

What sentences do

Act 1: Speech Acts and Sentence Types

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EGG, 28 July 2025

What is this class about?

We use language with **intent** to **make things happen**:

- | | | | |
|-----|----|--|---------------------|
| (1) | a. | I now pronounce you married. | <i>Performative</i> |
| | b. | Hey, stranger! | <i>Greeting</i> |
| | c. | Please buckle your seatbelt. | <i>Command</i> |
| | d. | Is there a doctor in the house? | <i>Question</i> |
| | e. | The butler was the murderer all along. | <i>Statement</i> |
| | f. | Yikes! | <i>Interjection</i> |

Slogan: *saying things is doing things*

Action performed by making an utterance: 'speech act'

Big question

What kinds of actions can we perform with what kinds of utterance and why?

Connecting speech acts to meanings

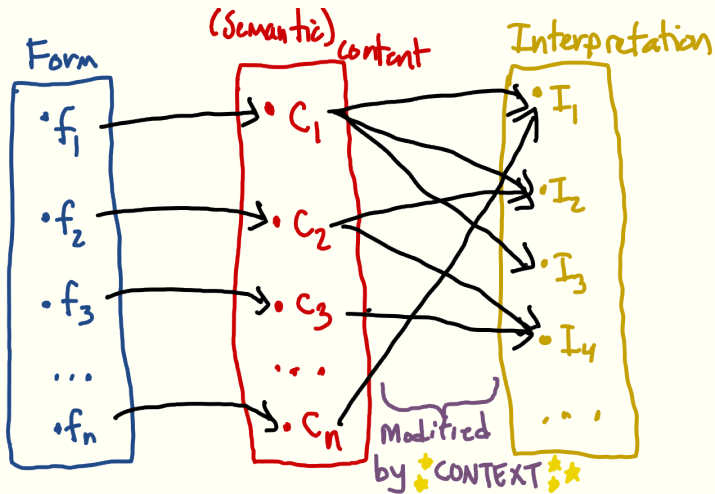
Some intuitions that seem like a linguist might want to capture them:

- ❖ Saying declarative sentences usually **provides information**
- ❖ Saying interrogative sentences usually **requests information**
- ❖ Saying imperative sentences usually **issues commands**

But!

- ❖ How should we model the meaning of these different sentence types to capture their communicative intent?
- ❖ How can we do the above while also allowing for sentences to be part of other kinds of speech acts?
- ❖ Need (a) an account of sentence meaning, and (b) an account of how this relates to **discourse contexts**

Connecting form and meaning



Goals of this course

Connect linguistic **form** to semantic **content** to **interpretations** in context in an optimal way (h/t Donka Farkas):

- ✦ maximize explanatory power
- ✦ minimize redundancy
- ✦ draw distinctions only when empirically justified
- ✦ allow us to make testable predictions

Today

- ✦ Introduction(s)
- ✦ Establish the lay of the land: what do we want to capture?
Empirical/theoretical considerations?
 - ✦ Speech acts
 - ✦ What are the sentence types?
- ✦ A first look at cool/tricky data

Expectations for you

This course will be driven in no small part by your (and our) interest!

- If there are topics you.PL want to explore more, I'd love to know about it.
- ✦ You are encouraged to ask questions and participate in discussions!
- ✦ New observations, challenges, data cleaning, and objections always welcome

Updates and corrections, along with slides, on the course website:

<https://rotom.github.io/eggweek1>
(or google my name/check syllabus on EGG website)

There are **optional** readings online. Some are very long. Obviously, I will not assume that you read them, but they are at least worth a glance.

What do sentences do?

Components of a speech act

A minimum of the players we need (Bach & Harnish 1979) in describing a speech act:

- ❖ A **speaker** Sp
- ❖ An **addressee** Ad
- ❖ A **context of utterance** c
- ❖ A **linguistic expression** e

Different layers of the speech act:

- ❖ **Utterance Act:** Sp utters e to Ad in c
- ❖ **Locutionary Act:** Sp says to Ad in c that xyz
- ❖ **Illocutionary Act:** Sp does something or other in c
- ❖ **Perlocutionary Act:** Sp affects Ad in a certain way

Our focus: connection between **utterances** and **illocutionary acts**

Sentence form

Four* main (morphosyntactic) flavors of sentences (aka ‘sentence mood’):

- (2) a. **Declarative:** The wombat is snoring.
- b. **Interrogative:** Is the wombat snoring?
- c. **Imperative:** Snore, (wombat)!
- d. **Exclamative*:** What a cute snoring wombat!

