SPEECH ACTS AND SOCIAL HABITS:
A Framework for Speech Act Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Early twentieth century analytic philosophers held that ordinary language was imprecise and prone to philosophical confusion. To separate scientific fact from metaphysical fiction, their project was to build an ideal logical language that was designed to accurately describe and mirror reality.

J.L. Austin challenged this approach with a strikingly simple observation: that we *do* things with words other than describing the world, such as commanding subordinates, telling a joke, testifying in court, and marrying another person. Austin referred to these uses of language as "speech acts": actions that are successfully performed by virtue of uttering certain words. Unlike his predecessors, Austin gave importance to human conversations by studying them in their variety, complexity, and use in ordinary life.

The paper presents a framework that breaks down speech act situations into four aspects—speakers, conventions, word-use, and audiences. The framework also illustrates how social habits influence the use and interpretation of language.

Further, it suggests how a variety of linguistic puzzles with legal, social, and cultural implications can be resolved through speech act analysis.

It concludes with a brief discussion of Yoshitake's critique that Austin's Speech Act Theory is speaker-centric, and should thus be modified to account for how audiences interpret what they hear. I argue that Yoshitake mischaracterizes Austin's analysis of communication, and that my framework withstands his objection.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the following situation:

> A high-profile criminal trial involving the homicide of a prominent union leader is under way. The district attorney is prosecuting Tony Soprano, a businessman rumored to have ties to mob activity. The prosecution has managed to convince one of his *caporegimes*, Bonpensiero, to testify against Soprano in exchange for immunity. On the witness stand, after swearing an oath, he says, "*I allege that I heard Mr. Soprano order the murder of Mr. Leotardo when he said, 'Whack 'em.'*"

> The judge might interrupt and say, "*I'm sorry Mr. Bonpensiero. Are you just alleging that you heard the order? Or are you testifying and swearing on your oath*?" Bonpensiero replies, "*What difference does it make? I'm just reporting what I saw.*"

The judge makes an important point which the witness seems to have missed. One may wonder what exactly is amiss with Bonpensiero's statement. He observes the syntactic rules of language because his sentence is grammatically correct. He also observes its semantic rules because it relays a coherent and logical report. If the statement is imprecise, then it must be because it violates a third set of rules—some that are pragmatic in nature—that obliges a witness in court to *testify* or *swear*, and not merely to *allege*.

Soprano's defense lawyer then cross-examines Bonpensiero and asks, "*Are you sure that 'Whack 'em,' was an order? Could it not have been a request, or an appeal*?" The defense then presents their own witness—a *consiglieri* named Dante—who claims, "*Because it was Tony who said it, I know it was a joke*!" Here we are faced with a second puzzle. The sentence is described as a *command* by one person, a *request* by another, and a *joke* by a third. But if different people all heard the same sentence being uttered, then the distinction must arise from factors apart from the words that are spoken. What is needed is a theory of language that can explain what these factors are so that one can make sense of such linguistic puzzles.

In *"Performative Utterances,"* (1957) Austin provides one such theory: language and its implicit rules are tied to the social habits of a community because its beliefs and practices influence how speakers choose their words and how audiences interpret them. Austin writes,

> *"This is just one way in which language develops in tune with the society of which it is the language. The social habits of the society may considerably affect the question of which performative verbs are evolved, and which, sometimes for rather irrelevant reasons, are not."*

The "evolved" performative verbs Austin refers to are words with considerable currency in that they are commonly used in everyday discourse. Austin does not elaborate on this idea further, but leaves much for his readers to ponder. One can begin by understanding his theory in the context of speech acts, which he also refers to as "performative utterances," an aspect of language he devoted much of his career to studying. To explicate Austin's thesis that language develops in tune with social habits, I shall discuss three main items in this paper. Firstly, I shall explain how speech acts work and identify four aspects of Austin's speech act theory that cover the different elements of speech act situations. Secondly, I shall develop an analytical framework based on these four aspects, and demonstrate how this can be used to resolve certain linguistic disputes. And finally, I shall present Yoshitake's critique that Austin's theory is too convention and speaker-centric, and should thus decentralize speaker-meaning in order to account for the role that audience interpretation plays in determining linguistic meaning. I will also reply to his objection in defense of Austin's view and explain why his critique does not discredit the framework I shall present later on.

I. AUSTIN'S ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

A. Philosophy Of Language In The Early 20th Century

The best way to appreciate Austin's philosophical agenda is to understand the view of language that he was responding to. Early 20th century philosophy was dominated by the methods employed by Bertrand Russell and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein. They observed that humans used

language vaguely and loosely, and that logical analysis was necessary to disentangle philosophical thought from imprecise and misguided reasoning. For example, Russell famously rejected Alexius Meinong's attempt to popularize "subsistence" as a solution to philosophical problems about the existence of hypothetical objects. For Meinong, propositions such as "*The round square is both round and not round*," were meaningful by virtue of someone being able to successfully refer to a round square that *sub*sisted—rather than *ex*isted—in some lower level of reality. Russell thought that this sophistry was intolerable because it led to logical contradictions and offended a more commonsensical view of reality. His alternative solution was to employ the methods of mathematics and logic as tools to analyze the deeper structure of language and make philosophical puzzles "disappear upon analysis" (1905).

