on are intrinsically related to the nature of the activity in question. Must we then reject Grice’s attractive and influential theory on the grounds that it does not apply to the empirical facts about the way in which talk is organized? I think that would be hasty: it has already given us a preliminary way of talking about some of the ways in which talk is different in different activities. There are two ways in which the conflict between Grice’s general principles of conversation and the particular expectations of specific activities can be reconciled. The first is to seek for a more sophisticated statement of Grice’s principles that will allow differing degrees of application of each maxim and the corresponding adjustment of implicatures. The second is to accept Grice’s maxims as specifications of some basic *unmarked* communication context, deviations from which, however common, are seen as special or *marked*. And there are various observations that suggest that the notion of basic unmarked communication context may be essential to pragmatics: for example it seems required by the facts of deixis (where the unmarked deictic center seems to be the speaker, and his or her temporal–spatial location at coding time; see Fillmore 1975), and

by the way in which turn taking is organized in conversation (where the system seems organized around or biased towards two-party conversation without preallocation of turns – see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974), and by a number of other pragmatic factors. In any case, more empirical work on activity types will be required to settle the issue.

Let us turn to a final issue concerning special inferences due to activity types, which was raised at the beginning of the section, when we claimed that particular modes of inference were the “mirror image,” as it were, of the structural constraints on each activity. What exactly is the relation between the structure of an activity and the inferences special to it? Presumably, exactly the same kind of relation that holds between Grice’s maxims and the inferences they generate. In that case the maxims set up specific expectations such that, if they are apparently violated, an inference that would preserve them is derived, and if contributions are adequate, they are strongly interpreted as cooperative (the latter is the kind of inference involved in the transition from *five* to *only five* in the exchange: A: *How many children does John have?* B: *Five*; see Horn 1972).

In a similar fashion the structural properties of specific activities set up strong expectations. Because there are strict constraints on contributions to any particular activity, there are corresponding strong expectations about the functions that any utterances at a certain point in the proceedings can be fulfilling. For example, in a basketball game it is understood that utterances will relate only to the game, and moreover will be restricted to a limited set of functions including, for example, applause/abuse, exhortations, directions positioning players, and signals to pass the ball. Given these constraints an utterance like *Here! Peter* or *Right over here* can (with appropriate prosodics) be understood best as a signal to pass the ball in the direction of the caller. The inference from the elliptical expression to the instruction or request relies on the constraints on the functions that utterances should have within that activity. Exactly the same kind of remarks hold for example (8) above, where the utterance “That’s a nice one” counted as selecting a lettuce for purchase by virtue of the strong expectations about the sorts of things that utterances in such a shop are doing.<sup>5</sup>



#### 4 Some activities where questions have a focal role

There are some activities where questions play a central role, for example an interview, a press conference, a legal case, greeting sequences, classroom teaching, seeking advice from a bureau, and so on. It is worth looking at some of these activities in detail to see precisely what role questions play in each.

The focus on questions has been chosen with some design. It is possible, (but mistaken, I believe), to view many other kinds of illocutionary force with their associated paradigmatic linguistic forms as having no interactional component. Austin (1962) would have disagreed, of course: he stressed the role of “uptake” – the recognition by the other party of the force in question – in the felicity of illocutionary acts. For him a threat, an order, a statement, a bet made to the winds are simply defective even if other felicity conditions are met; if I bet you sixpence that I can outrun you, but you fail to hear, I cannot be said truthfully to have betted you sixpence. In any case with questions (and imperatives too, of course), the case is clearer: the force of a question *is* (on the whole) an attempt to elicit a particular kind of answer. And a question–answer pair *is* an interactional sequence; such an important one, in fact, that it plays a special role in the ontogeny of verbal interaction (Keenan, Schieffelin, and Platt 1978) and in the organization of adult discourse (Sacks 1992: *passim*; Pope 1975; Merritt 1976). So in the case of questions anyway the concept of illocutionary force takes us beyond the bounds of a sentential utterance into a consideration of the role that such utterances can play in a discourse.

It is worth pointing out that even the formal, that is logical, treatment of questions leads in the same direction. A simple way to treat questions logically is to think of them as open sentences, closed by an appropriate answer; so a question–answer pair can denote a truth value just like an indicative sentence (see e.g. Hull 1975). Alternatively, one can think of them as the declarative disjunction of their possible answers (see e.g. Harrah 1961; Belnap 1963).<sup>6</sup> But if questions can only be characterized in relation to their answers, and question–answer pairs are normally distributed across parties to a conversation, then we are back to the essentially interactional nature of questions. Even if we allow that questions can be answered by their poser, we are still irrevocably beyond the

sentence and involved in the characterization of sentence properties by reference to their discourse properties.

Our purpose now is to show that the discourse properties involved in the definition of a question are subject to the nature of the activities in which questions are used: in short, that the role, and thus the nature, of a question is in part dependent on the matrix "language game."

