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CHAPTER

Non-Assertion Speech Acts

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Abstract

This chapter is devoted to major theoretical questions surrounding non-assertion speech acts. First is addressed the distinction between institutional and non-institutional speech acts. Then, directives, questions, expressives, and commissives are discussed in turn. Each of these classes of speech acts raise specific issues, which are separately discussed. For instance, it is important to determine the exact relationship questions bear, on the one hand, to directives and, on the other hand, to assertions. It is equally important to understand whether some expressives and commissive should be thought in naturalistic terms and how they relate to other types of speech acts. The extent to which definitions directives should make reference to desire expression is also discussed. That said, the study of non-assertion speech acts is also threaded with several common themes, such as the tension between normative and intentionality approaches, and the impact of non-assertion speech acts on theories of assertion.

Keywords: [speech acts](#), [non-assertion](#), [institutional](#), [directives](#), [expressives](#), [commissives](#), [normative](#), [question](#)

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Introduction

J.L. Austin's foundational and classic *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975) centers around a plea for loosening philosophers' traditional obsession with assertions. Austin attempts to articulate a distinction between "constative" utterances, whose main point is, in some sense or another, to represent a state of affairs, and all the remaining, "performative" ones. However, he quickly realizes that (at a certain level), every utterance, constative or not, is a speech act, resulting in specific, *illocutionary* effects.¹ While this perspective on assertion proved incredibly fecund, quite paradoxically, the fortunes of non-assertion speech acts in philosophy (and linguistics) turned out to be more variable. Of course, general theories of speech acts were generally sensitive to promises, threats, offers, questions, orders, pleas, greetings, bequests, etc. (Searle 1969; Bach and Hamish 1979; Alston 2000; Barker 2004; Kissine 2013a). However, assertion—and declarative sentences—attracted disproportionately more attention within mainstream philosophy of language than all the rest of speech acts. This does not mean, however, that every issue about non-assertion speech acts is a trivial extension of existing theories of assertion. Quite far from it: as soon as one moves beyond assertion, fascinating, and often unsolved, questions arise, some discussed in this article.

One of the reasons for the unbalanced state of Austinian legacy is perhaps that, while assertion constitutes quite an easily delineated set of phenomena, there is no total consensus on how boundaries should be drawn between non-assertion speech acts. As a result, speech act theory has been, to some extent, plagued by classification issues, the theoretical import of which, albeit often real, is not always immediately conspicuous (see Kissine 2013b for a detailed overview). That said, to start off any discussion of non-assertion speech acts, one needs to engage in some boundary drawing. This chapter is organized along the classificatory boundaries that are shared by the major theories of speech acts. Relying initially on an intuitive grasp of the speech acts types at hand, I will discuss, in turn:

- a) *institutional speech acts*, e.g., marriages, baptisms, and bets;
- b) *directives*, e.g., requests, commands, and pleas;
- c) *questions*;
- d) *expressives*, e.g., exclamations, apologies and good wishes;
- e) *commissives*, e.g., promises, threats, and offers.

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a vista of the major theoretical and empirical questions surrounding each of these categories. However, studying non-assertion speech acts also unveils more general issues of philosophy of language. For instance, it is customary, since Strawson (1964), to insulate speech acts that rely on culture-specific and extra-linguistic institutions from those that call for a Gricean analysis in terms of a speaker's communicative intentions. To begin with, this boundary is not always straightforward (promises, discussed in Section 6, are a good case in point). Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, it remains a matter of debate whether analyses of non-institutional speech acts should be couched in psychological terms, related to expression of mental states, or whether a normative approach is preferable.

Another general issue is the relationship between non-assertion speech acts and assertion, as theories of assertion often influenced, more or less directly, the way orders, questions, exclamations, or promises are approached. One obvious instance of this interdependency is given by theories of questions, which are difficult to conceive of independently of assertions; another is expressives, some of which are, as we will see, amenable to an analysis complimentary to those that are standardly used to delineate asserted contents.

Before proceeding, I would like to note that there is another, perhaps more obvious, reason for the relative predominance of assertion within works devoted to speech acts. The study of assertion is inherently intermeshed with that of the semantics of declarative sentences (as well as with the logical structure of belief and knowledge), so that theories of assertion have constantly fed on advances made in truth-conditional, formal semantics. Likewise, many contemporary semantic theories of non-declarative sentence-types—for example, imperatives, interrogatives, and exclamatives—closely interact with pragmatic theories of the non-assertion speech acts these sentence-types are prototypically used to perform—directives, questions, and expressives, respectively. But it is much less clear, still today, which kind of semantic model should be used for different types of non-declarative sentences (and for the logical properties of non-epistemic mental states).