Russell believed that the logical structure of propositions is concealed by the imprecise use of language and leads to philosophical confusion. Consider the proposition, "*The king of France is bald*." The statement appears meaningful at first glance, until one realizes that the proposition lacks an existing referent. If a sentence about a round square is intuitively meaningless, then so should a sentence about the non-existent king of France. Russell approached this puzzle by using the methods of to analyze the word "*the*," which he argued was really shorthand for three distinct but abbreviated propositions (1919):

PROPOSITION	SYMBOLIC FORM
(a) There is at least one person who is the king of France;	$(\exists x)Kx$
(b) There is at most one person who is the king of France;	$(x)(Kx \longrightarrow y)(Ky \longrightarrow y = x)$
(c) And whoever is the king of France is bald.	$(x)(Kx \longrightarrow Bx)$

According to the principle of compositionality, the semantic value of a complex expression is determined by the value of its constituent propositions (Miller, 2018). Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the

original proposition is faulty because (a) is false and fails to refer to anything that exists.

This revolutionary formalist approach was further popularized by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he introduced a Picture Theory of Meaning. According to this view, language shares the same logical structure with reality and thought, and only an ideal logical language can bridge the world and the mind by expressing accurate propositions (pictures) about reality. In this view if the logical structure of a proposition fails to represent the world, then that proposition is meaningless. The *Tractatus* ends with the famous line, "*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*." This was Wittgenstein's way of saying that propositions that failed to mirror reality should not be spoken at all (Wittgenstein, 1922).

The members of the Vienna Circle—scientists and mathematicians who came to be known as the logical positivists—embraced Wittgenstein's view of language, and claimed that only propositions that were verifiable by the methods of natural science were meaningful. For example, Tarski claimed that "*Snow is white*" is meaningful, if and only if, snow is actually white. In contrast, propositions such as "*God is benevolent*" (Theology), "*The Mona Lisa is beautiful*" (Aesthetics), or "*Killing is wrong*" (Ethics) were said to resemble value judgements rather than reports of actual facts, for there was no way to demonstrate the scientific truth behind these statements. For the positivists, the task of the philosopher was to expose metaphysics and other fields as non-sense because they were founded on unverifiable axiomatic propositions. This was the view of language that Austin challenged (Ayer, 1982).

B. Austin on Speech Acts

Ordinary language philosophers opposed this approach on the ground that language is multi-functional. They believed that human communication is complex, and that writing down sentences on a board to study their logical properties as the logical positivists did oversimplifies how language works. Words are not static artifacts with fixed meanings; they are used in a variety of contexts to achieve different outcomes. They believed that language ought to be studied as it is spoken in ordinary life, regardless of how sloppily and carelessly it is used, because it is in everyday situations that humans construct meaning through language. Even Wittgenstein turned

on his earlier views by conceding that there were countless kinds of sentences that he referred to as "language-games"—forms of life that used words as if they were game tokens in order to perform moves such as praying, ordering, questioning, begging, and other functions apart from describing the world (1951).

In particular, Austin pointed out that the positivists' myopic view of language risked dismissing certain utterances as nonsense, when in fact they were meaningful (1957). In "*Performative Utterances*", Austin notes that certain sentences are unique in that while they grammatically appear to be descriptive statements, they cannot be classified as either true or false. Moreover, they are uttered from the first-person point-of-view in the singular present indicative active tense. People who make these kinds of utterances are said to be *doing* something, rather than merely *saying* something. For example, a man who says, "*I take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife,*" is performing the action of marrying someone. Or a judge who says, "*I condemn you to ten years in prison without parole,*" is sentencing a convict by speaking those words. Many other events such as divorcing, baptizing, censuring, or commending are constituted by performing speech acts; hence the phrase "performative utterances". Austin developed these observations into a theory of speech acts across a number of publications. My primary objective in this section is to identify four aspects of his theory that cover the different elements of speech act situations and to integrate them into a framework for solving linguistic puzzles that arise in our daily experiences.

1. The Speaker of a Performative Utterance

In *A Plea For Excuses* (1956), Austin points out that speakers do not choose words based merely on their logical properties or textbook semantic meaning. Instead, speakers examine the context they are confronted with, and then *use* specific words to attain various outcomes:

> "*In view of the prevalence of the slogan 'ordinary language', and of such names as 'linguistic' or 'analytic' philosophy or 'the analysis of language', one thing needs specially emphasizing to counter misunderstandings. When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or 'meanings' whatever they*

may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about:
we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our
perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena."

In this passage, Austin asserts that a speaker's psychological state factors into the conversations he participates in, especially when his intentions and beliefs influence how his ideas are conveyed. Consider a company manager who is displeased with the performance of his subordinate at work. He schedules a one-on-one conversation in order to motivate his employee and improve his performance. The manager intends to be strict by sending a clear message that his employee ought to improve his work ethic, and carefully considers what he will say ahead of giving feedback. He knows that he can either utter: (A) "*I reprimand you, Mr. Smith,*" or (B) "*I insult you Smith, you poltroon.*" If he intends to maintain an image of fairness, he may utter "*I reprimand you.*" But if he believes that a stronger criticism is warranted, he may opt to utter, "*I insult you.*" This moment of reflection is an example of how speakers consider their situations before engaging in conversations and how psychological states influence the words they utter.

