

Review of speech acts

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2025

1 Question 1

Connect each concept on the left with its definition on the right:

Locution	an instance of using language
Illocution	an act performed merely by saying something
Perlocution	an effect of using language

Correct: Each concept connects with the definition on the same line. (This seems somehow uncooperative in this context!)

2 Question 2

Construct sentences using *hereby* with the following verbs and try to determine whether that verb can directly achieve an illocutionary effect. If there are preparatory conditions that need to be met, say what they are.

- i. promise

Example answer: *I hereby promise to take out the trash* \Rightarrow Sounds natural; seems to be a promise.

- ii. apologize

Example answer: *I hereby apologize for not taking out the trash* \Rightarrow Sounds natural; seems to be an apology of some kind.

- iii. marry

Example answer: *I hereby marry you* \Rightarrow Assuming the speaker is empowered to marry the people in question, this could succeed in actually marrying them.

- iv. insult

Example answer: *I hereby insult you.* \Rightarrow I think this fails as a speech act but can succeed because even a failure to insult could be insulting if the intent is clear.

3 Question 3

Mitchell Green's summary of illocutionary acts and illocutionary force properties says, "the characteristic point of a promise is to commit oneself to a future course of action" and "I can only promise what is in the future and under my control." What do you make of these claims in light of the following sentences?

- i. I promise you that it is going to rain tomorrow.
- ii. I promise you that you will regret your actions.
- iii. I promise you that Stanford was founded in 1885.

Example answer: These sentences seem to be counterexamples to Green's claims. One might argue that the first two have a non-literal quality that is consistent with his claim. For example, they might gain strength from a *pretense* that the speaker has control, or that control is irrelevant given the certainty of the predictions. The third one is not future oriented, but perhaps the future part is epistemic, i.e., relating to something they will look up and verify in the future.

4 Question 4

In Solan and Tiersma's chapter 'Consensual searches', they review the famous Bustamonte case, in which police officer James Rand asked Joe Alcala "Does the trunk open?" and Alcala replied with "Yes" and then opened the trunk. How might you characterize (i) Rand's intended illocutionary force for his utterance, and (ii) Alcala's perception of Rand's intended illocutionary force, drawing on the properties of illocutionary force given in section 4.2 of the 'Speech acts' handout?

Example answer: It is worth acknowledging right at the start that there will always be a great deal of uncertainty surrounding (i). We have no direct access to Rand's (or anyone else's) intentions. Even our own intentions might be hard to identify and articulate reliably. However, it is safe to say that Rand did *not* intend the force of his utterance to be that of a command. That force would likely contravene the Fourth Amendment, since a command from a police officer would be inconsistent with the requirement that consent to search be offered voluntarily. Thus, we might grant that the 'degree of strength' of the illocutionary act needs to be more like a 'request', since the preparatory conditions for a command are not met here – a command would 'misfire' on constitutional grounds.

For (ii), we could in principle ask Alcala what he perceived, and that would be pretty direct evidence. However, absent such a direct report, it seems worth entertaining the idea that Alcala perceived Rand's intended force to be that of a command, albeit one phrased in a polite way. Solan and Tiersma write, "Why, indeed, would any rational person ever agree to let the police search his possessions?" The answer is that rational people can feel unsure of what police officers are empowered to do, especially given the uncertainty surrounding legal precedents in this area. Police officers are empowered to command us to do many other things, so why not this? In our terms, this all traces to uncertainty about the pragmatic presuppositions inherent in speech-act preparatory conditions.

It is also possible that Alcala merely perceived the question to be a request. Assuming the trunk was not obviously damaged in some severe way, the question "Does the trunk open?" has a trivial "Yes" answer, and so that construal of the question is likely to be ruled out by quantity. In such situations, request interpretations of questions like this are very common. If Alcala believed there was nothing incriminating in the trunk (which is easy to imagine, given that the police had to search thoroughly and found only some bad checks), then complying with a request may have seemed like the safest option, given, again, some uncertainty about which speech acts police are empowered to perform.