However, it is wise not to conflate the semantics of non-declaratives with the study of non-assertion speech acts. True, there is a newly reborn trend in some quarters to build illocutionary forces (viz. the speech act type) within the logical form or properties of sentences, instead of conceiving of the illocutionary level as a property of utterances (e.g., Han 2000; Barker 2004; Boisvert and Ludwig 2006). Nevertheless, and without taking sides relative to such theories here (but see Kissine 2012; 2013a; Jary and Kissine 2014), an uncontroversial reason for setting the issue of non-declarative sentence-types apart from the study of non-assertion speech acts is that there is no speech act type that, at least a priori, can be performed using only one sentence-type.² Provided the right context, the non-imperative sentence in (2) will constitute the same directive speech act, albeit an indirect one, as the utterance of the imperative in (1); likewise, the non-interrogative in (4) can be used to ask the same question as the interrogative in (3), and the exclamative construction in (5) can serve to express the same feeling of surprise as (6).

- (1) Get out (please).

- (2) I'd like you to get out now.
- (3) How old is your son?
- (4) I'm wondering how old is your son.
- (5) Wow! The delicious chicken they serve here!
- (6) Wow! The chicken they serve here is delicious.

Arguably, the first members of the pairs in (1)–(2), (3)–(4), and (5)–(6) are direct speech acts of a certain type, while the second ones are indirect speech acts of the same type. Quite uncontroversially, a speech act of a type φ is indirect if it is not performed with the sentence-type s that is prototypically dedicated to the tokenings of φ . This presupposes, however, that the speech act type φ can be defined independently of the semantics of s . With this in mind, this chapter focuses on non-assertion speech acts without addressing the semantic issue of corresponding non-declarative sentences.

Institutional versus communicative speech acts

Austin famously held that illocutionary acts result in distinctively conventional effects. What remains unclear from his writings is the kind of convention at stake. In fact, one could argue that language is an intrinsically conventional affair, so that, trivially, any speech act appeals to (linguistic) conventions. This is, for instance, Searle's (1969) view, inherent in his willingness to associate speech-act types with linguistic meanings.³ However, a more commonly employed strategy is to adopt the distinction made by Strawson (1964) between, on the one hand, genuinely conventional or *institutional speech acts* and, on the other hand, non-conventional, communicative speech acts. While institutional speech acts depend on specific cultural institutions, non-institutional speech acts, by contrast, belong, according to Strawson, to the realm of intentional effects. That is, they can be reconstructed in Gricean terms (Grice 1957), as resulting from a complex communicative intention to produce a certain effect in the addressee's mind. In a paradigmatic incarnation of this view, Bach and Harnish (1979) analyze non-conventional speech acts in terms of a Gricean definition of mental state expression. According to them, an utterance u counts as expressing the mental state $\Psi(p)$ if, and only if, this utterance is produced with the intention that A takes u as reason to believe that S entertains $\Psi(p)$, and does so because he recognizes that u was performed with this very intention. The type of the mental state expressed then determines the kind of speech act performed. For instance, directives, such as orders and commands, express S's desires, intentions, or wishes that A bring about the truth of p , while commissives, such as promises and offers, express S's intention to bring about the truth of p (and the belief that her utterance commits her to do so).

In sum, under this Strawsonian dichotomy, non-conventional speech acts are accompanied by "natural" effects, viz. by changes in the addressee's cognitive state, whereas institutional speech acts depend on normative conditions (cf. Ball 2014). Institutional speech acts thus presuppose a system of more or less idiosyncratic extra-linguistic conventions, to which, in fact, they belong. Institutional speech acts range from declaring a meeting open and bidding five no trumps, to declaring a couple man and wife, to condemning someone to beheading. The primary point of all such institutional speech acts is to bring about a change in the normative space (which may then cause factual changes, such as one's beheading). Their successful performance depends on institutional conditions; when these conditions are fulfilled, the performance of the institutional speech act automatically entails the corresponding normative effect. *I declare you man and wife*, uttered in the right circumstances by the right person, automatically results in new obligations and rights for the newlyweds (such as filing a single tax-return form or the possibility to divorce).