2. Conventions

Speech acts cannot be uttered randomly during any given situation. They are governed by social conventions and ceremonies that must be observed for them to take proper effect. For example, cobsider the comedy "*National Lampoon's Animal House*" (1978) in which the fictional students of Faber College were not allowed to become official members of the Omega Theta Pi fraternity by merely swearing their loyalty to their brothers. In order to be admitted into the fraternity, their pledges had to be performed in an official induction ceremony where the leader would to perform a speech act of acceptance to signify their formal initiation. Other prerequisites had to be observed, such as drinking unconscionable amounts of alcohol at parties to prove they belonged, or tormenting members of their rival Delta Tau Chi to prove their worth. Only when these conditions were fulfilled could an utterance such as, "*I pledge allegiance to…*" take effect and swear aspirants into the fraternity.

The formalist view of language failed to account for extralinguistic factors that either provided or deprived speech acts of their potency. This is

because symbolic logic cannot capture social conventions that exist outside of language. For example, the methods of Russell cannot capture the fact that the effect of uttering, "*I divorce you*," is location-dependent. In Egypt, uttering these words can dissolve a marriage because of the existing *Khul'a* divorce procedures (Sonneveld, 2019). But these words cannot produce the same effect in the Philippines, a Catholic country where divorce is not legally recognized.

3. Word Usage

If conventions govern performative utterances, then it follows that certain rules may be violated, and consequently, nullify or void the performance of an action. Austin referred to these situations as "infelicities", fittingly so because certain failures to perform an action can create unhappy outcomes (1975). For example, the procedures of a ceremony must be carried out correctly and completely to avoid nullifying their main purpose. In the television series *Friends*, a wedding ceremony is scheduled to take place between Ross and Emily at the end of the fourth season. At the altar, Ross sees his former lover Rachel seated in the audience. Flustered by her unexpected attendance, Ross mistakenly proclaims, "*I take thee, Rachel, to be my lawfully wedded wife*." Quite clearly, by failing to properly state the correct name, Ross fails to successfully marry Emily. But he does not marry Rachel either, because she is not the designated bride for the ceremony, nor has she obtained any valid marriage license.

Another type of infelicity takes place when words are used inappropriately. Consider how the word "confess" is used in different situations. A man who steals a loaf of bread may be apprehended and charged for theft. At his arraignment, the thief faces the judge and says, "*Your honor, I wish to confess*." The judge answers, "*Are you pleading guilty? Do you wish to admit to the charge?*" The defendant replies, "*Oh, I don't intend to confess in a legal sense your honor. I meant that I wanted to confess in a religious sense, before a priest who can absolve me of my sin*." The defendant's words constitute neither a religious nor legal confession, and he has failed to use the word "confess" correctly.

Austin (1940) would plausibly say that what prevents us from making this kind of mistake "…*is rather some semantic convention (implicit, of course), about the way we use words in situations*." Austin means that words do

not carry meanings independently of how they are used in sentences. He elaborates further,

> "It may justly be urged that, properly speaking, what alone has meaning is a sentence. Of course, we can speak quite properly of, for example, looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary. Nevertheless, it appears that the sense in which a word or a phrase 'has a meaning' is derivative from the sense in which a sentence has a meaning…to know the meaning which the word or phrase has, is to know the meanings of sentences in which it occurs."

If Austin's claim is true, then words are like tools that perform specific functions, and their meanings depend on how they are used. This is reminiscent of P.F. Strawson's criticism of Russell, in which the former says that the meaning of an expression is "…*not to talk about its use on a particular occasion, but about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions, to refer or to assert.*" (1950)

4. The Audience of a Performative Utterance

The wide range of the applications of language reveals human concerns beyond truth and falsehood, such as treating other people with decency, empathy, or kindness. Austin writes, "*Usually, there is the question are they fair or are they not fair, are they adequate or not adequate, are they exaggerated or not exaggerated? Are they too rough, or are they perfectly precise, accurate, and so on?*" (1957) Speech acts impact audiences in different ways, leading people to look for the "right words" when they converse, out of respect and consideration for those whom they are speaking to. This is because while words can communicate roughly synonymous ideas, they may also carry different connotations. Austin explains why there are many reasons to prefer one term over another in *How To Talk* (1953):

> "A feature, for example, in which different speech-acts even of the same family may differ very much is that commonly discussed in an entirely general way under the name of 'truth': even, say, with speech-acts which are associations, we often prefer for one a different term of approbation from that which we prefer for another, and usually for good and understandable reasons."

Words such as 'reporting,' 'telling,' or 'asserting' all belong to a family of performative verbs used to describe the world. Austin realized two things concerning this category of words. Firstly, to report, tell, or assert are all instances of *doing* something. They are not fundamentally different from speech acts like apologizing, joking, or questioning. This caused the original distinction between the descriptive statements ("constatives") that the logical positivists focused on, and the performative verbs that caught Austin's interest, to eventually break down. There was no compelling reason to keep descriptive statements on their former pedestal, especially when their utterance also constituted the performance of different speech acts. Secondly, although the verbs within the family share a similar function, they impact audiences differently.

