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Illocutionary Acts from the Perspective of Questions and Answers

An examination of speech acts, especially illocutionary acts, from the perspective of the relationship between questions and answers, reveals the following. Questions are not a kind of request. Instead, questions specify the kind of illocutionary acts that qualify as answers and serve a unique illocutionary purpose that differs from that of all other illocutionary acts. Based on this analysis, I demonstrate that what I refer to as “*Collingwood’s thesis*” (i.e., “*the meaning of every utterance except questions can be determined only as an answer to a correlative question*”) can be expanded to illocutionary acts and that the expanded thesis, “*the illocutionary act of every utterance except questions can be determined only as an answer to a correlative question,*” can be proven.

I. Taxonomy of illocutionary acts from the perspective of questions and answers

1. Searle’s taxonomy of illocutionary acts

John Searle identified four kinds of speech acts in his *Speech Acts* (1969):¹

- (a) *Utterance acts* = uttering of words (morphemes, sentences)
- (b) *Propositional acts* = referring and predicating
- (c) *Illocutionary acts* = stating, questioning, commanding, promising, and so on.
- (d) *Perlocutionary acts* = persuading or convincing someone by arguing with, scaring, or alarming that person with warnings; getting someone to do something by making a request; and so on.

Searle classified illocutionary acts in his “taxonomy of illocutionary acts” (1975) as follows:²

- (1) *Assertives* $\vdash \downarrow B(P)$

These commit the speaker (to varying degrees) to the truth that something is the case (i.e., to the truth of the proposition expressed).

¹ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge UP, 1969, pp.21-23.

² John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge UP, 1979, pp.1-29.

(2) *Directives* !↑W(H does A)

These are attempts (to varying degrees) by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.

(3) *Commissives* C↑I(S does A)

These commit the speaker (to varying degrees) to some future course of action.

(4) *Expressives* E∅(p)(S/H + property)

These express a psychological state regarding a state of affairs specified under the sincerity condition and by the propositional content.

(5) *Declarations* D↓∅(P)

The successful performance of a declaration brings about correspondence between the propositional content and reality.

The first symbol (┌, !, C, E, D) in each case expresses a kind of illocutionary act, the second symbol represents directions of fit (i.e., ↓ represents the fit of a word to the world, ↑ represents the fit of the world to a word, ↓↑ represents both directions of fit, and ∅ represents no direction of fit). The third symbol represents a psychological state or sincerity condition. *B* refers to Belief, *I* refers to Intention, *W* refers to Want, and ∅ refers to having no sincerity condition. *H* stands for the hearer, and *S* stands for the speaker. (A hearer is not a person who hears an utterance, but the person to whom the utterance is addressed.)

2. Searle's revision of the taxonomy of illocutionary acts

Searle proposed a new taxonomy of illocutionary acts in his article, "How Performatives Work."³ First, he defined "a performative utterance" and "a performative verb" as follows:

A performative utterance is an utterance of a performative sentence token, such that the utterance constitutes the performance of the act named by the performative expression in the sentence.⁴

³ John R. Searle, "How Performatives Work" in *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12: 535-558 (1989) and in *Essays in Speech Act Theory* ed. by Daniel Vanderveken and Susumu Kubo, Publishing Company, 2001, pp.85-107.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.87.

A performative verb is simply a verb that can occur as a main verb in a performative sentence.⁵

Searle's "performative utterance" corresponds to Austin's "explicit performative." Searle defined a performative utterance as the utterance of a performative sentence with a performative verb as a "declaration." Non-performative utterances were defined as before. For example, "This is red" is an assertive utterance, and "I assert that this is red" is a declaration. "Pass me the salt!" is a directive utterance, and "I ask you to pass me the salt" is a declaration. The same pattern applies to other types of illocutionary acts; the taxonomy can be expressed as follows:

Non-performative utterances: $\vdash(P)$, $!(P)$, $C(P)$, $E(P)$, $D(P)$

Performative utterances: $D(\vdash P)$, $D(!P)$, $D(CP)$, $D(EP)$, $D(DP)$ ⁶

3. The particularity of the illocutionary act of questions

The utterance of question is classified as a request for information. However, it should be noted that this understanding is a kind of "descriptive fallacy," and utterances of questions are particular kinds of illocutionary acts.

(1) Is a question a request for information?

Searle construed a question as a kind of request for information. In *Speech Acts*, he stated, "asking questions is really a special case of requesting, viz., requesting information (real question) or requesting that the hearer display knowledge (exam question)."⁷ In general, questions seem to be classified as requests for information, so this is not particular to Searle.⁸ First, let us examine this interpretation.