It is possible to operate further distinction among institutional speech acts. For instance, Bach and Harnish (1979) distinguish between *veridictives*, which endow an assertion with an institutional status, and *effectives* (called "exercitives" by Austin 1975), which create a new institutional fact. To give an example of a veridictive, when a judge declares Colonel Mustard guilty, her assertion *Colonel Mustard murdered Dr. Black* receives an institutional status—with formidable normative consequences for Colonel Mustard—whether it is true or not. However, out of the record, in pronouncing the same words, the judge merely performs an assertion, which may or may not be true. Resigning from a company by uttering *I (hereby) resign from this position* is a good candidate for being an *effective*. When performed as a felicitous institutional speech act, for example, in the manager's office, this

utterance results in a new normative reality. However, outside the adequate framework, say, in the pub, the employee's saying *I hereby resign* would not even be false; it would not count as a felicitous assertion, for her utterance is not describing an institution-independent natural fact. Independent of the validity (or, indeed, usefulness) of the distinction between *effectives* and *veridictives*, the crucial point is that grasping an institutional speech act requires knowledge of the specific conventional pattern of which they form part. Accordingly, it makes sense to argue that the study of such speech acts belongs to the inquiry into the cultural institutions at hand.

Before moving to non-conventional speech acts, it should be kept in mind that even speech acts that have been traditionally classified as non-conventional result in normative effects. A comparison with assertion may be of some use here. The contemporary theoretical landscape roughly divides between those who analyze assertion as an intentional action (Stalnaker 1978) and those who see it as a normative action (Williamson 1996; Brandom 1983).⁴ Accordingly, "natural" effects of assertions are usually described as some kind of belief modification in the addressee's mind, whereas normative effects vary between the speaker being committed to know the asserted content and to be normatively liable to justify it. A parallel dichotomy can be applied to other non-institutional speech acts. For instance, a natural effect of a directive speech act would then be to provide, in one way or another, the addressee with a reason to act (Bach and Harnish 1979, 47–49; Kissine 2013a, chapter 5), while a normative effect places the addressee under the obligation to perform an action. Likewise, a natural effect of a question is to make the addressee realize that the speaker is willing to obtain some piece of information, while on the normative side, a question puts the addressee under the obligation to relieve the state of ignorance to which the speaker commits herself by asking this question. Insofar that the capacity to perform assertions, directives, and questions is a universal property of human communication such normative effects do not depend on culture specific conventions.⁵

Directives

At first glance, directive speech acts probably represent the conceptually least complex class of non-institutional speech acts. The prototypical aim of a directive speech act is to cause the addressee to perform some action. This communicative function is essential to human (and non-human) interaction and it is therefore understandable that a specific *imperative* sentence-type devoted to it emerged and persisted in most human languages (e.g. Millikan 2005; Sadock and Zwicky 1985).⁶

According to Searle (1975), directive speech acts are satisfied (viz. complied with) if the world comes to match its propositional content (viz. they have a world-to-word direction of fit).⁷ In addition, this match must result from the performance of the directive itself. To obey your request that I do the dishes, my washing the dishes must, at least in part, be caused by this very request; being dragged to the sink and forced to do the dishes by my in-laws would hardly count as a case of compliance. Orders, requests, suggestions, pleas, and the like fall easily within these conditions.

Searle also posits that a directive necessarily constitutes an expression of the speaker's desire that this directive be satisfied. The problematic data here are constituted by permission, advice, and warning (Wilson and Sperber 1988). I may grant permission to my son to watch a movie while having a strong desire that, instead, he reads some book. Likewise, one may give a piece of advice (or issue a warning) without caring much whether or not the addressee will follow it. Now, while some languages have specific sentence-types devoted to permission, warnings, and/or advice (Aikhenvald 2010, 201–203; Jary and Kissine 2014, 64–65), in the vast majority of languages the range of uses of imperative sentences extends to these speech acts. This typological fact makes it difficult not to consider permission, warning, and advice as members—albeit peripheral ones—of the class of directives.

The same line of objection can be directed at more normative definitions of directives. For instance, Alston (2000, 99–102) defines directives as attempts to modify the normative environment in such a way that the addressee has a (prima facie) obligation to bring about the truth of the propositional content or to provide acceptable justification for not doing so. Yet, it is not entirely obvious that a piece of advice or a disinterested warning impose such an obligation on the addressee.

However, one may argue, in the defense of the connection between directives and desire expression, that issuing even the most disinterested piece of advice, such as (7), commits any cooperative speaker to have at least a weak preference that the addressee follows the advice (Dominicy and Franken 2002; Condoravdi and Lauer 2012).

(7) A: Excuse me, how do I get to the station?

B: Take the B train.

If A doesn't follow B's advice, his behavior may be felt as a non-cooperative by B (Dominicy and Franken 2002). In the same vein, Condoravdi and Lauer (2012) propose that issuing a permission entails that the speaker prefers the realization of the propositional content over some other state of affairs that is incompatible with this realization.