By way of introduction let us consider the different roles that questions play in an exotic society – among the Gonja of West Africa, as reported by E. Goody (1978). This is not simply a catalog of all the indirect usages to which questions are put; although the interrogative form and its uses are the focus of the report, all the uses described have some family resemblance to the illocutionary force that we paradigmatically associate with questions, more so, I understand, than English questions like *can you please pass the salt?* There are strong social constraints in Gonja in the use to which questions can be put in various circumstances; some of these constraints derive from the activity type in which the questions are being used, others are related more closely to the social relations between the interlocutors. Taking those uses of questions that are clearly constrained by the nature of the activity, we may note the following special uses. In greetings, questions are asked about activities and the health of relatives, but the "information that can pass is minimal, for the statement or question is standardized, as is the reply", for "in Gonja a single answer can suffice for all these salutations: *awo* 'it is cool.' This is the equivalent of 'all right,' 'fine,' 'ok'" (Goody 1972: 47). Further examples of such special treatment of questions in greetings can be found in other societies of course – see, for example, Irvine (1974) on greetings among the Wolof, and Sacks (1975) on greetings between (American) English speakers.

Another special usage in Gonja is the use of rhetorical questions in court cases. An elder may say in such circumstances things like "Is it one parent only who creates a child?"; this is interpreted as an attempt to establish the relevance of norms associated with co-parenthood to the judicial case in process. If other elders presiding do not think the norms referred to have relevance to this particular case, they do not answer; on the other hand, if they concur with the questioner they provide an affirmative answer of the sort "No, it is

not only one parent who creates the child," thereby conceding the judicial point in question (Goody 1978: 30). There are also special uses of questions in divination, although we are not told much about them; from my own fieldwork in South India I am familiar with a system of questioning restricted to *yes/no* questions that could be answered by configurations in the divinatory objects, and perhaps in Gonja divination works in the same sort of way.

Other uses of questions in Gonja are more closely related to types of social relationship than to activities. Perhaps intermediate is the use of questions to express what anthropologists call a "joking relationship" as typically holds between potential affines. In Gonja, a man may say to a visiting marriageable girl things like the following:

Man: Have you prepared your trousseau yet?

Girl: How can I? You haven't given me anything towards it.

where the man's question refers to the possibility that the girl could be his next wife, and her reply jokingly "chides him for not having courted her" (Goody 1978: 28).

Now each of these uses are understood as questions in some sense, indeed in a primary sense because the response to each is or can be an answer in logical terms. But if, like Searle (1969), we hoped to capture a common feature, the illocutionary force of questioning, in terms of a set of shared felicity conditions, we should be rudely disappointed. We shall return to this point below.

I now wish to look in detail at two special uses of questions in English and I shall try and show that the particular uses are closely tied to – indeed, derived from – the overall goals of the activities in which they occur.

The following extract comes from the cross-examination of a rape victim by the defendant's lawyer in an English court of law (this and other extracts are reprinted in Toner 1977: 156ff).

- (12) 1 Your aim that evening then was to go to the discotheque?  
 2 Yes.  
 3 Presumably you had dressed up for that, had you?  
 4 Yes.  
 5 And you were wearing make-up?  
 6 Yes.  
 7 Eye-shadow?  
 8 Yes.

- 9 Lipstick?
- 10 No I was not wearing lipstick.
- 11 You weren't wearing lipstick?
- 12 No.
- 13 Just eye-shadow, eye make-up?
- 14 Yes.
- 15 And powder presumably?
- 16 Foundation cream, yes.
- 17 You had had bronchitis had you not?
- 18 Yes.
- 19 You have mentioned in the course of your evidence about wearing a coat?
- 20 Yes.
- 21 It was not really a coat at all, was it?
- 22 Well, it is sort of a coat-dress and I bought it with trousers, as a trouser suit.
- 23 That is it down there isn't it, the red one?
- 24 Yes.
- 25 If we call that a dress, if we call that a dress you had no coat on at all had you?
- 26 No.
- 27 And this is January. It was quite a cold night?
- 28 Yes it was cold actually.

Now this is a dialogue constructed of questions and answers. Our initial question is: what exactly is the nature of these questions? An immediate puzzlement is that many, in fact most, of these questions request details that are already known to the questioner. This is clearer, perhaps, in the second extract:

- (13) 1 ...you have had sexual intercourse on a previous occasion haven't you?
- 2 Yes.
- 3 On many previous occasions?
- 4 Not many.
- 5 Several?
- 6 Yes.
- 7 With several men?
- 8 No.
- 9 Just one.
- 10 Two.
- 11 Two. And you are seventeen and a half?
- 12 Yes.

Here the girl's age is asked, even though the basic facts of the case, including this one, would be known to all parties. The point of the

question is not to learn something from the answer, although it is in part to obtain the answer, to get the witness to state the answer. What can be the point of getting the witness to state what is already known to all present? It could be to obtain a confession, but in this case a statement of one's age is hardly a confession. We could spin the conundrum out, but the point, of course, is that the function of the question does not lie within utterance 11 (or the answer in 12), but in its *juxtaposition* with what has gone before. By careful juxtaposition 11 does the job of suggesting that a girl of seventeen who has already slept with two men is not a woman of good repute.