Is questioning a request for information? Searle raised the following in this regard: "What's the name of the first President of the United States?" is indeed a request for information, and answers to such questions are assertive utterances. However, not all

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ We can represent performative utterances in the following way:
 $D(\vdash P)$, $D(!P)$, $DC(P)$, $DE(P)$, $DD(P)$

$D(\vdash P)$ considers \vdash as a part of a proposition, and $D(!P)$ considers $!$ as a part of an illocutionary act. As the words "I assert" in "I assert that P" is a part of the proposition, I adopt the notation $D\vdash(P)$.

⁷ Searle, J. R., *Speech Acts*, Cambridge UP, 1969, p.69.

⁸ For example, Jaakko Hintikka said, "If there is anything here that virtually all parties agree on, it is the idea that a question is a request for information." (J. Hintikka, 'Questions about Questions', *Semantics and Philosophy*, ed. M. K. Muniz & P. K. Unger, 1974, NYUP, p.104.)

questions are of this type. Searle's claim applies only to questions whose answers are assertive utterances and ignores questions whose answers involve other illocutionary acts, such as commissive or directive utterances. This is clearly indicated by Searle's explanation that one of the preparatory rules of a question is "S does not know 'the answer', i.e., does not know if the proposition is true, or, in the case of the propositional function, does not know the information needed to complete the proposition truly."⁹ J. L. Austin called the view that utterances with truth values are primary utterances a "descriptive fallacy"¹⁰. According to him, we could call the view that questions whose answers have truth value are primary questions a "descriptive fallacy."

Do answers that are commissive or directive utterances give information? For example, we would not consider the answer to the question "Will you give me the book?" (e.g., "Yes, I will" or "No, I won't") as providing information. Indeed, information is usually understood as knowledge about objective facts, and the intentions or decisions of the speaker are not objective facts. Assertive utterances such as "He promises ..." provide information, but "I promise" does not provide any information, as it reflects a decision and a promise that produce an event.

However, the following objection may be raised: Such an answer is not giving information to the answerer, but it is giving information to the questioner. Let us re-examine the question in order to respond to this objection. The questioner who asks, "Will you give me the book?" may want to know whether the hearer will promise to do so, or he/she may want an actual promise to do so. In the latter case, the questioner is requesting a decision rather than information. (In the latter case, the questioner can be understood from a third person's perspective to be managing his/her actions after receiving information. This point relates to the discussion in the next section.)

Another objection may be raised. In most cases, we can perform illocutionary acts by using performative verbs. For example, we can rephrase "I give you this book" as "I promise to give you this book" using a performative utterance. Performative utterances have been the subject of a debate between the descriptivists and the non-descriptivists. Descriptivists claim that the declarations in performative utterances simultaneously act as descriptions of the utterance itself and have truth value (Bach & Harnish, Searle¹¹), and the non-descriptivists

⁹ Searle, J. R., *Speech Acts*, Cambridge UP, 1969, p.66.

¹⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, second ed., Oxford UP, 1975 (first ed. 1962), p.3, p.100.

¹¹ Cf. K. Bach, "Performatives are Statements too," *Philosophical Studies* 28: 229-36. Reprinted in Bach and Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, 1979. K. Bach and R. M. Harnish, "How Performatives Really Work: a reply to searle," *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 1992, vol 15. issue 1, pp.93-110. J. R. Searle, "How Performatives Work," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12, 1989, 535-558, Reprinted in *Essays in Speech Act Theory*, edited by D. Vanderveken and S. Kubo, 2001.

claim that such declarations do not describe the speaker's utterance itself and have no truth value (J. L. Austin¹²). However, even if the performative utterances have truth value, they become true by virtue of the utterances themselves. Therefore, the answerer of a performative utterance does not intend to assert it as a true description, and the questioner is not requesting information.

(2) Are questions a particular type of request?

Original questions include both requests for information and requests for decisions. It is unclear whether Searle considered the latter, as he did not define questions as requesting information but noted, "Questions are a subclass of directives, since they are attempts by S to get H to answer, i.e., to perform a speech act."¹³ Thus, questions are understood as requesting not only information but also decisions. Then, are questions a particular type of requests? Answering this question requires clarification of the primary types of requests embedded in questions.

(a) Two relationships between questions and requests

Two types of request may be embedded in questions:

- (1) A request for an answer to the question (i.e., a request for information or a decision).
- (2) A request for an answer framed so that the request includes the expectation that a certain answer will be forthcoming.

All questions contain requests in the sense of (1). (However, this is not valid for rhetorical interrogative expressions, which act as indirect speech acts.) The expectations embedded in questions that contain requests in the sense of (2) are only one part of those questions. In addition, these are questions whose answers are commissive utterances. We can rephrase such questions into requests, such as the following:

"Will you give me the book?" ⇒ "Give me the book!"