The same rough inventory across languages (at least the first 3):

(3) Dutch

- a. De wombat snurkt.
- b. Snurkt de wombat?
- c. Snurk!
- d. Wat een schattige snurkende wombat!

(4) Estonian

- a. Vombat norskab.
- b. Kas vombat norskab?
- c. Norska!
- d. Milline armas norskav vombat!

What illocutionary forces do we have?

Long philosophical tradition in speech act theory, starting from Austin (1962)

Some common forces: assertion, question, command

Problems for speech act theory: what forces are there? How are they defined?

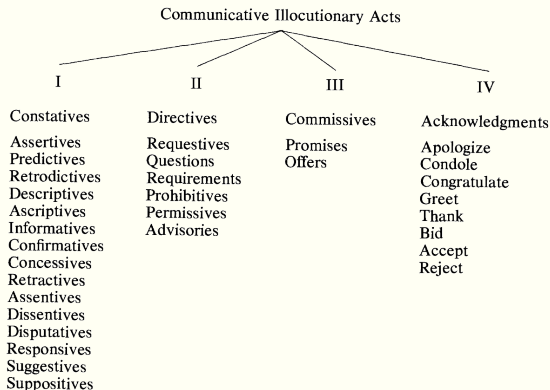
For linguists: do we need illocutionary force operators? If so, what is their role?

- ✦ Putting things in categories is only as meaningful as the categories themselves

Ideally we would like our ontology to have some empirical basis
Nice descriptions, but missing some empirical rigor

What is wrong with this picture?

Taxonomy of speech act types, from Bach & Harnish (1979):



If our goal is to explain the form-meaning connection, do we have forms for each of these types?

Where do forces come from?

‘Syntaxified’ idea: left-periphery **force operators**, heading a ForceP (in the extended projection of CP) (Rizzi 1997, a.m.o.)

- ✦ Sentences denote (e.g.) propositions, which are transformed into speech acts by illocutionary force operators

Supporting evidence: edge-occurring discourse-oriented particles

(5) Estonian

Ega sa midagi pole unustanud?
PRT you anything be.NEG forgot.NEG
‘You haven’t forgotten anything(, right?)’
(Sign after airport security checkpoint)

(Roberts 2023: ex. 6)

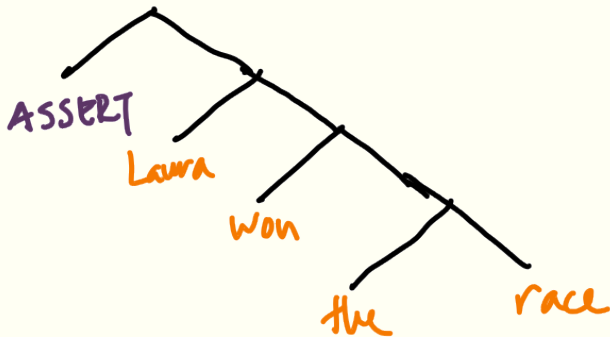
(6) Cantonese

nei5 hai6 mei5gwok3 jan4 **me1**?
2SG COP USA person PRT
‘You aren’t American, are you?’