Consider the family of verbs that includes 'request,' 'beg,' 'plead,' 'implore,' or 'ask. A mother may *request* a university admissions officer to consider her son's application into their school. This would seem like a fairly straightforward appeal that may or may not be honored by the officer. But if a mother says, "*I beg you to review his application*!", she communicates a sense of desperation implicit in her words. A compassionate officer may be moved to give the slot out of pity, but she may feel insulted if she wrongly presumes that she is about to be offered some kind of bribe. The effects of speech acts can be unpredictable, and sometimes require a speaker to consider the background and cultural sensitivities of the audience before he performs certain speech acts.

In summary, Austin's approach signaled a significant shift in the philosophy of language. Whereas Russell and the logical positivists dismissed human conversations as fuzzy and unclear, Austin gave them importance by studying them in their variety and complexity. The conversations Austin considered involved the encouragement of a friend, the expression of poetry, and the release of emotions—all of which are aspects of communication that symbolic logic is inherently incapable of capturing. Ultimately, Austin realized that only a small fraction of conversations was comprised of the descriptive kind that Russell was interested in, and so developed a more comprehensive theory of language that explicated its different uses and applications.

I shall now turn to integrating Austin's analysis of speakers, conventions, word usage, and audiences into a framework for speech act analysis. But I will develop this in light of Austin's thesis that social habits are tied to the use of language, and apply this relationship to discuss how a variety of linguistic puzzles can be approached by studying the nature of speech acts.

II. A FRAMEWORK FOR SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS

Before proceeding further, I shall make three clarifications concerning what social habits are. Firstly, social habits can be understood by defining the field they are most closely associated with, which is social psychology. Ciccareli and White (2015) define this field as

> " the study of behaviors and processes but includes as well the social world in which we exist, as we are surrounded by others to whom we are connected and by whom we are influenced in so many ways. It is the scientific study of how a person's behavior, thoughts, and feelings influence and are influenced by social groups."

Given this definition, social habits may be described as the norms and behaviors that are commonly practiced in social situations. These include universal customs such as expressing gratitude for receiving a gift when one says, "*I thank you for your generosity.*" But they may also refer to more localized practices in smaller social groups such as neighborhoods. For instance, in a tightly-knit and traditional community where members are all friendly and familiar with one another, "*I invite you over for dinner,*" may commonly be taken to mean "*I invite your entire family over for dinner,*" even though the phrase would not carry the same meaning elsewhere.

Secondly, given that I have explained the perspective from which "social habits" should be understood, I shall now define the *scope* of examples that I will use in this paper. Because the term is used quite loosely in ordinary language, several aspects of human behavior may be covered by the phrase. In the cases I will provide, I will include religious views, conventional

greetings, bodily gestures, historical and cultural practices, and gender norms within the purview of social habits.

Finally, what does it mean for a social habit to influence or define a speech act? I think this may be understood in two ways. Sometimes, a social habit may accompany or precede a speech act. In sports, members of the losing team may offer a handshake to the winners before saying, "*I congratulate you*." In other instances, the social habit may be constituted of performing the speech act itself. Professors who praise their students for accomplishing a project would often say, "*I commend you for a job well done*," because commending is generally considered to be an amiable and well-mannered practice.

Now that I have provided a more precise definition of social habits, I shall briefly explain my purpose in developing a framework for speech act analysis. A framework for studying language may refer to a method of analyzing the structure and rules of a linguistic phenomenon, because language is viewed as a "pattern of interlocking systems" that organizes how meaning is communicated (Clerehan et al, 2005). The framework I shall present is structured according to the four aspects of speech act situations I discussed, and focuses on one set of rules that govern language. These rules are socially determined by the dominant norms and practices of a community, and by closely examining how these rules work, we will be able to resolve a number of linguistic puzzles that people encounter in ordinary situations.

A. Four Linguistic Puzzles

Linguistic puzzles arise in speech act situations when the meaning or validity of a speech act is unclear. In this section, I shall begin by describing each puzzle and then suggest how each can be unraveled. I shall then describe more complex problems when some social rules of language and different angles of speech act analysis come into conflict.

1. Puzzles of Illocutionary Force

One puzzle concerning speech acts arises when the force of an utterance is ambiguous. It occurs when a speech act fails to include an explicit performative verb. For instance, Austin notes that even phrases such as "*Shut*

the door," functions as a a speech act, even though it does not include any explicit performative verb. But it is unclear whether it is an order, a request, a suggestion, or an appeal. In such problems, one solution is to analyze the speaker of an utterance—his beliefs, intentions, background, or role in a community—because such factors may determine the force of his speech act, which Austin refers to as its illocutionary force (1975). A sentence may be delivered with the varying forces of a command, an imploration, or even a subtle threat, and certain social habits relevant to a given situation may well determine the meaning of a speech act.