Turning back to extract (12), we see that juxtaposition there too provides our understanding of what some of these questions are doing. Take utterance 17 for example: here a question about the girl's health follows those about her make-up on the night of the crime, and is succeeded by questions about whether on that occasion she had a coat and how cold the weather was. Again the fact questioned in utterance 17 was known to both questioner and respondent, as indicated by its form – a tagged assertion; the point of asking the question was to obtain an acknowledgment of the fact *at this particular locus* in the cross-examination.

In what kinds of discourse is it appropriate, and perhaps necessary, to state things that may already be known in a certain order or sequence? One answer is: in the presentation of an argument, of course. And now we are in a position to state succinctly what our intuitions have already told us about extracts (12) and (13): *the functions of the questions here are to extract from the witness answers that build up to form a "natural" argument for the jury.* The argument that is thus extracted from the girl's answers in (12) goes something like this: the victim was dressed to go dancing, she was heavily made up – something of a painted lady, in fact – and, despite the fact that she had been ill, she was wearing no coat on the cold winter's night. The implicit conclusion is that the girl was seeking sexual adventures.

But to obtain this argument, or anything like it, we have had to make some basic assumptions about the intentions of the questioner – namely, that he wishes to convey an argument, and moreover an argument that will show the facts of the case in a certain light. We can make these assumptions with surety because the nature of the activity – the cross-examining of the victim by the

defendant's lawyer – assigns a particular role, a class of intentions, in fact, to the questioner. To see the connections between these different levels of discourse organization, first note that if the questions were randomly picked out of a hat, then we could not understand the sequence of questions as an argument designed by the questioner. Second, note that if the sequence of questions is understood as designed to convey an argument, the conclusion of the argument could be different in different activities. If (13), for example, was constructed from the questions posed by a concerned auntie to her modern niece, the implicit conclusion might be something like “well I do disapprove of modern mores”. Or even if the roles in the courtroom were reversed, and the respondent in (12) was the defendant accused of luring lorry-drivers into deserted lay-bys where accomplices could hijack the goods, the implicit conclusion would again be different – what else could the siren be doing on a January night underdressed?

I hope, then, to have established that our understanding of these extracts as designed to elicit an argument of a certain kind with specific conclusions rests on our knowledge of the kind of activity the talk occurs within. We know that in a rape case it is the job of the defendant and his lawyer to show that the girl asked for it, and the goal of the victim and her counsel to resist this and establish that the defendant committed the crime intentionally and against the girl's resistance. Each of these conflicting goals specifies a class of strategies, and it is the location of these that gives us our understanding of what is going on.<sup>7</sup> For example, it will be in the defendant's best interests to obtain the most damaging admissions from the victim; his counsel will therefore ask the strongest version of the relevant question first, and failing to obtain assent, will come down one notch and so on. A structure of this sort can be seen in (13), where the cross-examiner first asks whether the girl has had sexual intercourse on many occasions, to which there is dissent, falls back on several, which is again resisted, and so on. We understand too, of course, why the girl resists: her understanding like ours rests on a reconstruction of the intended line of argument, and, given the goals that the activity assigns to her, she must try to thwart that line of argument. In the case in question she was sometimes relatively successful at this, as indicated by the following extract (Toner 1977: 158):

- (14) 1 ...you guessed by then this was a man who wanted to make  
advances to you, didn't you?  
2 Well, I didn't think of it straight away.  
3 I know you didn't think of it straight away. I am now asking  
you about the time when you missed the turning and started  
talking, according to you, about going to Taunton?  
4 Well, I thought about it, but I just sort of kept it at the back of  
my mind. You know, I didn't really want to think about it.  
5 You thought about it, and your evening having fallen flat you  
were not adverse to it, were you?  
6 *I don't understand what you mean.*  
7 Well, you didn't mind?  
8 Of course I minded.  
9 I want to make this quite clear. You did not say, 'Stop the car'  
because you didn't want the car stopped?  
10 I did.

This example should make clear the way in which our understanding of what is going on requires reference to the underlying strategies or plans employed by both parties, which in turn are derived from the nature of the activity and the goals that it assigns the various participants. There is a way in which the question-answer format is invariant and insensitive to all of this; together with an assignment of questioner/answerer roles it constructs a turn-taking organization that gives control of topical organization entirely to the questioner, thus making the format a possible vehicle for the expression of an argument. But there is another way in which the role and the function of each question is relative to the goals and strategies of the participants: the questioner hopes to elicit a response that will count as part of an implicit argument, the answerer will try to avoid such a response. The questions may be rhetorical, in the sense that both know the answer (cf. utterances 23 in (12), 11 in (13)); they may appear to seek information when in fact the information is already known (as perhaps in 25 in (12)), or they may appear merely to seek confirmation when in fact they seek information, and so on. In each case the particular role that we see them playing is established by reference to the strategies we assume the questioner to be utilizing by virtue of the role he is playing in a particular kind of activity.

