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Abstract
The idea of a speech act and of the illocutionary or performative force of an utterance was first elucidated some 45 years ago by John Austin. Today’s on-going interest in lexical teaching methods, with the emphasis on the formulaic aspects of language use, draws upon philosophical analyses which link formulaic expressions to one very large class of spoken items, namely, institutionalized utterances. A variety of sources for gleaning a repertory of common performative utterances is presented. Several simple formal exercises used to exploit such utterances are described.

Introductory polemic
English teachers are notoriously pragmatic. Success or failure in their teaching relates not so much to learners’ test results (although such measures do apply) but to the proper use of various skills which teachers so laboriously seek to impart.

The precise nature of language skills — involving both their description and their acquisition — forms the core question surrounding language teaching.

Linguistics, one of the broadest of sciences, encompasses a myriad of pursuits, not all of which concern learning. At one end of the spectrum, we slip into the philosophy of language, while at the other end (please excuse the one-dimensional analogy) we have pure linguistic description: recording sounds and gestures and transcribing the social product of linguistic convention. The former drifts into abstract realms while the latter betakes of anthropology.

Among the roiled waters of linguistics other currents flow: the proponents of formal linguistics attempt to establish general syntax theory, applying it to any language while others try to describe the rules we use to create new words from some initial base set.
Another, equally ambitious project would, by means of a finite number of categories, describe all types of social interaction from which a relation could be drawn between the types of utterances most commonly employed in a given situation and the situations themselves.

This somewhat tedious enumeration is not meant to exhaust the potential subjects; its aim is to show that linguistic inquiry embraces an awesome range. The question that arises, however, is how all this diversity might help hard-pressed pragmatists struggling to teach skills to their bemused or overwhelmed or demanding pupils one and a half hours a week. The practitioner can justifiably drown in or, more frequently, ignore the welter of detail. All the same, ignorance does not lead to salvation when knowledge is at stake. What works for ostriches does not hold for pragmatists.

Ideally, it helps to know where one stands with respect to what one does in any discipline. In sports, we need coaches to do just that. Teachers are critical observers. But what they observe depends as much on what they believe as on what they know. To whom might we look for a critical vantage?

**Starting point: speech acts**

Philosophers over the course of the century have concentrated on understanding the meaning of affirmative sentences or statements, seeking to explain meaning. Many philosophers such as Russell and the logical positivists, and empiricists in general considered language as an exchange of information. Many textbooks tread the same path: we start with affirmative sentences whose verbs are conjugated in the simple present, then move on to the interrogatives and so forth. Then we consider events taking place as we speak, afterwards we talk about the past (or vice-versa, for the present progressive requires a more elaborate explanation than the preterit), then the future, and finally what would be the case, if something else were, and such like. *Most of what is taught revolves around expressing facts.* But how does one explain the ostensible question "*How do you do?*" Is it a question? Conjugated in the simple present, does it not concern a habitual action or state, or some atemporal truth?

"*How do you do?*" is an example of a speech act. The utterance does not solicit a factual answer (in most contexts, the reply has the form of a question, viz. "*How..."
do you do?"), but rather performs an action. It expresses recognition of the other person, a type of greeting. *I beg your pardon* (?) is a speech act where the speaker is neither begging, nor asking a formal question. The sentence usually means "please repeat what you have just said". In other contexts, it might also mean "I don't believe my ears", or "what you just said has shocked me".

John Austin, the British linguistic philosopher, was the first to cast light on the role of speech acts. He initially distinguished two types of utterance (the act of speaking, although if one were mute, scribbling down the phrase before a given public would have the same effect): constatives and performatives. Austin wrote:

"the constative utterance, under the name so dear to philosophers, of statement, has the property of being true or false. The performative utterance, by contrast, can never be either, it has its own special job, it is used to perform an action — an action, perhaps, which one could scarcely perform, at least with so much precision, in any other way."²

Initially, Austin asserted that performative utterances covered the manifold actions described by all the linguistic action verbs in our language: promising, convincing, maligning, flattering, etc. However, as his thought evolved, Austin realized that flat affirmative statements could be assimilated to performative utterances.