That said, non-normative theories of directives, especially when they are framed in terms of reason to acts, have probably less trouble treating permission and warning as directives. Bach and Harnish (1979, 47–49) define directives as expressing a speaker's intention that her utterance be taken as a reason to act. In Kissine (2009; 2013a, chapter 4), I also define directives as reasons to act. However, in my account the status of reason to act is framed in terms of the utterance's inferential status relative to the conversational background. Under Bach and Harnish's and my views, both warning and advice constitute a reason for the addressee to act in a certain way, albeit not necessarily one that is sufficient to cause this action. Likewise, by removing an obstacle to action, permission constitutes a reason for the addressee to act, a reason that may be independent of the speaker's desires.⁸

Questions

Within classic Speech Act Theory, questions are viewed as a sub-type of directives. They are analyzed as requests for a specific kind of action: that the addressee provides some kind of information (Searle 1975; Searle and Vanderveken 1985; Bach and Harnish 1979, 47). One strong reason for rejecting this view is linguistic, as there seems to be no language that exhibits a full morpho-syntactic overlap between interrogatives and imperatives; that is, no language uses the same sentence type for the performance of (direct) directives and questions (e.g. Croft 1994; Siemund 2001).⁹ Furthermore, as a speech act, asking a question cannot be dissociated from assertion: an appropriate response to a question belongs to the assertion family, while an appropriate response to a directive is an action.

The proximity between questions and assertions is made particularly conspicuous within the classic Stalnakerian framework. In Stalnaker's (1978; 2002) theory, assertions are conceived of as attempts to add content to the presupposition set, that is, to the set of propositions that are mutually accepted by the participants to the conversation. As asserted contents become accepted, the set of possible worlds compatible with the presuppositions in force within the context of conversation shrinks accordingly. The point of an assertion, then, is to reduce ignorance within the context of conversation. Now, in asking questions, speakers make their state of ignorance manifest and, in this way, seek to commit the addressee to a certain answer, which would add to the stock of shared presuppositions and thus relieve the speaker's state of ignorance.

A *wh*-question, such as (8) or (9), calls for response whose content is to be picked up among all the possible answers to the question. This is why *wh*-questions are said to denote sets of answers, corresponding to partitioned sets of propositions (e.g., Groenendijk and Stokhof 1989).¹⁰

(8) Where do you live?

(9) What did you buy for dinner?

Groenendijk and Stokhof (1989) assimilate the *wh*-element of a *wh*-question to a variable. In their account, answering the question in (9) amounts to selecting a certain assignment of value (e.g., *meat*) to this variable. When the resulting proposition is asserted and successfully added to the presupposition set, ruled out are all the possible worlds where this proposition is true under another value assignment (e.g. *fish*, *salad*, etc.).

Note that this aspect of Groenendijk and Stokhof's (1989) account entails that answerhood conditions of *wh*-questions are exhaustive: appropriately answering a question requires full specification of the values under which the answer to this question would be true. That is, if the addressee bought fish and meat, answering (9) with *meat* corresponds to an incomplete reply; once a particular value assignment is selected—and asserted as true—all the possible worlds that correspond to the remaining alternative

assignment (e.g., answers) are rejected as non-actual, and among them the possible world where both meat and fish were purchased for dinner. While this feature of Groenendijk and Stokhof's (1989) account seems welcome in most cases, there are circumstances where non-exhaustive answers seem fully appropriate (see Dekker, Aloni, and Butler 2007 and references within). For instance, by asking (10), I don't necessarily require knowing who are all the possible holders of a lighter; I'd be fully satisfied as soon as I find one person who has one.

(10) Who's got a lighter?

Unlike *wh*-questions, polar questions, such as (11) or (12), call for a "yes or no" response.

(11) Do you live near a bakery?

(12) Did you buy some meat?

"Answerhood" conditions of polar questions such as (12) require that that the addressee modifies the presupposition set in a way that either rules out all the possible worlds where it is true that he bought some meat, or those where it is false that he bought some meat. Note that an answer to (9) can modify the presupposition set in these two ways, too, but also in an infinite number of other ways. In other words, answers to polar questions form a strict sub-set of answers to *wh*-questions.

It follows from the foregoing that ignorance demonstrated by a polar question is less deep than that revealed by the corresponding *wh*-questions. A still weaker form of ignorance is displayed by confirmation questions, such as (13)–(14). Here the speaker makes it manifest that she holds a more or less weak belief, whose content she seeks to (re)establish as commonly accepted.

(13) You live near a bakery, (don't you)?

(14) You bought some meat, (didn't you)?

Levinson (2012) argues that confessing one's ignorance has a certain social cost. In addition, the richer the information that is asked of the addressee of the question, the stronger the assertoric commitment he incurs by answering it. Levinson (2012) reports data indicating that "questioners" tend to ask the weakest question possible given their doxastic state. For instance, one does not ask a *wh*-question in a context where the corresponding polar question would suffice, and one does not ask a polar question when a confirmation question would do.