Let us turn now to another activity type where questions play an important role: *teaching children in the classroom*. Interestingly, questions are not integral to the teaching process in all cultures;

Gonja society again provides some useful crosscultural perspectives here (see Goody 1978: 40–1). Nevertheless, it is clear that questions are an invaluable resource in the classroom: firstly, because they require answers they enjoin participation; secondly, because they provide feedback they can be used to test for knowledge acquired in particular; and thirdly, because they allow the pupil to express the location of any puzzlement he or she may feel. But in what follows we shall be particularly concerned with questions uttered by the teacher, and with the larger discourse structures that are involved with these questions.

We may start with a piece of constructed data (T denotes teacher, C1 first child, and so on):

- (15) T: What are the names of some trees?  
C1: There are oaks.  
C2: Apples!  
T: Apple-trees, yes.  
C3: Yews.  
T: Well done Johnny!  
C4: Oak trees!  
T: No Sally, Willy's already said that.

The example illustrates that to participate properly in this activity you have to know more than just how to answer questions. For C4's utterance was a valid and truthful answer to T's question, but the response by T indicates that it was not a valid move in this particular language game. Note too that T's rejoinder does not entirely make explicit the language game: the game could still consist of uttering any tree name Willy has not already said. T is merely alluding to the rules of the game, not stating them.

Now let us turn to a piece of real data that will illustrate the same sort of thing in greater detail and veracity. The data and some of the insights come from a study of classroom interaction by Gumperz and Herasimchuk (1975: 109ff.).

- (16) T: Jane, how do you spell *Ann*?  
J: A, N, N.  
T: A, N, N. What kind of an A?  
J: Capital.  
T: Why is it capital?  
J: Cause it's a name.  
T: Of a?



- J: Girl.  
 T: OK, Ivy, do you see a name on that page you know?  
 I: Ann.  
 T: That's the one that Jane just named. How do you spell *Ann*?  
 I: A, N, N.  
 T: How do we say A?  
 I: (no response).  
 T: Jane, do you want to help her?  
 C: I know.  
 J: The letter capital A.  
 T: Capital A, N, N. Why do we say 'capital', Ivy?  
 I: (no response).  
 T: Why should we put a capital A on *Ann*, Esmé?  
 E: Because it's someone's name.  
 T: It's the *name* of someone, Ivy. So we make it special.  
 E: A girl, the name of a girl.  
 T: Would you see any other name, Ivy, that you know?  
 C: I see a name, a *Ben*.  
 T: (to Ivy): ...any other name? Let Ivy find one.  
 D'you see a name you know there?  
 I: (pause) *Ken*?  
 T: All right, *Ken*. That's right. How do you spell *Ken*? Don't forget what you'd say to that first letter. How do you spell *Ken*?  
 A: Where is *Ken*? K, C, K, E, er..  
 T: Alex, Ivy is spelling it. Capital K—  
 I: Capital K.  
 C: (to other child) You messin up the raser already!  
 T: E.  
 I: N.  
 T: Right. *Ken*. Do you see any word that you know there, Bill, anyone's name?  
 B: *Pat*.  
 T: Where do you see *Pat*? do you see an *ae* sound in there?  
 B: No.  
 T: What sound do you see?  
 B: Pat.  
 T: Do you see an *ae* sound?  
 B: No.  
 T: What sound do you see?  
 B: *Pet*.  
 I: *Peter*?  
 T: Is there an *er* on the end?  
 I: Is it *Peter*?  
 T: Ivy's helping you. She's given you a clue. But is there an *er* on the end of that?  
 C: (inaudible).

- T: What's the word?  
 C: (inaudible).  
 T: What?  
 C: *Pete*.  
 T: That's right. How do you spell it?

In this extract I think it is clear that the teacher's questions are *requests to follow a procedure*. The procedure in question, which is recursively applied, has three parts: first one should identify names in the text; then one should spell them; and thirdly one should attend to the capitalization of the first letter. The teacher, in getting the children to go through the procedure, also requires that the children's contributions must *prove* (a) that they can identify names, (b) that they can spell them, and (c) that they know about capital letters.

It is because it is necessary in this language game to prove that one can identify a name or spell it that one cannot repeat an identification or spelling, since one might do that by imitation. And this explains the particular role that we understand T's utterances like the following to be playing: "That's the one that J just named"; "A, I is spelling it." Notice that, as in the prior constructed example, the rules of the language game are presumed even in these corrections, and not taught. In order to understand these two utterances of the teacher as having the force of dismissing the prior contribution one would need already to know what the rules of the language game are. We are left with what is here, and elsewhere I think throughout the range of activities in a culture, a genuine puzzle: how are the rules of a language game ever learnt?

Even within our culture teaching styles and methods vary a great deal, partly, of course, in relation to subject-matter, educational ideology within the school, and approaches favored by particular teachers. Let us take another example of a rather different type, where questions play a different role. The following extract from a science lesson comes from a large corpus gathered by the Birmingham (UK) discourse project.<sup>8</sup>

- (17) T: Now tell me: why do you eat all that food? Can you tell me why do you eat all that food?  
 Yes  
 C: To keep strong.  
 T: To keep you strong. Yes. To keep you strong. Why do you want to be strong?