Another example, consider a third-grade class wherein a particularly tall student tells his classmate, "*I'm hungry. Give me your food.*" Feeling bullied and intimidated, the second student complies, but then informs his teacher about the incident. The teacher is now faced with a dilemma between sanctioning the tall student for delivering a threat, or dismissing the incident as an innocent request. She knows that she cannot arrive at a conclusion on the basis of the story alone. She thus deduces the meaning of "*Give me your food,*" by recalling some relevant facts about the tall student. She knows that bullying is rampant in their school, and that the tall student often associates with known bullies. He is also known to have been uncourteous to his classmates by speaking to them unkindly. Based on his history, past intentions, and attitude, the teacher judges that the tall student likely delivered a threat, and is thus deserving of a sanction. Perhaps her judgment would have been different had another student been involved because that student may have been a kind and respectful boy who never had a history of treating his peers unkindly. This example shows that in cases wherein the illocutionary force of a speech act is unclear, an analysis of who the speaker is may clarify its meaning.

2. Puzzles of Obligation

A second puzzle concerns cases wherein it is unclear whether certain speech acts are binding upon their speakers. Consider a situation where an elderly woman discovers a puddle on her bathroom floor caused by several leaking pipes. Terrified of slipping and falling, she calls her plumber and says, "*I promise to pay you anything to fix my bathroom right away!*" The plumber agrees to address her problem. After three days of work, he presents her with a bill amounting to thousands of dollars. It turns out that he rendered

other services in addition to replacing the leaking pipes. He re-tiled the bathroom floor, installed grab bars for the elderly, and purchased water-absorbing rugs to prevent her from slipping. The elderly woman is alarmed and reports this to the police, who arrest the plumber on the charge of fraud. In court, he defends himself by claiming that his client was of sound mind, and that she freely consented to pay him for his services. The question then becomes whether the woman's earlier promise created an obligation for her to pay what he demands.

One can resolve this conflict by analyzing the convention of promising. The elderly woman can argue that promises are made in good faith, making it unconscionable for the plumber to take advantage of her by charging exorbitant prices. She cannot be obligated to pay for services she never requested, despite the fact that they will benefit her safety. On the other hand, the plumber can argue that professionals take promises seriously. He counters that the elderly woman promised to pay him "anything" for fixing her bathroom, a job which is not confined to the replacement of leaking pipes. If the court rules that clients can renege from verbal agreements, then professionals become disadvantaged. The judge presiding over this case evaluates this promise in terms of how society treats similar cases. He may reason that past legal decisions made special exceptions for the elderly because society views them as vulnerable. He may point out that both society and case law do not consider verbal contracts to be enforceable. Common experience also reveals that people who speak in hyperbole do not always literally mean what they say. In the end, the judge may rule in favor of the elderly woman.

This example illustrates Austin's explanation that language develops alongside societal values and norms. Traditional and conservative communities may have a general presumption in favor of protecting their elders, while modern and progressive societies may treat everyone as equals regardless of seniority. If my analysis is correct, then puzzles of obligation cannot be resolved by purely subjective factors such as the psychological state of a speaker. They are solved by referring to how much weight a community gives to conventions such as promise-making.

3. Puzzles of Connotation

A third puzzle concerns the connotations that sentences carry. For example, consider the questions, "*Can I invite you to my office?*" and "*Can I invite you to my hotel room?*" The first might be described as a formal request, while the second might be described as an act of seduction. The latter may even be construed as an act of sexual harassment. An important but unspoken social rule is reflected in this difference: it is proper to invite someone into one's office, but inviting someone into private quarters crosses some kind of social boundary. The question then becomes what creates this distinction if both speech acts share the same logical and syntactic structure.

One answer is that the sentences themselves have come to imply and be associated with different connotations. "*Can I invite you to my office?*" seems harmless because people generally feel safe in a professional space. But the sentence "*Can I invite you to my hotel room?*" carries sexual innuendos. How this association develops is a matter of psychology or sociology; perhaps we have witnessed similar situations in movies, or have read certain stories on social media. But for this paper, we must understand this problem in the context of language.

We learn the rules of social interaction by observing how others participate in social activities, and we learn to refrain from uttering sentences that may cause undue harm. By participating in conversations, we gradually become familiar with and internalize these rules. In *The Meaning of a Word* (1940), Austin argued that word-meaning depends on the sentence in which it is used. If this is true, then the rules of language do not only describe how words are used, but also draw the line between sentences that are permissible to speak and those that should be avoided. For example, some statements are considered taboo because they are considered lewd, while some statements of reprimand are preferable to others because they are perceived to be kinder and less offensive. Although the distinctions between functionally similar sentences may be arbitrary, they are nevertheless socially determined by communities who have accepted certain linguistic rules. So in order to resolve puzzles of connotation, one must ask what a sentence ordinarily means within a given social group.

4. Puzzles of Perlocutionary Effects

The fourth and final puzzle arises when speaker-meaning is interpreted differently by an audience and results in unintended outcomes. Consider a man whose wallet and mobile phone was stolen in another country. He runs to a store offering telegram services to seek help. Unfortunately, with only a few coins in his pocket, he can only afford to send five words to his brother: "*Robbed. Stuck here. Send money.*" He proceeds to the nearest cash remittance center and waits for hours, but never receives any money. After he arrives home a few days later, he confronts his brother and says, "*I ordered you to send me money! Why didn't you*?" His brother replies, "*I thought you were either joking or lying so you could fund your alcoholism! You annoyed me!*" The problem in this example is that a speech act was performed as an *order* for a speaker but was received as a *joke* or a *lie* that annoyed his audience.

