1 Classic Speech Act Theoretic Approaches

1.1 INTRODUCTION

When we interact with one another, we perform 'illocutionary acts' or, more generally, 'speech acts' (SAs), following Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) seminal works. There are, of course, different ways to perform one and the same SA. For example, the imperative sentence *Open the window* can easily be used for requesting someone to open the window in a situation where the window is closed and the speaker would like some fresh air. In that case, the request is considered to be a 'direct speech act' (DSA), as it is the only possible interpretation of that sentence in that context. By contrast, an ISA is special: it is performed in addition to a DSA. For instance, when it is used for asking a question, the interrogative sentence *Can you open the window?* is a DSA, a request for information about the addressee's ability to open the window. However, it easy to think of a situation where this expression would be used as a request that the addressee open the window. In that case, the request would be an ISA, as it would be performed in addition to the DSA of a request for information.

This chapter offers an overview of the traditional accounts of ISAs. I am using 'traditional' in the sense that they are strictly speaking speech act theoretic or reminiscent of some aspect of speech act theory. It is also in these approaches that the very notion of an ISA has been introduced. I will first present generative semantic accounts of indirectness, which will lay the common thread in this chapter: the 'literalist' view that the syntax and semantics of sentences determines the pragmatics of utterances. We will also see how Austin's analysis of indirectness has been further developed in Searle's speech act theory, itself incorporating important insights from Grice's theory of conversational cooperation. More recent approaches with a speech act theoretic orientation will then be addressed, and I will close this chapter with a discussion of the relationship between indirectness and politeness, as well as make suggestions for how to deal

with the variety of constructions that can be used in the performance of ISAs.

An important term used in SA literature, and throughout this book, is 'sentence-type'. As aptly proposed by Fiengo (2007), one can conceive of sentences as tools used in the performance of a range of verbal actions, including SAs. Sadock and Zwicky (1985: 156) define a 'sentence-type' as 'a regular association of form and the speaker's use of sentences'. In English, the three major, generic sentence-types would then be the declarative, the interrogative and the imperative. These generic sentence-types can be subdivided into different subtypes. For example, *yes/no* interrogatives, *wh-* interrogatives and disjunctive interrogatives are the three most common subtypes of the interrogative sentence-type in English. For Sadock and Zwicky, sentence-types are mutually exclusive: a sentence cannot instantiate more than one sentence-type. While Fiengo uses the term *sentence-type* to refer to the abstract notion of 'sentence' in opposition to a sentence *token*, which corresponds to the particular utterance of a sentence, I will use *sentence-type* as a shortcut for morpho-syntactic type, to refer to the distinction in terms of declarative, interrogative and imperative sentences.

As it is mostly indirect requests that have been, to date, discussed in theoretical work and used in experimental studies on ISAs, I will have more to say on indirect requests than on any other type of ISA. The same is true for the imperative sentence-type, prototypically associated with the performance of directive SAs. The common thread of the first theoretical chapters will therefore be the relationship between sentence-types and illocutionary types or 'SA types'. This perspective is actually more difficult to adopt for other SA types, such as promises, replies or compliments, which will nonetheless be discussed in my experimental chapters.

1.2 GENERATIVE SEMANTICS

The thesis that the illocutionary act performed with an utterance is directly predictable on the basis of the utterance's sentence-type is called literalism. This sort of approach is very important, because it lies at the origin of the notion of an ISA, and most accounts of indirectness either stand in line with or in opposition to this view. One of the earliest approaches that can be considered literalist is generative semantics. This approach is interesting, as it provides an attractive explanation of the relationship we observe between the three major sentence-types in English (as well as in other European languages, such

as Dutch, French and Spanish) and the three major SA categories. That is, it seeks to explain why declarative/interrogative/imperative sentences are commonly used in the performance of statements/questions/requests, respectively.