Of course, not all questions aim at relieving one's ignorance. Examination or quiz questions require a true answer without laying the speaker open to an ignorance charge. In order to force the strongest assertoric commitment or avowal of ignorance on the addressee, these questions rely on a mechanism of ignorance display, but without actually displaying it. As answers to polar or confirmation types form a sub-set to answers to the corresponding *wh*-questions, the latter force a stronger assertoric commitment on the addressee than the former; this is probably the reason why polar or confirmation forms are not frequently used as exam or quiz questions (see Fiengo 2007, 78).

Like examination questions, rhetorical questions do not commit the speaker to ignorance; in fact, they do not even call for a response. Fiengo (2007, 62–63) distinguishes two broad classes of rhetorical questions. The first regroups cases, such as (15), where the answer is so obvious that the speaker can be taken to imply something else.

(15) Is this lecture going to end?

The second class of rhetorical question relies on the impossibility to find an answer in order to highlight some negative proposition. Fiengo gives the example in (16), which, provided that it is mutually manifest that the answer is *nothing*, highlights that it is common ground that the speaker was not in the position to act.

(16) What could I do?

Expressives

Expressive speech acts have in common that their primary aim is to express a mental state, an attitude, or an emotion. Formulating a satisfying theory of expressives is fraught with difficulties, however. To begin with, there exist various competing accounts of expression (Bach and Harnish 1979, 15–16; Davis 2003; Green 2007), a debate that space constraints force me to leave aside here. Kaplan (1999) argues that there is an intuitively firm difference between linguistic expressions that can be judged as descriptively correct—as true—and those that can be judged expressively correct. Ignoring many nuances, (17) and (18) can then be said to, respectively, express and describe the same content.¹¹

(17) Ouch!

(18) The speaker just experienced sharp pain.

On this relatively rough understanding, expressing a mental state, an attitude, and an emotion, then, is at least different from asserting this same mental state, attitude, or emotion.

Even on such an obviously unanalyzed conception of what expressing through an utterance could be, expressives form a very heterogeneous class. One group that may be quite easily delimited within the general class of expressives is formed by “social” or “conventional” expressives. The first defining feature of social expressives is that they occur in contexts where expressing a certain attitude is socially mandated. Thus one difference between, for instance, apologizing and merely expressing contrition is that, while one may express contrition in virtually any context, apologies are conventionally restricted to certain circumstances—ones, *inter alia*, where the addressee is likely to have been offended by the speaker’s past conduct (Alston 2000, 112–113). Second, very often, albeit not always, social expressives take the form of frozen, conventionalized formulae. For instance, saying *I feel bad about having let you down* is not quite the same as adding *and I apologize for this*. Likewise, while in some sense (19) and (20) have the same meaning (Kaplan 1999), (20) would not do as a socially acceptable way to bid farewell.

(19) Goodbye.

(20) You and I are now parting from one another for a significant period of time.

In these two respects, the study of social expressives belongs to the realm of institutional speech acts and of the cultural specificities that underlie and determine them.

Owing to their conventional character, it is also intuitive that expression is quite perfunctory in the case of social expressives, that is, that sincerity constraints on the expression are somehow relaxed. For instance, apologies are not expected to convey genuine contrition, but are rather seen as intended to satisfy a social expectation or norm. Likewise, when the loser of a presidential election congratulates the victorious rival, there is often no reason to expect any sincere expression of joy about the addressee’s good fortunes.

Yet, as perfunctory as social expressives may be, and while the shape and the constraints on their use—and even their range—vary tremendously across cultures, raising fascinating ethno-linguistic issues, there arguably is room for some generalization. It makes sense to surmise that, for instance, greetings or apologies exist, in one way or another, in every human society, because humans develop rituals aimed at (normatively) prompting and encouraging spontaneous emotions to emerge in certain circumstances. This is probably why, as pointed out by Alston (2000, 112), no matter how conventional an apology or a congratulation is, combining it with an explicit denial of feeling regret or joy appears as a fatally self-defeating conversational move:

(21) I apologize. Of course, I feel absolutely no contrition for what I did.

(22) I don’t feel any appreciation for the gift, but thanks a lot!

(In the same vein, while saying *Hello* may appear as an entirely contentless, social reflex, deciding not to greet a relative at a family reunion does mean something about how you feel about him.)