Austin's major contribution to our view of language, aside from his cogent analysis of speech acts, lies in his simple observation that many things we say are not statements, that we use language not merely to describe things. This perspicacious insight reveals a problem with generative-type grammars which curiously only give examples of affirmative statements. *Hence the utter poverty of their approach as far as teaching a language.*

Austin's approach has been taken further by the American philosopher John Searle who affirms that:

"It is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol or word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol or word or sentence, which is the unit of linguistic communication, but rather it is the production of the token in performance of the speech act that constitutes the basic unit of linguistic communication".³
Speech acts, therefore, are the intentional embodiment of the abstract forms that language seems to have. Clearly we must have at our beck and call a finite number of tools. We start with our base set and construct elaborate discursive strategies to get things done. Generative grammarians are interested in understanding how we construct complex units from simple base sets. But the unsung English teachers must succeed elsewhere: they must impart upon their students the conventions involving speech acts, that is, they must explain to their students how to wield a sentence such as “how do you do” and distinguish it from “what do you do”? And how to explain the difference between “I saw an accident, it was terrific” and “I saw an accident, it was terrible”, just as in France we master “c’était pas terrible” in drawing a clear distinction from “c’était pas mal”. Praising and condemning, being spiteful and being ever so kind — all these actions are performed with either sharp tongues or through kind words. Foreign students need to know how to praise their hosts, convince their colleagues, understand obscene jokes, disagree, express polite disgust, throw out a mirthful line, tell someone that they know they have been shortchanged, and proffer blandishments when the need arises.

Clearly all linguistic mastery requires the ability to match the context and the act; to choose from among the collection of linguistic elements the one whose meaning fits the speaker’s intent. Obviously, no given set of rules determines by a rigid convention the specific utterances produced on every occasion: no description for every kind of social interaction has ever been known to exist. Austin sought to subsume in general categories the different types of speech acts, and he drew up a series of lists to that effect. If no overall description of social interaction exists, there must be certain general categories. Greetings, for one. But think of how you greet people in the morning when you wish to avoid prolonged exchange: are there fixed ways for going about this?

The question here deals with describing social interaction and speakers’ intentions. All this concerns our native language(s). Can we say that general categories of interaction must apply to all human societies, and that being a person entails engaging in some of these types of interaction? If you agree, the challenge boils down to finding and teaching students these equivalents. But does this not exceed our time and budget? And doesn’t this approach raise the problem of cross-cultural communication? I imagine it does, but learning a language requires
just that — assuming you are not merely seeking to exchange pure information, like trading baseball cards. In limited contexts, purely constative language will do the trick. But aren’t we performing speech acts when we carry out our day-to-day activities? Don’t people learn language to do things in various environments? Travelers set off with phrase books in their baggage. Michael Lewis has said that tourists take dictionaries and not grammars. I insist on the need to memorize the conventional phrases used to perform the most commonplace speech acts. This type of learning is commonly accepted as fundamental. There remain, however, the more “sophisticated” speech acts, those expressing sarcasm, incredulity, cynicism, which don’t appear in the standard methods used in the classroom and yet these classes of actions are used daily to deride, decry, disapprove and dismay. How do we recognize sarcasm except by the particular “extra-linguistic” context?

The Vocabulary Conundrum: Words As Tools Of The Trade
Having raised the question of language function, and perhaps the specter of functional syllabi, let’s address the more humdrum dilemma of vocabulary. Some authors advocate committing to memory word lists, in particular those containing the most frequently used words. Hence the crucial role played by frequency tables. Indeed, this would seem to be a preliminary step for recognizing a word. Yet the problem lies not in mere rote acquisition of vocabulary, the words themselves cluster in multiple-unit expressions which in turn give rise to the basic skeleton of meaningful exchange: a taxonomy of the multi unit items is given by Nattinger and DeCarrico. More recently Moon has sought to classify these items. Among the fixed structures occur phrases or sentences of limited length labeled variously “institutionalized utterances” (Lewis’s term) or “functional lexical phrases” (Nattinger and DeCarrico’s term, but they use “institutionalized expressions” as well). Institutionalized utterances are the fundamental elements used in the most widespread speech acts. People do not remember the exact words, they understand the speech act. Thus, the learner must recognize the entire structure and not some component thereof. For institutionalized utterances, although formed (tautologically) by strings of words, are much greater than the sum of their parts.