Austin accounted for such cases by distinguishing between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects. Whereas illocutionary acts refers to the speaker's expression of a sentence with a certain force, perlocutionary effects refer to how speech acts elicit responses from the audience (Lycan, 2019). Because of this distinction, there is no logical or practical necessity for speaker-intention and audience reaction to always be aligned. Austin (1975) says,

> "*Saying something will often, or even normally produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them. We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act.*"

In other words, a performative utterance can constitute two distinct actions: the speaker's illocutionary act of commanding and the audience's perlocutionary act of being annoyed. Knowledge of the audience helps one predict how they are likely to interpret a speech act. Beyond the relationship between the speaker and his audience, the dominant beliefs, attitudes, and psychological states of a community may influence how its members interpret certain statements. Sometimes, their cultural sensitivities may even filter what they hear and which part of a speaker's message they latch on to. In order to

avoid potential miscommunication, speakers must often take into account such societal factors.

As the examples have shown, linguistic disputes can be settled by breaking down speech acts into any of the four aspects and analyzing them from the standpoint of social habits. But some situations are more complex than what I have presented thus far.

B. Further Applications of the Framework

In this section, I shall address two complex problems that arise when different issues on language or social habits overlap. The first is a problem of substance: is it possible to determine the "correct" meaning of a speech act if meaning is subjectively determined? The second is a problem of form: how do we decide borderline cases concerning whether or not a speech act is voided by an infelicity?

Problems of Substance

Let us return to the example of a man who tells his female colleague, "*I invite you to my hotel room*," during a function. Feeling sexually harassed, the woman decides to press charges in court. The prosecution opens by arguing that their client was made to feel vulnerable and powerless. They point to evidence from CCTV cameras indicating that the man had been making gratuitous advances all night by wrapping his arms around her waist. They argue that such gestures carried sexual innuendos. One witness, another female colleague, testifies on their organizational culture. She reveals that chauvinism is rampant within the company, and that male employees including the defendant, habitually make lewd remarks in the presence of women. The prosecution argues that the content and substance of the speech act satisfy the definition of sexual harassment within their jurusdiction.

Meanwhile, the defense begins by claiming that the prosecution has failed to prove criminal intent. Their client, they explain, was raised in a culture where people are encouraged to be warm and affectionate. They claim that his gestures were never lascivious, that he was only ascertaining that the woman felt relaxed and comfortable throughout the event. He invited her to his hotel room merely intending to end the evening with a nightcap. It

is common practice in their company, they explain, for colleagues to have late-night drinks together. They believe such socializing fosters trust and camaraderie among employees.

How ought the judge weigh the facts of the case, assuming all of the statements he heard were true? The nature of the speech act and whether it constitutes an act of sexual harassment is unclear, because its meaning is being contested. These kinds of problems may be referred to as *problems of substance*, where the speaker and audience of a speech act may disagree on its content and what was really said. In arriving at a verdict, the judge adheres to the legal principle of *stare decisis*, which means that he must remain faithful to precedent and treat like cases alike. (Dworkin, 1977) He may research several relevant cases that were decided in favor of women, and on this basis, conclude that there is indeed a precedent for interpreting "*I invite you to my room*," to carry malicious meaning and constitute an act of sexual harassment. If this is true, then many problems of substance are resolved by referring to the relationship between a community and the conventional meaning of sentences as enshrined in law.

Problems of Form

Problems of form arise when it is unclear whether the violation of undocumented but socially accepted rules negates the validity of speech acts. In such situations, the meaning or substance of a speech act is clear; what remains uncertain is whether the speech act remains efficacious because certain mechanics or procedures were not properly observed. Consider this real-life example. The film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) concludes with the wedding of Jonathan Harker (Keanu Reeves) and Mina Murray (Winona Ryder). Director Francis Ford Coppola, well-known for his attention to detail, hired an actual Romanian priest to preside over the staged wedding. He assured that the entire ceremony would be as authentic as possible. Documents were signed, ceremonial protocol was observed, and the actual script for a wedding was followed. Essentially, it may be said that an authentic Greek Orthodox wedding took place between the two actors. Ryder claims that she knew that a bona fide wedding was taking place as they filmed it, but Reeves claims he did not realize this (Fernandez, 2019). The question is whether Reeves and Ryder actually got married when they uttered something like, "*I take thee as my lawfully wedded wife…*" Some may argue that an infelicity

was committed because neither participant expressed their intent nor consent to be wed, effectively invalidating the wedding. But others may counter that it is impossible for prerequisite psychological states to be formally documented, and this cannot outweigh the fact that an authentic ceremony took place.

This debate can be settled by an analysis of social habits and beliefs. In many jurisdictions, a person cannot legally enter marriage without intending or consenting to. This is why annulment is available as a legal option for couples who drunkenly marry in Las Vegas weddings. But beyond legality, most people would agree that speech acts staged in movies or plays should not be taken seriously as a matter of common sense. For example, nobody actually thinks that Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet have obligated themselves to love each other unconditionally, by virtue of their characters promising to do so in *Titanic* (1997), similar to Reeves' and Ryder's staged wedding. It seems that in the absence of explicitly written rules, social attitudes provide norms on when to take speech acts seriously. In this case, they stipulate the prerequisite of consent for marriage to be binding. If this is true, then problems of form can be resolved by applying principles that carry societal weight and precedence.