"Will you go camping with us?" ⇒ "Let's go camping!"

Not all questions that request commissive utterances as answers should be classified as type (2). Indeed, some questions request only decisions and do not include the expectation

¹² Cf. J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," (1956) in Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 1961.

¹³ John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge UP 1979, p.14.

of certain answers. Questions that qualify as type (2) are euphemistic expressions based on the “principle of politeness” (i.e., such questions offer the possibility of answers other than the one the questioner expects, rendering rejection of the request easier and reducing the intrusiveness of the request). Just as expectations can be embedded in questions as euphemisms, so orders can be rephrased as questions, but this can occur only when they can be rephrased as polite requests. For example, “I order you to bring me the gun!” \Rightarrow “I ask that you bring me the gun.” \Rightarrow “Will you bring me the gun?” When we cannot rephrase the order as a request, then we cannot rephrase it as a question (e.g., the order “Fire!”).

All type (1) questions can be rephrased into forms such as, “Tell me whether ...!” or “Decide whether ...!” However, some can also include type (2) questions, which cannot be rephrased in this way. For example, it would be unusual to rephrase “Pass me the salt!” as “Please decide whether to pass me the salt!” because the intention to ask someone to pass the salt is not usually expressed in this way. This rephrasing would imply that “I do not care whether you pass me the salt.”

Thus, we can say that most questions are of type (1), and we can rephrase them into requests. However, we cannot assume that most questions are a particular kind of request because, as demonstrated in the next section, other illocutionary acts could also be of type (1).

(b) Every illocutionary act contains a type (1) request.

If every illocutionary act contains a type (1) request, we cannot consider questions to be a particular kind of request just because they contain a request of this type. The hearers of assertive requests accept the propositional content of the assertion as true; therefore, assertive utterances are requests to accept assertions. Directive utterances request that hearers obey requests. The hearers of commissive utterances are asked to trust the acts to which the speaker refers. The hearers of expressive utterances are asked to acknowledge the sincerity of the attitudes or feelings articulated by the speaker. The hearers of declarations are asked to recognize the validity of what the speaker is saying; therefore, such utterances are requests to recognize a particular declaration. These requests ask that the hearer accept as true what speakers intend convey by the illocutionary acts (i.e., to accept the perlocutionary acts as true).

The same logic applies to questions. Questioners request that hearers answer their questions; therefore, questions are requests for answers to those questions (i.e., to realize the speaker’s perlocutionary attempts to receive answers). However, every other illocutionary act also includes such a request that the illocutionary act be realized.

3. The particularity of questions

As Searle pointed out, we can use one sentence to perform multiple illocutionary acts.¹⁴ Searle provided the following example:

- ① Sam smokes habitually. (Assertion)
- ② Does Sam smoke habitually? (Question)
- ③ Sam, smoke habitually! (Order)
- ④ Would that Sam smoked habitually. (Want)

These sentences use the same references and predicates. “Whenever two illocutionary acts contain the same reference and predication, provided that the meaning of the referring expression is the same, I shall say the same proposition is expressed.”¹⁵ According to Searle, sentences do not express propositions precisely; instead, the speaker expresses a proposition with a sentence. The above four sentences are the same with regard to “propositional indicator[s]” and differ with regard to “illocutionary force indicator[s].”¹⁶ The illocutionary points of the four sentences are expressed as $\vdash(P)$, $?(P)$, $!(P)$, and $E(P)$, respectively. Answers to a question, i.e., $?(P)$, would be expressed as $\vdash(P)$ or $\vdash(\sim P)$.¹⁷ When someone is asked “Does Sam smoke habitually?” and answers “Sam smokes habitually” (assertion) or “Sam does not smoke habitually” (assertion), this question and its answer are expressed as $?(P)$, $\vdash(P)$, and $\vdash(\sim P)$, respectively.

When someone is asked by Sam, “Did you order me to smoke habitually?” and answers “Sam, smoke habitually!” (order) or “Sam, don’t smoke habitually!” (order), this question and its answers are expressed as $?(P)$, $!(P)$, and $!(\sim P)$, respectively.

Furthermore when Sam is asked “Sam, do you promise to smoke habitually?” and he answers “I, Sam, smoke habitually” (promise) or “I, Sam, do not smoke habitually” (promise), this question and its answers are expressed as $?(P)$, $C(P)$, or $C(\sim P)$, respectively.

When someone is asked “Do you wish that Sam smoked habitually?” and answers “I wish that Sam smoked habitually” (expressive) and “I wish that that Sam did not smoke habitually” (expressive), this question and its answer are expressed as $?(P)$, $E(P)$, and $E(\sim P)$, respectively.