I contend that we should incorporate into our pedagogy these institutionalized utterances, or more correctly, we should teach students under what conditions
the tokens of these sentences can be successfully brought to bear and hence become speech acts.

**Pedagogy**

How can we find a representative sample of speech acts? Where should such a syllabus begin? How does learning a language begin? We can't start off from the cradle again. Not in a thirty-hour class. So what do the students intend to do with the language? Give scientific lectures or negotiate new markets?

Several suggestions. To learn suitable sentences for performing successful speech acts, the teacher must start from conversations. We need to gather together as large a range of short social interactions as possible from which we can extract the institutionalized utterances. This seems like a hopeless task. In fact it isn't. Part of the work has already been done.

Today, a variety of large-scale proficiency tests exist and are administered with ever greater frequency. For the purposes of exposition, I shall concentrate on the listening component of the paper-based Test Of English as a Foreign Language, The test contains three parts, the first of which is a listening test. The listening test is itself divided into three parts, the first of which contains 40 short conversations with a question for each. These conversations provide a full range of speech acts. The test section requires the examinee to recognize under what conditions a given speech act is being used and often choose, from among four multiple choice answers, a reformulation of the original fixed expression used to perform a specific speech act. The college testing service obviously has concluded that knowledge of an institutionalized utterance and its performative force is a key element in judging a student's language level. I certainly do not want to conclude that every potential speech act is embraced by the TOEFL test, but a large number are.

What I am advocating here is to use this material in a novel way. It is not always easy to explain the intentions of the speakers. As an example consider the following:

Look, I'm sorry to bother you, but the music's really loud.
I didn't realize (you could hear) it.
What will the woman probably do?
I have underlined the main stressed syllables. The above transcript clearly depicts a speech act. You are face to face with a plausible situation, but as well it contains a standard apologetic stem “Look, I’m sorry to bother you” used to stifle possible rage. In class couldn’t the teacher imagine other possible scenarios and conclusions other than the peaceful lowering the volume? For example “turn down the music, would you” could also be taught in this context.

As a further exercise, we can draw up sentence matches such as the following:

| Match the elements from the right-hand and left-hand sides of the following table so as to obtain standard context-determined sentences or short conversations. |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I’m sorry to bother you about this but | You want to make a good impression on our guests.                                                                |
| Congratulations! I understand your wife had a baby.                              | But he told me he had to work.                                                                                     |
| Could you bring my English dictionary back?                                | We can’t afford to serve them that tonight.                                                                        |
| Shouldn’t someone                                                            | your children keep throwing rocks at my dog.                                                                       |
| Are you sure you cleaned all the rooms?                                      | you liked deep-fried oysters.                                                                                      |
| Look at the price of roast beef today!                                      | You must be thinking of someone else. She’s not pregnant.                                                          |
| I didn’t realize                                                             | I don’t how to put this, but I left it on the bus yesterday.                                                       |
| Bill said he’s coming to the party tonight.                                  | Yeah, I’d better check my bags again just to make sure.                                                            |
| Have you taken everything you need for the trip.                              | buy the cake for tonight’s party.                                                                                  |

In the above I have split both single sentences and short conversations; it might be better to separate the two techniques. I admit that the choice has been made of rather trite sentences; but what we seek are precisely those hackneyed elements of the language.

Short examples such as below can be used to reinforce various types of sentence use; in this case “Can he do that and—” used to express skepticism.
It is extremely important to note that while word by word translation leads to monstrous difficulties, when students seek sentence-length equivalents for the institutional utterances, translations abound.

Institutionalized expressions such as “it doesn’t matter” or “what’s the matter” or “don’t look at me” all can be taught using this method. Since cassettes accompany the TOEFL preparation courses, teachers can avail themselves of the recorded material to hone students’ listening abilities.