- C: Sir, — muscles.  
 T: To make muscles. Yes. Well what would you want to do with your muscles?  
 C: Sir, use them.  
 T: You'd want to —  
 C: Use them.  
 T: You'd want to use them. Well how do you use your muscles?  
 C: By working.  
 T: By working. Yes. And when you're working, what are you using apart from your muscles? What does that food give you? What does the food give you?  
 C: Strength.  
 T: Not only strength; we have another word for it.  
 Yes.  
 C: Energy.  
 T: Good girl. Yes. Energy. You can have a team point. That's a very good word. We use — we're using —energy. We're using — energy  
 When a car goes into the garage, what do you put in it?  
 C: Petrol.  
 T: You put petrol in. Why do you put petrol in?  
 C: To keep it going.  
 T: To keep it going; so that it will go on the road. The car uses the petrol but the petrol changes to something, in the same way that your food changes to something. What does the petrol change to?  
 C: Smoke.  
 C: Water.  
 C: Fire.  
 T: You told me before.  
 C: Smoke.  
 C: (inaudible.)  
 T: Again.  
 C: (Energy).  
 T: Energy. Tell everybody.  
 C: Energy.  
 T: Energy. Yes. When you put petrol in the car, you're putting another kind of energy in the car from the petrol. So we get energy from petrol and we get energy from food. Two kinds of energy.

Despite the fact that this extract shares with (16) the fact that it is structured primarily by the teacher's use of questions, it is clearly a very different "language game" in the sense that there are different strategies and procedures in employment. Specifically, the discourse in (17) appears to be a variant of the Socratic method: the teacher attempts to make explicit a selected part of the implicit knowledge

that he assumes pupils to have, by means of a dialog of questions and answers. The selected knowledge that the teacher hopes to make explicit is an analogy or parallelism, best expressed by the proportion:

(18) food : humans :: petrol : cars

where the underlying symmetry is that the first part of each pair is the energy source for the second part. There is a parallel here to the way in which in the courtroom questions were used to extract answers that would amount to a specific argument. One difference, of course, is that whereas in the courtroom a cross-examination is more like a zero-sum game, where one party's losses are the other party's gains, here it is at least the hope of the teacher that the game is perceived as more like one of pure coordination, where both parties stand to lose or gain together. That is, the teacher hopes that by directing questions and selecting answers he will get the pupils to see in what direction he wants them to answer. And there is a presumption of cooperation. The game then consists in trying to get the pupils to see the proportion in (18) and to state the underlying rationale for it.

It is important to note to what extent the procedure here is cooperative and dependent on the pupils foreseeing the *kind* of answer that the teacher has in mind. The answer to the teacher's first question, for example ("Can you tell me why do you eat all that food?"), could equally well have been *Hunger* or *Mother cooks it* or a host of other responses in the wrong direction. Nevertheless, these might be truthful answers. Similarly, to the question "When a car goes into the garage, what do you put in it?" there would be many correct but useless answers – useless in that they would not advance the game – like *Air*, *Water*, *Oil*, and so on. The game could not proceed efficiently, if at all, simply by a selection of randomly produced answers. To play the game the pupils must know the kind of thing the teacher is trying to do, they must foresee the general line of reasoning, and they must cooperatively help to build it.

The discussion so far has in fact oversimplified the nature of the game in (17), and thus the amount of knowledge that the children require in order to play it effectively. Consider how the children are meant to come to a realization of the proportion in (18), and what

will count as a display of that realization. They are meant to use the same linguistic category to express the relation between humans and food and between cars and petrol. We see from T's rejection of C's answer "Strength" to the question "What does food give you?" that the relation must be expressed by the word *energy* to count as a winning move in the game. The game has then a metalinguistic element. An interesting thing about this element is that it seems to commit the teacher to holding a special view of the relation between language and the world, something approximating to that held by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. For only on such a view would the activity of placing two events, objects, or relations under the same linguistic description amount to saying something about the relationship between those two events, objects, or relations in the real world. This Tractarian assumption then, seems to underlie the insistence on the use of the word *energy*.<sup>9</sup>

We are now in a position to state the knowledge that the child needs in order to play in this particular language game. He must know that not just any truthful answer to the teacher's questions will count as a valid move; he must attempt to foresee the line of argument so that his answer will contribute towards it. Moreover, he needs to see that not just any expression of his contribution will do, and specifically here that parallelisms should be expressed under an identical verbal relation. To do this, he must be able to recognize sameness of linguistic description, and his understanding of the relevance of this will certainly be aided by a grasp of the teacher's Tractarian views (without this grasp the activity will appear to be a purely linguistic game rather than a science lesson).