According to Searle (1975; also Searle and Vanderveken 1985), in asserting, speakers aim at putting forth a content that matches how the world is (word-to-world direction of fit), and in performing directives, they aim at provoking a change in the world that would fit the directive's content (world-to-world direction of fit). He claims that, by contrast, no issue of fit, or correspondence, arises during the performance of expressives. For Searle, expressives have an empty direction of fit because they are constituted by the expression of an attitude toward a presupposed proposition—when I apologize for having let you down, it is presupposed that I have let you down. However, one may object that something like expressive adequacy or correctness is still at stake in expressives. Apologizing requires that the speaker presents herself as feeling contrition; if this is manifestly not the case, as discussed in the previous paragraph, the apology seems to be “expressively” incorrect, much in the same way as the corresponding assertion (23) would be false in the same circumstances (cf. Kaplan 1999).

(23) I feel contrition for what I did.

In the case of apologies, expressive correctness is determined by sincerity, that is, by conditions to the assessment of which the speaker has privileged access. However, the fact that greetings, such as *hello* and *goodbye*, and speech acts such as thanking, congratulating, and apologizing are generally grouped together (e.g., Bach and Harnish 1979, 51–53; Searle and Vanderveken 1985, 211) is symptomatic of the fact that expressives are not limited to emotive, subjective, or attitudinal contents. As already mentioned, *goodbye* seems to express a content equivalent to that in (20). And, as argued by Kaplan (1999) in a context where (20) is false, the corresponding *goodbye* would be expressively inappropriate. Imagine, for instance, that I think that you're leaving, and say *Goodbye*, to which you reply that you're not leaving yet. My expressive turned out to be incorrect, but for reasons to which I, as a speaker, have no privileged access.

Turning to less socially constrained expressives, Kaplan (1999) makes the same point about interjections like (24)–(27).

(24) Ouch!

(25) Damn!

(26) Hurrah!

(27) Oops!

Expressive speech acts constituted by *ouch*, *damn*, or *hurrah* are linked to speaker's attitudes or emotions; in other words, the speaker has privileged access to their expressive adequacy. By contrast, Kaplan characterizes the content expressed by *oops*, as (28), in objective terms. He imagines next a scenario where a speaker utters *oops* upon seeing a man bumping over a pyramid of glasses. However, this utterance of *oops* turns out to be expressively incorrect, because the speaker did not realize at first that what she was viewing was, in fact, part of an act staged during a movie recording.

(28) The speaker observed a minor mishap.

Such a scenario reveals that speakers do not necessarily have privileged access to the expressive correctness of the expressive speech acts they perform.

The parallel between descriptive correctness of assertions and expressive correctness of expressives, however, should not obfuscate the difference between these two types of speech acts. This difference shows very clearly in “declarative exclamations,” such as (29)–(30).

(29) Alas, Smith didn't get promoted.

(30) Wow, Smith got a wonderful job!

There is general agreement that (29)–(30) combine both an assertion and an expressive. Uttering (30) commits the speaker both to the assertion that Smith got a wonderful job and to expressing (unexpected) joy about this fact (e.g., Vanderveken 1990; Kaplan 1999; Potts 2005; Rett 2011). However, the two commitments are different in nature, as, while uttering (30) commits the speaker to the assertion in (31), the reverse is clearly not true.¹²

(31) Smith got a wonderful job.

Unexpected surprise and joy toward Smith's getting a wonderful job may also be expressed by using specifically exclamative sentences in (32)–(34).¹³

(32) What a wonderful job Smith got!

(33) Did Smith get a wonderful job!

(34) The wonderful job Smith got!

In exclamatives, however, expressive illocutionary force does not combine with assertion. While a declarative exclamation may be responded to with the denial of the asserted content, such denial would be infelicitous with the corresponding exclamative.¹⁴

(35) A: Wow, Smith got a wonderful job!

B: No, eventually the Board didn't approve his hiring.

(36) A: What a wonderful job Smith got!

B: # No, eventually the Board didn't approve his hiring.

Finally, expressive speech acts, such as good wishes or curses, may also be performed with imperative sentences.¹⁵

(37) Sleep well.

(38) Get well soon.

(39) Go fuck yourself.

There is an important contrast between declarative exclamations and good wishes or curses cast in the imperative mood. As seen above, utterances of declarative exclamations combine the performance of an expressive speech act with the prototypical function of declarative sentences, viz. assertion. By contrast, in good wishes like (37)–(38), the use of the imperative is clearly non-directive. In fact, it is precisely because it is mutually manifest that the addressee has no control over the realization of the propositional content, viz. that the directive interpretation is impossible, that (37)–(38) can be interpreted as good wishes (cf. Dominicy and Franken 2002). One may argue that in good wishes, the speaker makes as if she were performing a directive. While this suggestion may make sense for curses, it does seem that, literally, (37)–(38) are good wishes, and that any directive interpretation, such as the one forced in (40), is precisely a non-literal exploitation of this literal meaning.