When someone is asked “Does Sam smoke habitually?” in an appropriate situation

¹⁴ Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge UP. 1969, p.22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.30.

¹⁷ Searle separated the propositional negation and the illocutionary negation, therefore $\sim\vdash(P)$ could be another candidate for a possible answer. However, I will consider the illocutionary negation in another article.

(question requesting a judgment) and answers “Sam smokes habitually” (declaration) or “Sam does not smokes habitually” (declaration), this question and its answer are expressed as ? (P), D(P), and D(~P), respectively.

The reference and predication are the same in the above five questions, and Searle’s notations represent all questions in the same way: ?(P). However, this is not sufficient because the answers involve different illocutionary acts: \vdash (P), !(P), C(P), E(P), and D(P). The illocutionary acts involved in the answers must be selected as indicated in the questions. Therefore, we need to express questions as follows: ? \vdash (P), ?!(P), ?C(P), ?E(P), and ?D(P). Generally, if an answer to a question becomes F(P), then the question should be expressed as ?F(P). Questions should be expressed in such way that it is clear that the illocutionary act of questioning is unique and differs from other illocutionary acts.

Illocutionary acts are divided as follows in the Searle’s revised taxonomy:

Non-performative utterances:

\vdash (P), !(P), C(P), E(P), D(P)

Performative utterances:

D(\vdash P), D(!P), D(CP), D(EP), D(DP)

We can express the illocutionary acts of questions as follows:

Questions without a performative verb:

? \vdash (P), ?!(P), ?C(P), ?E(P), ?D(P)

Questions with a performative verb:

?D(\vdash P), ?D(!P), ?D(CP), ?D(EP), ?D(DP)

4. Expansion of Collingwood’s thesis to a theory of speech acts

R. G. Collingwood claimed the following in *An Autobiography*:

In order to find out his [a man’s] meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.¹⁸

He stated the following in *Metaphysics*:

¹⁸ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1978, p.31

Every statement that anybody ever makes is made in answer to a question.¹⁹

I formulated his claim, which I refer to as “Collingwood’s thesis” (CT), as follows: “*Every statement has meaning only in relation to the question to which it is an answer.*” I then attempted to prove it,²⁰ and reformulated this claim more precisely:

CT: The meaning of every utterance except questions can be determined only as an answer to a correlative question.

I refer to the question to which an utterance is an answer as the *correlative question* of the utterance. I will attempt to show that if we presuppose CT, we can expand it to the theory of speech acts. This expanded thesis of CT (ECT) is as follows.

ECT: The illocutionary act of every utterance except questions can be determined only as an answer to a correlative question.

We can prove ECT from CT. First, we hypothesize CT. If we can prove the next T,

Understanding of propositional acts and understanding of illocutionary acts always occur simultaneously,

then we can deduce ECT from CT and T.

To prove T, it is necessary to respond to two objections (i.e., two types of possible counterexamples).

Objection 1: There is a case in which, although we cannot understand the propositional content of an utterance, we can understand the illocutionary act of it.

Davidson claims that, although we cannot understand the meaning of the utterance “Es regnet,” we can, in some cases, understand that it is asserted.²¹ Indeed, there are cases in which we can guess the illocutionary act without understanding the propositional content. However, these are only guesses. The understanding that an utterance asserts something cannot be definitive unless its propositional content is understood. If a hypothesized

¹⁹ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998, p.23. Gadamar referred to Collingwood’s idea of the “Logic of question and answer” and developed his method of hermeneutics based on it. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamar, “Wahrheit und Methode,” 4th edition, J. C. B. Mohr Tuebingen, 1975, pp.351-360.

²⁰ Yukio Irie, ‘A Proof of Collingwood’s Thesis’ in *Philosophia Osaka*, Nr. 4, Published by Philosophy and History of Philosophy / Studies on Modern Thought and Culture, Division of Studies on Cultural Forms, Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, pp.69-83, 2009.

²¹ Donald Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1984, p.135.

illocutionary act and the propositional content are inconsistent, we may have to correct the hypothesis about the illocutionary act. Therefore, objection 1 is not valid. We can clearly understand the illocutionary acts of utterances only when we understand their propositional content.

Objection 2: There is a case in which, although we cannot understand the illocutionary act of an utterance, we can understand its propositional content.

According to CT, we must understand the correlative question to understand the propositional content. As demonstrated in the preceding section, questions point to the illocutionary acts of their answers. Thus, if we understand the correlative question of an utterance, we can understand its illocutionary act. Therefore, there is no case in which we understand only the propositional content of an utterance without understanding its illocutionary act.

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