I have talked loosely of "language games" at two levels: on the one hand, one has the activity type which in part determines the role that language will play; and on the other hand, one has particular strategies or procedures within the activity – like teaching spelling in a particular way, or drawing out the pupils' implicit knowledge about energy sources of various sorts. Does the existence of these lower-order structures indicate that the notion of activity alone is not predictive of (or explanatory with regard to) the rules of language use in an interesting way? I think not, because there are intrinsic connections between the two layers of organization. For example, there are certain goals that seem to be taken as

central to teaching. One of these is to impart knowledge, but more importantly to organize knowledge, especially by drawing out important parallels – let us call this the gnomic function; another is to impart abilities, or knowledge of procedures, like spelling, counting, and so on. Now, given some other aspects of the activity, especially that one functionary (the teacher) has control both in task setting and turn taking while the rest must try to do whatever task the teacher assigns, various detailed features of the teaching strategies or procedures can be seen to follow – in the sense that they seem to be rationally adapted to achieving the overall goals. For example, the procedure used in (16) where each child was called upon to demonstrate the ability to identify and spell proper names was a rational way of testing whether that ability had been acquired, and perhaps of enhancing that ability by practice. So it is ultimately against the background of the goals of the activity as a whole and the derivative structures and pedagogical strategies that detailed features of the organization make sense. So an utterance of the form “A, B is spelling it” can function as a command for A to shut up, because it is understood that the teacher T schedules the events, that T has asked B to spell it in order to ascertain whether B has learnt the relevant procedure, and that T is therefore not now interested in A’s ability.<sup>10</sup>

It seems, then, that the various levels of organization within an activity cohere, and can be seen to derive as rational means from overall ends and organizational conditions. It may be that the means chosen only *seem* rational to the participants at the time, or are assumed to be on the basis of received wisdom, or more often are rational but turn out to be ineffective because other conditions have not been taken into account. In any case the coherence of the different levels seems to reside in a general tendency towards rational organization.

In the light of the very different usages of questions in these examples, let us return to examine the definition and characterization of a question. Our basic problem is this: can we factor out from all these different usages a common core which we can continue to think of as part of the semantics of questions? Or is there no such core, but rather only a set of language games in which they play roles related by “family resemblance”?

One influential way of thinking about the properties that indivi-

duate different illocutionary forces is to factor out the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the nondefective performance of the relative speech act. This is the characterization of speech acts by means of the specification of their “felicity conditions” as advocated by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1976). After stating that “there are two kinds of questions (a) real questions, (b) exam questions” (1969: 66), Searle produces the following felicity conditions for “real questions” (the corresponding ones for exam questions are presumably as I have indicated in brackets):

- (19) Propositional content condition: any proposition or propositional function.

Preparatory conditions: (a) S does not know “the answer” (exam Q: S knows the answer but does not know whether H knows it).

(b) It is *not obvious* to both S and H that H will provide the information at that time without being asked.

Sincerity condition: S wants *this* information (exam Q: S wants to know if H knows the information).

Essential condition: Counts as an attempt to elicit this information from H.

It is clear that in line with Searle’s method one could go on elaborating the conditions; for instance, for real questions there seem to be other preparatory conditions to the effect that S has reason to think that H might know the answer, that S expects H to provide a response, and so on. The notion of ‘answer’ can be independently characterized as an assent or dissent to the proposition of a *yes/no* question, or the completion of the open proposition in the case of *Wh*-questions.

The problem for us is that many of the questions that we have examined do not fit into this schema as either “real” or “exam” questions. For example, the utterance 11 in the courtroom example (13) (“And you are seventeen and a half?”),<sup>11</sup> does not fit the first preparatory condition, the sincerity condition, or the essential condition: both parties know the answer and know that they know the answer, the speaker does not want the information nor does he want to know whether the hearer knows it, nor is he attempting to elicit the information although he is attempting to elicit a response (namely the answer). We could say that this is a rhetorical question,

in that these properties are typical of such questions, and that rhetorical questions are "really" statements (see Sadock 1974, for one such line). However, the fact that a response that is an answer is expected and given distinguishes this question from rhetorical questions where responses are inappropriate or optional.

Take another of our questions, the first utterance in example (17) ("why do you eat all that food?"). Again both parties know a wide range of truthful answers to this question and know that they do – so it does not fall within Searle's category of exam questions. The questioner does not want the information, nor does he want the children to show that they know it, he merely wants a response drawn from the pupils' tacit knowledge that will advance and make explicit his argument about a specific analogy.