(Lam 2014: ex. 11)

Depicting speech act operators

Schematic structure of *Laura won the race*:



An alternative

Some theoretical motivations to pursue another course than an operator-based view:

- ✦ Why have operators that are always (or almost always) silent?
- ✦ Illocutionary force is obviously context-dependent, so we need an account of interaction with context regardless
- ✦ Thus, assuming operators in the syntax substantially increases theoretical complexity for limited payoff

Alternative view I hope to convince you of this week:

- ✦ Discourse effect of uttering a sentence of a particular type is **constant**
 - ✦ More ambitiously: uttering sentences of *any* type has a unified discourse effect
- ✦ inferences about speaker intent/speech act arise from the above effect + general pragmatic reasoning

Building blocks of a theory

Beginnings

Three main ingredients of an account of the form to update pipeline:

1. (Syntactic) form—we will (mostly) take this for granted
2. (Semantic) content of sentences—more tomorrow
3. **Conventions of use:** connection between semantics and discourse context update—more Wednesday

Goal: A principled account of what sentences mean in context

Tactic: Look at a variety of illocutions with the same sentence type and see what they have in common and when they vary

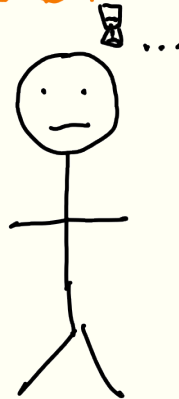
**What do declaratives,
interrogatives, and imperatives
do?**

Canonical view: uttering declarative sentence does speech act of **assertion** by default

What's an assertion?

- ✦ Public judgment of a proposition as true (Frege 1892, 1918)
- ✦ Proposal to update the common ground (body of shared info)
(Stalnaker 1978, *et seq.*)
- ✦ Attempt to convince hearer of p (Grice 1957; Bach & Harnish 1979)

ASSERTION



Not all declarative utterances are purely ‘assertions’, in that they also have other communicative effects:

(7) **Threat**

If you cross me, there'll be hell to pay.

(8) **Promise**

I'll turn in the assignment no later than Monday.

(9) **Indirect question**

I wonder what we're having for dinner.

Desiderata for a theory of declaratives

Intuition: The conventional discourse effects (CDEs) of uttering declaratives usually is assertion-y (to be precisified)

Other effects come from:

- ✦ interaction between discourse context and CDEs
- ✦ lexical semantics of key parts of the sentence (*order*, *promise*, etc.)

We will have similar desiderata for other sentence types.

But what about intonation?

One thing we should put a pin in: the kind of intonation a declarative sentence has dramatically affects interpretation!

Falling↓ vs rising↑ declaratives:

- (10) John is getting married↓. (Isn't that nice!)
- (10) John is getting married↑? (That's news to me.)

What is asking a question?

Interrogatives ‘ask a question’/‘raise an issue’. But what does that mean?

(11) Do you have a vegan menu?

Canonical view:

- ✦ **requests** information, solicited from
- ✦ a **possibly knowledgeable addressee**, to
- ✦ alleviate **speaker ignorance**

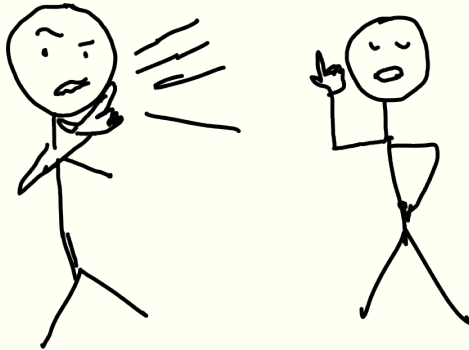
(Searle 1969; Dayal 2016, a.m.o.)

Coordination view: To open public coordination on (resolving) an issue, which typically involves the above

(?Roberts 1996/2012; Ginzburg 1996; Farkas & Bruce 2010; Murray & Starr 2018);
see also discussion by Rawlins 2024)

QUESTION

??



Non-canonical questions

Some interrogative utterances don't have the canonical properties:

(12) **Rhetorical questions**

A: Who will win the election?

B: Do I look like a psychic?

✗ Info-seeking, ✓ Knowledgeable Ad, ✗ Sp ignorance

(13) **Exam questions**

Teacher, to student: Is Bratislava the capital of Slovakia?

✓ Info-seeking, ✓ Knowledgeable Ad, ✗ Sp ignorance

(14) **Self-addressed/musing questions**

Will it rain tomorrow(, I wonder)?