**Video**

A much more detailed approach for learning the conventional expressions exists in the form of video-based teaching. A large amount of video or cinema production can be used in language classes to study the entire intentional situation or to scrutinize the fixed expressions. Here though, teachers must prepare the transcripts and gird themselves for the grueling context analysis. The video sequence chosen for study should contain a conventional conversational embodying some speech act. Jean-Louis Habert has outlined a method of this kind, albeit more preoccupied with grammatical niceties, than pragmatic behavior.

**Materials**

Taxonomies aside, what materials are readily available today to teach the basic pragmatic functions of conventional phrases? Tidbits are scattered throughout the standard methods, yet no standard guidebook exists. While it is impossible to predict what institutionalized expression will be applied to a given social interaction, it is certainly possible to gather a corpus of conventional exchanges and subject them to intentional analysis. Yet, this dissociation of context and sentence or token, is to be discouraged, because we learn these conventional sentence-types through their context-bound occurrences. It is well-nigh impossible to foresee every use of “you’re looking beautiful” but it’s a safe bet that flattery is the usual goal.
Michael McCarthy, who supervised the *Cambridge Word Routes* series, provides a section entitled “language for communication” at the end of each volume. These contain a large number of conventional sentence types with the correlated performative classification. This in itself should tempt a teacher to buy the book. The same author has, in collaboration with Ronald Carter, produced a unique effort to study the pragmatics of the spoken language in *Exploring Spoken English*, Cambridge University Press, 1997 (with a cassette). In that work, the authors present, analyze and develop exercises using unrehearsed conversations forming part of a large spoken English data-base, the CANCODE project. Unfortunately, the exercises could be improved.

**Conclusion**

The few ideas expressed in this article just scratch the surface. The field lies wide open for innovation. Institutionalized expressions presented in the context of speech acts should become an integral part of the classroom.

**Biodata**

Preston Perluss majored in mathematics and minored in linguistic philosophy at San Francisco State University. In 1985, he obtained a magistère in teaching French as a foreign language from the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. Since then, he has been teaching and conducting research in lexicology and discourse analysis while preparing a doctorate at the University of Paris-IV in 18th century Parisian urban history.

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Notes

1This difficulty, I would argue, hinges on the illocutionary uses of the "present progressive", as to the meaning of illocutionary, see the following note.

2Performative and constative, a groundbreaking lecture delivered first in French (of all things!) at Royaumont in March 1958 published in [Searle; 1972] p. 13. Earlier, in 1955, Austin presented his theory of language when he gave the William James lectures at Harvard, published posthumously (Oxford University Press, 1962, 167p.) as How to do things with words. In these lectures Austin distinguishes three aspects of an utterance: its locutionary character, that is, what is said (its meaning or propositional content, if you will); its illocutionary force, that is, what one intends to do when uttering (ordering, complaining and such like) and finally the perlocutionary effect: what the utterance does to the listener (angers, relieves, inspires, etc). Please excuse this over-simplification. Bear in mind, however, that Austin's thought is quite rich and intensely pertinent to present-day concerns with language use.


4Lewis, Michael, The Lexical Approach, 1993, Hove, Language Teaching Publications. Lewis writes (p. 132) "dictionaries remain largely restricted to vocabulary and fixed collocations. A resource book of lexical phrases including sentence heads and
institutionalised utterances should be an important priority for one of the major publishing houses”.

5See Nation and Waring in [Schmitt and McCarthy; 1997] for both an overview of the subject and a staunch defense of the method.


7Moon, Rosamund, “Vocabulary Connections: multi-word items in English”, in [Schmitt and McCarthy; 1997], p 43-47.

8Op cit. In particular, Chapter 3, “Functional aspects of lexical phrases”, wherein the authors draw up lists akin to those sketched out by Austin.

9Idea of chunking as expounded by Ellis in [Schmitt and McCarthy; 1997]

10Linda Thalman has given a list of internet addresses for American movie screenplays; she provides sites for American TV screenplays as well. Here is an invaluable starting point for developing classes based on performative or illocutionary analyses, see her article, “Video and the internet” in TESOL France Journal, volume 4, 1997 (On video), p. 86-94.