Most of the other questions in our examples will also fail to fit Searle's schema in one way or another. Consider the questions in greetings (*How are you?*), where the answers are more or less prescribed so that all the felicity conditions concerning knowledge, information, and desire for it must be wrong. Consider too the special uses in Gonja between joking relatives, or in law courts, as described at the beginning of this section. It is really hard to see a common core to all these kinds of questions, except that they elicit responses of specific kinds. But that will hardly distinguish questions from bets, offers, and so on. Moreover, some questions do not seem intended to elicit responses, unless we consider silence a response – consider the use of sentences like *How could you do that to me?* in a quarrel. Nor will the usual strategy for the rescue of the concept of speech act from the diversity of discourse – namely, to identify a paradigmatic type and then consider other usages "indirect speech acts" (see Gordon and Lakoff 1975; Searle 1975) – work very well here: the questions in the courtroom, for example, are not easily understood as other kinds of speech acts masquerading in question form. Nor is the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts so clear in practice: consider the first utterance in (16) for example ("J, how do you spell Ann?"): is this an imperative ("Go through the procedure of spelling Ann!") in question form? But how else would you answer the question except by demonstrating how to spell Ann?<sup>12</sup> Sometimes it is easier to demonstrate an "answer" than to describe it.

Other linguistic approaches to the analysis of questions tend to



accept the existence of well-defined felicity conditions; the problem is, then, where in a linguistic description these should be accommodated. If one accepts the performative analysis (Ross 1970; Sadock 1974; Lakoff 1975), then they can be seen as presuppositions of the higher verb of saying. Even those who have avoided that analysis have tended to see their job as dismantling the hybrid theory of speech acts and parceling out the felicity conditions to either the semantic or pragmatic component, where they are thought more properly to belong (see e.g. Katz 1977). But if felicity conditions are variable in relation to discourse context, then none of them are the sort of thing one wants in an orderly semantics in any case.

Is there anything left that one could claim to be the semantics of questions? Note that if one rejects the performative analysis, and there are now a great number of arguments why one should (see e.g. Gazdar 1976 and references therein), then there is reason to think that illocutionary force has nothing to do with semantics, and should rather be handled entirely in pragmatics. Not all linguists seem to see this. Katz (1977), for example, while rejecting the performative analysis, argues that because one has to provide the semantics for *ask* in such statements as *John asked Mary what the time was*, one should assimilate the same semantics to the *question form* in direct questions. But the argument seems confused: one might as well argue that because one has to provide the semantics for *kick* in sentences like *John kicked Bill*, one should provide the same semantics for the action of kicking. Reports of acts have semantic characterizations, acts do not.

If there is a role for semantics to play in the characterization of questions it is probably in the characterization of the logical relation between questions and answers. But since there are also pragmatic constraints on adequate answers (of the sort outlined by Grice 1975, as well as the sort specific to activities), and since there are many appropriate responses to questions that are not answers, the precise role that this relation will play in the definition of a question is certainly not clear to me.

If, on the other hand, the illocutionary force associated with questions is an entirely pragmatic affair (as for example in Stenius's 1972 account), then there is no reason to resist the fact that the nature of questions can vary in relation to the particular language games in which they play a role. In that case Wittgenstein's

failure to make a distinction between speech acts and the activities they are used in would have a more principled basis than is currently thought.

## 5 Conclusions

We have argued that types of activity, social episodes if one prefers, play a central role in language usage. They do this in two ways especially: on the one hand, they constrain what will count as an allowable contribution to each activity; and on the other hand, they help to determine how what one says will be “taken” – that is, what kinds of inferences will be made from what is said. Both of these issues are of some theoretical and practical interest. For example, knowing the constraints on allowable contributions will be an important part of what Hymes (1962) has called *communicative competence*, the knowledge required to use language appropriately in cultural situations. The inferential side to these constraints adds an important further element to our understanding of, and appreciation of the importance of, inference in discourse. In addition to the very general principles outlined by Grice (1975), and the very specific organizations of background knowledge emphasized by workers in artificial intelligence, there are *activity-specific rules of inference*. Again having a grasp of the latter will play an important role in the reception side of communicative competence, the ability to understand what one hears. And because these activity-specific rules of inference are more culturally specific than other sorts, they are likely to play a large role in crosscultural or interethnic miscommunications, an area of growing interest (see e.g. Gumperz 1978). Computer models of language understanding are also likely to prove disappointing if such bases for inference are not taken into account.

The apprehension will no doubt be that a full understanding of the ways language usage is inextricably entangled with social activities will require the description of a heterogeneous mass of arbitrarily varied, culturally determined language games. Certainly, compared to simple overarching principles of a Gricean sort, this is something of a Pandora’s box. Nevertheless, as we proceeded through the examples we were able to show that many features of these language games are not unprincipled. Rather there seems to

be a healthy tendency towards the rational construction of language games as organizations functionally adapted to achieving certain goals – the main purposes of the activity in question. A very good idea of the kind of language usage likely to be found within a given activity can thus be predicted simply by knowing what the main function of the activity is seen to be by participants. If that is the case, then *all the details of constraints on language usage within each activity need not be taught to the foreign-language learner, or incorporated into a language-understanding program; it will suffice to specify the general goals and any special unpredictable constraints.*

And finally we have tried to show that Wittgenstein's abstention from a distinction between speech acts and speech events, both of which fell under the rubric of "language games," was more principled than speech-act theorists would have us believe. To quote him:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? – There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten ... Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (1958a: 1.23)

We explored this doctrine through an analysis of questions and their usages in various activities. And we may take as an epitaph to that investigation another quote:

If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games in view you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: "What is a question?" – Is it the statement that I do not know such-and-such, or the statement that I wish the other person would tell me ...? Or is it the description of my mental state of uncertainty? (1958a: 1.24)

## Notes

1. Those more familiar with basketball tell me that I have assigned the wrong functions to some of these utterances, on a mistaken analogy to soccer. They tell me that (1)1 is obviously a commendation, (1)4 a critical encouragement. *But my mistake only illustrates the point – how specialized the uses of language can be to the particular activities within which they are employed.*

2. I have in mind distinctions like Searle's "Word to World" versus "World to Word" fit: a sports commentary mirrors a nonspeech event, but magical rites are often held to create the world they describe. Another distinction can be made between cases where concurrent actions describe or illustrate the words, and cases where the words describe the actions. Consider, for instance, how the same set of photographic slides of, say, Venice could be used to illustrate a lecture on architecture or to describe a holiday trip: in the one case the slides merely illustrate the talk, in the other talk merely amplifies the slides.
3. Recollect that I have confined my remarks to the structural rather than the stylistic properties of speech events; here the constraints on contributions that I have in mind are especially those on the functions that utterances will be understood – if possible – to have.
4. It may be argued, incorrectly I think, that the implicature from *saw x* to *read x* (where *x* is reading matter) is *particularized* in Grice's sense, that it only holds in certain special circumstances. Its cancellation might then not be dependent on certain levels of cooperation, but due simply to the absence of those special circumstances. However, precisely analogous arguments to those I am making here can be made from other examples that have indubitably *generalized* conversational implicatures. For example, *three* generally implicates "no more than three," and so the following exchange is expectable only in noncooperative situations like legal settings:
 

A: How many men were with you?  
 B: Three.  
 A: No more than three?  
 B: Well, perhaps as many as five.
5. A final issue that arises in connection with inference can be a very real interactional problem, that faces conversationalists: how does one ascertain *which* activity one is in at any one point in an ongoing interaction? Sometimes the gross facts of physical setting, time, copresent personnel, etc. are insufficient to determine the activity. Then one may work backwards, so to speak, from the nature of verbal contributions to a determination of what kind of activity the other participants, at least, think they are in. The need for this kind of inference frequently arises where one kind of activity comes embedded within another, for example joking sequences within work talk, or business transactions conducted at a cocktail party. A good locus for the study of such activity-identifying processes is where misunderstandings arise due to different cultural or subcultural origins of participants: John Gumperz and associates have done some important work in this areas (see e.g. Gumperz 1978; Gumperz and Tannen 1979). My lack of attention to this problem of "frame invocation" is a gross oversimplification if it is taken to imply that the determination of the activity one is in is unproblematic, but that is not my intention. In this chapter my main aim is to establish that the activities within which utterances occur play

- a central role in the assignment of function or import to those utterances. If this can be established, the question of how activities are recognized becomes, of course, all the more important.
6. More recently we have the formal treatment of questions as the sets of possible, or true, answers by Hamblin (1973) and Karttunen (1977). Another long-standing tradition, of course, is to think of questions as imperatives to tell specific answers; there is a rather sophisticated treatment along these lines by Hintikka (1974) incorporating an epistemic element – a *yes/no* question gets paraphrased essentially as “bring it about that I know that p or not-p.” The interactional element here is also clear: an answer will only be adequate relative to the asker’s epistemic state. The problem with this line of attack is that it assigns a very specific pragmatic function to questions, while empirically they seem to have a very wide range of functions, as will be fully documented below.
  7. I am reminded by Carlotta Smith that it would be useful here to distinguish and relate *constraints* on activities from the *strategies* that may flourish within them. We may take constraints to be normatively imposed, and maintained at least in part by the fact that failure to conform may yield quite unintended misinterpretations. Strategies, on the other hand, may be seen as optimal or self-maximizing patterns of behavior available to participants in particular roles, *under* the specific constraints of the relevant activity.
  8. The example is cited here by kind permission of Malcolm Coulthard. These and other materials appear in Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns (1980).
  9. It is a Tractarian game, Jay Atlas points out to me, insofar as the syntax of language is *made* to mirror the structure of the world. The emphasis on the metalinguistic element in this game derives directly from Jay Atlas’s comments on a version of this paper given to a seminar in Cambridge.
  10. Much of this discussion ties into the controversy over the nature of indirect speech acts; for some discussion and many references see Brown and Levinson (1978: 137ff.). The classic articles are reprinted in Cole and Morgan (1975).
  11. I have not always distinguished between what are syntactically questions and what are only prosodically marked as questions, although there are clearly some pragmatic differences here. But in most cases we could substitute syntactic questions for those marked by other means in our examples without changing those aspects of the text that we are interested in here. In any case the argument here could be conducted equally well with syntactic questions, drawn from a wider range of data.
  12. Let us ignore the other readings of the manner adverbial implicit in *how*, as revealed in such joke answers (this one produced by Jay Atlas) as “Correctly every time.”