III. YOSHITAKE'S OBJECTION CONCERNING CONVENTION

In this final section, I shall discuss a critique against Austin's Speech Act Theory raised by Yoshitake Masaki (Kyushu Communication Studies, 2004). Yoshitake's primary assertion is that speech act theories must be decentralized; that is, they must accurately represent the "dialogical nature of communication" by accounting for both speaker meaning and audience interpretation when speech acts are performed.

His main criticism against Austin's theory is that it unfairly privileges the speaker by connecting meaning to how the speaker uses language and applies what he believes are "static" conventions. Yoshitake expounds on this assertion by making two distinct claims. Firstly, he believes that use theories raise epistemological issues, because if meaning is determined by how language is used, then only the speaker can access the

"true" meaning of his statements. But this inaccurately depicts how conversations work, because it neglects the role that audiences play in interpreting what they hear from the speaker. Yoshitake concludes that Austin's theory must be refined to account for this phenomenon without relying on use theories of meaning. Secondly, Yoshitake believes that speech act theories can be decentralized by accounting for the "dynamic" nature of conventions. Rather than relying on fixed rules and interpretations that apply across all kinds of human conversations, theories must explain how meaning is determined by the different human agents and specific contextual nuances present in unique speech act situations. Yoshitake writes,

> "*Since humans are ever-interpreting beings, they never cease attaching their own meaning to such incoming stimuli as someone's utterances and behaviors, events, and environments where one is situated…In total, there is no essential reason why the speaker's meaning is more privileged than that of the listener, because both the speaker and the listener are equally active participants of communication. By giving priority only to the speaker concerning the ownership of meaning, the listener is reduced to a mere passive decoder of the message, located out of the speaker's meaning system. Communication is dialogical in nature. Speech Act Theory has to integrate this dialogical nature of communication when it conceptualizes speech acts,*"

Yoshitake provides this example to strengthen his claim: Mary loves her classmate John, but John does not know this. At a party, John sees a familiar-looking woman, but does not remember her name. He tells Mary, "*I wonder who that girl is.*" Conventionally, speakers use this sentence intending to elicit information. But Mary does not know this; she thinks the sentence means that he plans to ask the other girl out on a date. Upset and jealous, she lies, "*I don't know.*"

Yoshitake insists that Austin's theory, because it is speaker-centric, cannot explain what just took place between John and Mary. This is because Mary's response implicitly reveals that her interpretation diverged from what John intended it to be. Moreover, their miscommunication suggests that conversations are not governed by static and uniform rules. While the

illocutionary act of asking questions ordinarily elicits a corresponding answer from an audience, John's words achieved the unexpected perlocutionary effect of disturbing it, which goes against convention.

If Yoshitake's criticisms are correct, then the framework I have presented in this paper is likewise inherently skewed in favor of the speaker by downgrading audience interpretation, placing the credibility of any analysis that arises from it into serious question. I shall begin by defending Austin's theory against his criticism, and then proceed to defend my framework by explaining how my analysis of social habits speech act situations covers the alleged deficiencies that Yoshitake pointed out.

My main reply is that Yoshitake fails to undermine Austin's theory because he mischaracterizes how human communication works. Austin pointed out that conversations do not rely on purely linguistic conventions. Multiple aspects of communication, which Austin identifies in the passage below, constantly supplement spoken language by being accessible to both the speaker and audience who participate in speech acts. Austin (1957) writes,

> "*There are a great many devices that can be used for making clear, even at the primitive level, what act it is we are performing when we say something—the tone of voice, cadence, gesture— and above all else rely upon the nature of circumstances, the context in which the utterance is issued. This very often makes it quite unmistakable whether it is an order that is being given or whether, say, I am simply urging you or entreating you.*"

Yoshitake correctly points out that speaker-meaning and audience interpretation often diverge. But people learn to use conventions through practice, and improve their communication over time. They learn to use and pick up context clues or body language to better convey ideas. Speaker-meaning and audience interpretation gradually synchronize. The use of conventions is thus not speaker-centric, because audiences learn how to use, interpret, and participate in conventions as well. Moreover, Yoshitake wrongly interprets Austin's theory to be reliant on static rules and conventions, because Austin already recognized how a wide array of communicative devices make human conversations dynamic in nature. I shall illustrate this point with my own example.

On a very warm afternoon, Smith and Jones are together in their apartment. Smith feels weary and dehydrated due to the punishing heat. He looks at the window and sees that it is closed. He wants the window opened to improve the ventilation in the room. Jones is standing near the window, enjoying a panoramic view of the city. If Smith explicitly says, "*I order you to shut the window*," Jones will very likely shut the window.

A misunderstanding might arise, however, if the illocutionary force is unclear because an explicit performative utterance is not made. For example, if Smith simply says, "*Window*," and Jones is not affected by the sweltering heat as much as Smith because he is wearing loose clothing, Jones may misunderstand Smith by thinking he wants the curtains by the window opened, not the window itself, so that Smith can appreciate the view as well.