✓ Info-seeking, ✗ Knowledgeable Ad, ✓ Sp ignorance

(15) **'Controversy' questions**

Conspiracy theorist YouTuber: Was 9/11 an inside job?

✗ Info-seeking, ✗ Knowledgeable Ad, ✓ Sp ignorance

(Sadock 1971; Han 2002; Rohde 2006; Caponigro & Sprouse 2007; Biezma & Rawlins 2017; Farkas 2022, 2024; Roberts 2024, a.m.o.)

Interrogatives and bias

With interrogatives, another wrinkle: **bias**

- (16)
- a. Do you like wombats?
 - b. Don't you like wombats?
 - c. Do you not like wombats?
 - d. You like wombats, right?
 - e. You like wombats, don't you?

★ (a)-(e) raise same issue, but differ in the **speaker's attitude towards possible resolutions** ⇒ correlation with special *form*

Like declaratives, intonation also plays a role in interpretation:

- (17)
- a. Do you speak Dutch ↑ or Frisian ↓?
 - b. Do you speak Dutch ↑ or Frisian ↑?

What's the difference between (a) and (b)?

Canonical imperatives

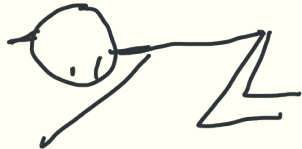
Canonical view: Impose upon the addressee an obligation to do something

- (18) a. Clean your room!
 b. Please pass the salt.

Version which is weaker than 'obligation' but still on the same track
(Searle 1975):

- ✦ Conveys that *Sp* wants *Ad* to do *x*
- ✦ Acts to induce *Ad* to do *x*

0 1 2 3 4



Other kinds of imperatives

Not all imperatives seem to act to attempt to get the addressee to bring something about.

(19) **Advice, instructions**

- a. Take bus 27 to Janskerkhof.
- b. Beat eggs well and incorporate flour.

(20) **Finger-crossing imperatives** (my term)

- a. To a slot machine: Give me triple 7s!
- b. Before a blind date: Please be blonde! (Condoravdi & Lauer 2012)

(21) **Curses, blessings, well-wishes**

- a. Go jump in a lake! (idiomatic)
- b. (May) God bless you.
- c. Get well soon!

Imperatives and intonation

Like declaratives and interrogatives, intonation matters.

Rising intonation makes imperatives seem much more like suggestions:

- (22) A: I'm so tired. I can't concentrate on semantics anymore.
- a. B: Take a nap↑? Go home↑?
 - b. B: Doe een dutje↑? Ga naar huis↑? (Adapted from Rudin 2018)

The black sheep: Exclamatives

Exclamative sentences express surprise on the part of the speaker at the extremeness of some degree property.

English: either have subject-aux inversion (like polar interrogatives) or *what/how*+degree

- (23) a. (My,) what big teeth you have!
 b. I just flew in from Vegas and [boy, am I tired!]

Some debate over whether they belong in the canon:

- ✦ Much less infrequent than other sentence types (distributionally marginal)
- ✦ Relatively specific meaning
- ✦ Lack of dedicated morphosyntax cross-linguistically

In defense of exclamatives

We won't get to discuss exclamatives much in this course :(, but they are very understudied.

One reason to think they matter: some langs do have dedicated morphosyntactic signatures of exclamatives:

(24) **Dutch**

- a. Wat **een** mooie bloemen heb je!
what a beautiful flowers have you
'What beautiful flowers you have!' (lit. 'What a beautiful flowers you have!')
- b. Je hebt (*een) mooie bloemen.
you have a beautiful flowers
'You have beautiful flowers.'

Wrapping up

Uttering different types of sentences have different discourse effects:

- ❖ Declarative → assertion
- ❖ Interrogative → question
- ❖ Imperative → order

But each kind of sentence can perform many other kinds of speech acts!

- ❖ Can be thought of as a kind of **form-meaning mismatch**
- ❖ What are the constraints on the form-meaning mapping?

For tomorrow: Think about what the common denominator is among subtypes of **declaratives** and **interrogatives**

- ❖ Are there subtypes we didn't mention? (In English or any other language)?

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