Decomposing Speech Acts

Johannes Heim

University of British Columbia

Direct (e.g. Saddock 1974, Levinson 1983) and indirect (e.g. Beyssade & Marandin 2006, Farkas & Roelofson 2017) characterizations of the relation between clause type (syntactic form) and speech act (pragmatic function) have one problem in common: they map decomposable forms onto epiphenomenal functions. I propose an alternative account of deriving speech acts by abandoning any (in)direct link to their clause type and by decomposing speech acts into two variables encoding propositional attitudes. One variable captures the speaker's commitment to an utterance, another their expectation on the addressee's engagement. As a consequence, we find similarities between different speech acts that go unnoticed with a notion of speech acts that depends on clause types.

In English, questions and assertions are conventionally encoded by clause type and intonation:

(1)   **Convention I**: declarative (DEC) = assertion / interrogative (INT) = question
(2)   **Convention II**: falling intonation ($\downarrow$) = assertion / rising intonation ($\uparrow$) = question

Depending on how these conventions interact, the interpretation changes. The examples in (3) show how the conventions hold for falling declaratives in (a), and for rising interrogatives in (b); the examples in (4) show that mixing conventions provides us with different interpretations:

(3)   a. It is raining$\downarrow$ {after a glance out of the window}
       b. Is it raining$\uparrow$ {after the Addressee reported that he checked the weather forecast}
(4)   a. It is raining$\uparrow$ {after the entrance of a wet coworker into a windowless office}
       b. Is it raining$\downarrow$ {after asking the same question twice before without a response}

This simplified account of encoding speech acts has three problems: Firstly, all of the convectional forms of encoding clause types are ambiguous: Inversion, wh-pronouns, and rising intonation are also present in constructions not interpreted as questions. Secondly, prosodic analysis shows that a $\downarrow/\uparrow$ distinction needs to be expanded by at least one further contour, a modified rise ($\nearrow$). This modified rise has a smaller excursion than the rise found in polar questions. Thirdly, a question/assertion distinction is insufficient. One uncontroversial function of rising intonation that is difficult to reconcile with the question/answer distinction is that between completed and uncomplete turns independent of clause types (5). Another is where a modified rise does not signal continuation, but an uncertainty about the relevance ((6) from Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg 1990):

(5)   a. It is raining$\nearrow$ so I take a bus home$\downarrow$
       b. Will you bike$\nearrow$ or a bus$\downarrow$
(6)   My name is Mark Liberman$\nearrow$ {after walking up to a receptionist}

I propose that a single conceptual shift will resolve all three problems: the central variables for interpreting SAs need to be described in gradable, rather than categorical terms. This is possible if we focus on the conventional use of speech acts rather than their encoding: Speaker Commitment captures the degree to which the Speaker publicly commits to the issue currently negotiated for entering the Common Ground (Stalnaker 1978); Addressee Engagement captures the degree to which the Speaker engages the Addressee to resolve the issue currently negotiated for entering the Common Ground. Evidence for a gradient distinction of these variables comes from their different context of use, which can be traced by the variation in compatibility with subjective predicates, evaluative adverbs, (in)direct evidentials, addresses, and calls. This paper will develop a set of heuristics that can determine the individual degrees of Commitment and Engagement. We can

extend this analysis to incorporate (at least) nine different speech acts in English, including the examples in (5) and (6), wh-questions, echo-questions and the use of the incredulity contour.

References

Beyssade, Claire & Jean-Marie Marandin, 2006. The speech act assignment problem revisited: Disentangling speaker's commitment from speaker's call on addressee. Empirical issues in syntax and semantics, 6, 37-68.

Farkas, Donk. F., & Floris Roelofsen, .2017. Division of labor in the interpretation of declaratives and interrogatives. Journal of Semantics, 34(2), 237-289.

Levinson, Stephen C., 1983. Pragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pierrehumbert, J., & Hirschberg, J. 1990. The meaning of intonational contours in the interpretation of discourse. In P. Cohen, J. Morgan & M. Pollack (Eds.), Intentions in Communication, 271–311. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Sadock, Jerrold M., 1974. Towards a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts. New York: Academic Press.

Stalnaker, Robert. 1978. Assertion. In: P. Cole (ed.). *Syntax and Semantics* 9: *Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 315-332.