(40) Get well soon, that's an order!

Commissives

Promises are the most prototypical and most discussed members of the class of commissive speech acts. However, defined as the class of speech acts whose primary aim is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action, commissives also comprise, *inter alia*, offers, consents, and threats.

A natural effect of a commissive is usually described as inducing the belief that the speaker is under the obligation to perform some action (e.g., Bach and Harnish 1979, 50). Of course (without further analysis), the obligation component of such a natural effect remains irreducibly normative. In his famous derivation of *ought* from *is*, Searle (1969, 172–188) relies on linguistic conventions that govern the use of the performative prefix *I promise*_. Promises, according to him, give rise to the speaker's commitment in virtue of their linguistic meaning. However, positing such a linguistic convention requires explaining the existence of a normative frame that allows a speaker to contract obligation merely in virtue of saying so (see Heuer 2012a; 2012b for a review). A related

problem is that not all commissives are performed with a specific wording; very often, declaring one's firm intention to perform an action counts as a commissive. For instance, in many cases using (41) to tell your PhD student that you will read his last draft commits you to do it as much as the formal promise in (42).

(41) I'll read through it tonight.

(42) I promise you to read through it tonight.

Threats are different from promises, first, because most of the time they are conditional on some action of the addressee, and, second, because they involve an action undesirable for the addressee, which very often may bring along negative consequences for the speaker (Verbrugge et al. 2004; Kissine 2008a; 2013a, chapter 6). However, threats are usually considered to belong to the same class as promises, since they also commit the speaker to a course of action; to be efficient a threat must be taken seriously, which implies that the speaker is known to act as she threatens to (on the social importance of keeping threats, see Nesse 2001). However, there is no conventional linguistic form associated with threats, and, notably, the verb *to threaten* is unacceptable as an explicit performative, which casts further doubt on Searle's solution.

(43) ? I threaten you to break your neck (next time you whinge about your supervisor).

Related objections can be raised against accounts that relegate commissives to the realm of institutional speech acts (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Alston 2000). Promises, according to proponents of such views, create binding obligations in virtue of specific social conventions. In other words, the fact that promising to read a paper creates the obligation for the promisor to read it should be explained in the same idiocultural, institutional terms as the fact that once the president declares the meeting open, the meeting is effectively open. However, institutional speech acts are often associated with specific, frozen linguistic formulae, and, in any event, require specific institutional frameworks to be felicitously performed. As we just saw, successfully promising, by contrast, does not necessarily require any specific wording, and there are no a priori institutional barriers preventing anyone from promising anything in any circumstance. Furthermore, it remains unclear how a specific social convention that imbues promises with normative power could emerge. Finally, it is very doubtful that bindings created by promises, threats, and offers are not to be found in every human society.

Now, there does not seem to be any language that dedicates a specific morpho-syntactic type to commissive speech acts (Sadock and Zwicky 1985; König and Siemund 2007).¹⁶ Instead, promises are always performed by declaratives. Interestingly, in languages where the imperative paradigm extends to the first-person singular, first-person singular imperatives usually express desire or permission-seeking, but no commissive use seems to be attested (see Aikhenvald 2010, 72–75). This is one reason for not treating commissives as first-person directives. Another is that directives directed at a group including the speaker, such as *Let's write a paper*, don't create obligation, but purport to create one, conditional on the acceptance by the addressed group (Hamblin 1987, 36–39; Kissine 2013a, 155–156).

It thus seems that commissives call for an account that explains how asserting one's intention to perform an action generates the obligation to do so. Scanlon (1990) argues that a satisfying account of promise should build up on the fact that expressing one's intentions creates expectations in the addressee, revising which would cause him potential cost. Consistent with this idea is the fact that only assertoric expressions of firm intentions seem to be open to a commissive interpretation (Kissine 2008a; 2013a, 153–154). While (45) is likely to be taken as a promise, no commissive interpretation is triggered by (44).

(44) Maybe I'll come to your party tonight.

(45) I'll come to your party tonight.

To be sure, not every expression of a firm intention creates commitment; it must also be mutually obvious to the addressee and to the speaker that the expression of a firm intention by the latter creates expectations in, and more generally, modifies the cognitive environment of, the former. I cannot felicitously promise a person passing by that I will wear a green shirt tomorrow (although I may try). The speaker may also make clear that her expressing a firm intention should not be taken as a promise (Scanlon 1990; Kissine 2008a; Kissine 2013a, chapter 6):

(46) I intend to come tonight, but I can't promise.

Commissive speech acts consist, then, in asserting one's firm intention to perform an action; this assertion generates expectations in the addressee, and thus creates a reason for the speaker to hold to her intention independently of her desires.