To avoid this scenario, Smith may make use of a variety of devices to clarify the meaning of his speech act. Even if Smith utters, "*Window*," he can rely on any combination of conventions to clarify his intention. He may wave his hands as if he were fanning his face, or wipe the sweat off his forehead. He may even speak in a dry and raspy voice with a tone of fatigue to emphasize that he is feeling dehydrated. He may unbutton the top of his shirt to show how red his skin has become. These communicative devices are social habits that have come to be associated with how some people feel on uncomfortably days.

Moreover, Jones, as the audience of a speech act, can use the context of their conversation to interpret what Smith really means. He might remember Smith complaining ten minutes ago that he was already sweating bullets, or know that Smith easily dehydrates in warm weather. Even if they miscommunicate on that particular day, the next time Smith utters, "*Window*," in a similar context, Jones will better understand what he means. The ability to learn and synchronize conventions suggests that even audience interpretation relies on how social habits work as well. It is simply false to say that use theories of meaning only pertain to how speakers use conventions to communicate, for audiences participate in them as well.

The same applies to Yoshitake's example of John and Mary. John may use any number of social habits to suggest that he simply wants to remember the name of the familiar girl. He may scratch his head in confusion,

or show a puzzled and forgetful look on his face. He may speak with a tone of genuine curiosity without suggesting he is smitten. He may even bring out his mobile phone, open the Facebook application, and begin to scroll through his contacts list as if he were trying to remember the name of someone familiar. While Mary might misinterpret his intention based on words alone, she can also interpret the context of his utterance to determine his meaning.

John may even ask Mary why she looks so bothered. Mary, believing there was no better time to confess her feelings, tells John she was jealous of the other girl and that she thought that John wanted to ask her out. John claims he does not like that other girl, and reveals—to Mary's utter delight— that he has feelings for her instead. Mary then learns that whenever John utters something like, "*I wonder what her name is,*" he is simply eliciting information without intending to ask that woman out.

Austin explains how people learn to use and interpret conventions in *Other Minds* (1940), in which he explores epistemological issues in ordinary language:

> "*The questions raised…concern our past experiences, our opportunities and our activities in learning to discriminate or discern, and, bound up with both, the correctness or otherwise of the linguistic usages we have acquired. Upon these earlier experiences depends how well we know things, just as, in different but cognate cases of 'knowing', it is upon earlier experience that it depends how thoroughly or how intimately we know.*"

If Austin's analysis is correct, then his speech act theory need not be modified in the ways that Yoshitake suggests. Firstly, the theory accounts for the role audiences play in interpreting the words of a speaker after all. This is because conventions are participatory; they rely on the interpretation and cooperation of audiences to work as much as they depend on how correctly a speaker uses them. Secondly, the theory explains human communication in terms of dynamic and complex social rules, rather than static and uniform norms. The wide variety of communicative devices available to both speaker

and audience allow them to participate in a coherent and meaningful conversation in any number ways. If these observations are true, then my framework for speech act analysis similarly evades Yoshitake's objection. My framework "*integrates the dialogical nature of conversation*" by explaining how social habits function as devices of communication that enable both speaker and listener to communicate within the same set of rules and conventions. There is thus no persuasive reason to believe that Yoshitake's objection—as it stands—constitutes a compelling challenge against using the method of speech act analysis I have presented as a means to resolve some linguistic puzzles.

CONCLUSION

Allow me to conclude by returning to my opening example. The problem with Bonpensiero merely alleging Soprano issued an order to kill is because it falls short of qualifying as testimony. It is commonly understood that to allege is to claim without proof, but to testify is to assume accountability for a sworn statement. In its search for truth and justice, the court would naturally demand a testimony rather than hearsay, and the witness fails to provide this by performing the wrong speech act.

Meanwhile, the problem of whether "*Whack 'em,*" constitutes an order, a request, or a joke is solved by distinguishing the speech act's illocutionary force from its perlocutionary effects. Soprano may have spoken with the force of an order, but others may have interpreted it differently. The judge may determine its meaning on the basis of concrete facts and evidence, that given Soprano's history of mob involvement, his speech act does satisfy the definition of an order to kill, warranting a conviction on this charge.

My endeavor in this paper has been to show how analyzing speech acts from the standpoint of social habits can resolve some legal, social, and linguistic puzzles that matter in our everyday lives. I do not claim to have innovated any original solutions; after all, society already deals with such problems in the ways I have described. Rather, my purpose has been to explicate part of the implicit framework that guides our everyday reasoning and bring our hidden assumptions to the fore. Ironically, it was A.J. Ayer (1982), a logical

positivist and prominent critic of Austin, of all people, who explained why his project was valuable:

> "*In the history of human inquiry, philosophy has the place of the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous: from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science…This happened long ago at the birth of mathematics, and again at the birth of physics: only in the last century have we witnessed the same process once again, slow and at the time almost imperceptible, in the birth of the science of mathematical logic, through the joint labours of philosophers and mathematicians. Is it not possible that the next century may see the birth, through the joint labours of philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive science of language?*"

I hope my modest contribution to this science of language has been to provide some insight on some of the social rules that govern it.

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