However, the obligation to keep one's promises is stronger than a reason linked to the addressee's expectations. One ought to keep one's promise even though the expectations created by the promise are not of any particular importance or relevance for the addressee. In Kissine (2008a; 2013a, chapter 6) I attempted to build a naturalistic explanation of why commissive speech acts provide the speaker with a desire-independent reason by building up on neo-Darwinian theories of the evolutionary benefits of cooperative behavior and social reputation (e.g. Axelrod 1984; Dawkins 1989; Zahavi and Zahavi 1997). Obligation created by commissive speech acts could be traced back to a long-term social cost entailed by failing other people's expectations, however unimportant these are. A reputation of being an unreliable "predictor" may lead to ostracism in future cooperative activities, with all the negative consequences such exclusion entails. It may be objected to this line of reasoning that a promise ought to be kept even though no sanction, social or otherwise, can be envisaged (Heuer 2012a). This is certainly so, but the problem is not peculiar to commissive speech acts, and is faced by anyone who seeks to explain motivation for selfless, fair, and altruistic behavior (see, for instance, Fehr and Schmidt 2006).

Summary

Non-assertion speech acts clearly don't form a natural class, a putative complement to assertions. For this reason, it is virtually impossible to reach a general take-home message at the end of this chapter. Given the diversity of the ways language is used outside the assertion family, it is not surprising that this entry merely touched the surface of some deep issues surrounding non-assertion speech acts. Two more general theoretical questions should, however, be singled out. First, one of the outstanding problems is the right way, if there is any, to draw the boundary between institutional and non-institutional speech acts. The second burning issue is whether normative theories can, and should, be applied for every type of speech acts. It is possible, as suggested by Ball (2014), for assertion, that normative accounts are not orthogonal to more psychologically oriented ones. Whatever the answers to these questions turn out to be, they require a careful consideration of different ways language can be used beyond asserting things.

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Notes

- 1 Another revolutionary contribution of Austin's is to distinguish between several levels of description of a single utterance. The two most important levels of description are the locutionary and perlocutionary ones. For an introduction and a discussion, see Kissine (2008b; 2009; 2013a, chapter 1).
- 2 Very formulaic institutional speech acts (see next section), which require a precise wording for their successful performance, are probably an exception here.
- 3 For critical discussions of Searle's position, see Recanati (2003) and Kissine (2011; 2013b).
- 4 Although a new paper related to assertion appears in print virtually every fortnight, the contributions in Brown and Cappelen (2011) still offer a good panorama on contemporary research. Jary (2010) and Ball (2014) provide two promising attempts to bring the two traditions—normative and intentionalist—together.
- 5 Instead, they are conventional, in Millikan's (2004; 2005) sense of being evolutionary stabilized patterns of behavior (cf. Ball 2014). For instance, the reason why directives keep being performed is that their normal, expected effect is to impose obligation on the addressee to comply with it.
- 6 Some, but not all; for a discussion of languages with no imperative sentence-type, see Jary and Kissine (2014, 40–48).
- 7 Note that under this view, propositional contents of directives always denote some action by the addressee.
- 8 Permission remains a problem for Bach and Harnish's definition of directives, though (see Davies 1986, 41; Jary and Kissine 2014, 57–58).
- 9 There are also indications that intonation-wise, imperatives and declaratives pattern together versus interrogatives (Gusev 2013, 29, 104–107).
- 10 Alternatively, *wh*-questions have been analyzed as denoting incomplete propositions (Fiengo 2007).
- 11 If contents or propositions are defined as sets of circumstances of evaluations (privileged possible worlds), in Kaplan's framework, (17) and (18) can be said to have the same content because their correctness conditions—expressive for (17) and descriptive for (18)—determine exactly the same set of circumstances of evaluations.
- 12 Expressives can also add to the asserted content. For instance, the derogatory *Kraut* in (i) expresses both a general negative attitude toward Germans and the information that Lessing was German. For a recent review, see Gutzmann (2013).

(i) Lessing was a Kraut.
- 13 Rett (2011) argues that there are important differences in the kind of unexpectedness that can be expressed by declarative exclamations like (29)–(30) and exclamatives like (32)–(34).

- 14 It has been argued that this is so because exclamatives like (32) presuppose their content (Zanuttini and Portner 2003); see Rett (2011) for objections.
- 15 The productivity of such usages of imperative sentences varies language from language; in addition, in some languages good wishes are not performed with imperative sentences, but using irrealis or optative moods (Jary and Kissine 2014, 65–69).
- 16 Zanuttini, Pak, and Portner (2012) argue for the existence of “promissive” particles in Korean. Note that their analysis presupposes that commissives can be treated as first-person directives.