Following Chomsky's (1957) early work in generative syntax, the *surface* form of a sentence is the output of a set of transformations that affect the underlying syntactic structure or 'deep structure' of the sentence. Katz and Postal (1964), for instance, argued that the difference between the declarative sentence-type, on the one hand, and the imperative and interrogative sentence-types, on the other hand, arises from their deep structure. According to them, every sentence contains, at its deep syntactic level, a structure consisting of a pre-sentential marker of illocutionary force (the imperative marker 'I' for directives that are not questions, the marker 'Q' for questions) plus a proposition. For instance, (1a) and (2a) have (1b) and (2b) as their deep syntactic structure, respectively.

(1) a Close the window.
b I [*you will close the window*].
(2) a Can you close the window?
b Q [*you can close the window*].

Katz and Postal's analysis accounts for the fact that *You will* + verbal phrase (VP) can be used either with assertive or directive force. Because the imperative transformation applies optionally in the presence of the imperative 'I' marker, there is an ambiguity at the surface syntactic level.

According to this analysis, the surface form of (3) is ambiguous between the declarative and the imperative sentence-types.

(3) You will close the window.

For these authors, the possibility to add a tag such as *will you* in (4) indicates that the modal *will* is present in the deep structure of imperative sentences:

(4) Close the window, will you.

However, as Sadock (1974: 16) remarks, there is straightforward evidence against the claim that imperative sentences contain the modal *will* in their underlying syntactic structure. For instance, other, 'non-imperative' tags are compatible with imperative sentences without

cancelling their illocutionary force of requests or commands (see also Bolinger 1977):

(5) Close the door, could you?

(6) Close the door, why don't you?

The pragmatic acceptability of these tags suggests that (5)–(6) contain a deep structure with *Could you VP?* and *Why don't you VP?*, respectively, instead of the alleged underlying *You will VP* structure.

Returning to (3), there is no reason why it should be considered an 'indirect' directive utterance in this approach. The command is not performed in addition to another SA of statement. In fact, (3) is a direct command because its deep syntactic structure is the same as that of an imperative sentence.

Things are more complicated for requests performed by means of interrogative sentences such as (2a).

(2a) Can you close the window? (repeated)

Unlike *You will VP* declaratives, here we have an incompatibility in terms of pre-sentential marker between the deep and surface structures of the utterance, and also a different modal verb included in the embedded propositional structure (*can* versus *will*) as in (7).

(7) Deep structure: Q [You can close the window]
Surface form: I [You will close the window]

Saying that (2a) is an indirect request makes sense in this approach if one equates formal indirectness with a mismatch between the pre-sentential markers in the deep and surface structures. Instead of a simple imperative transformation, several moves must take place.

Another view, which Sadock (1974) calls the 'abstract-performative hypothesis' (APH), is based on Ross's (1970) performative analysis. Typical performative utterances, such as (8), take the form of a sentence with a main verb in the first person singular, in the simple present indicative active.

(8) I request that you make necessary revisions, publish an apology and take your mistakes into consideration for future coverage. (COCA, Davies 2008)

The semantic structure of (8), given in (9), includes a subject that refers to the speaker, a verb that indicates the illocutionary force of the sentence, a pronoun (i.e., *you*) that refers to the addressee, and a clause as the direct object of the verb.

(9) I REQUEST YOU [you will make necessary revisions, publish an apology, etc.].

The APH holds that sentences in which the illocutionary force is not explicit – sentences that are not explicit performatives – contain in their underlying syntactic form the semantic correspondent of a performative clause. One syntactic argument that supports the APH is the acceptability of parenthetical qualifiers such as *since I have my arms full* in imperatives, as in (10):

(10) Close the window, since I have my arms full.

These parentheticals are associated with the abstract performative clause in the deep structure of the imperative sentence, as in (11), and not with the embedded clause 'you close the window'.

(11) I request that you close the window, since I have my arms full.

However, as noted by several authors (Fraser 1974; Gazdar 1979; Searle 1975), the APH faces a good deal of problems, which make it empirically untenable.

First, remember that, according to the APH, the acceptability of *since I have my arms full* in a performative request explains why it is also acceptable in an imperative request. Implicit in the APH is the assumption that (10) and (11) are equivalent in meaning. But, as Sadock (1974) rightly points out, following the APH, (10) and (11) cannot be equivalent, because the deep syntactic structure of (11) is that of an assertion, that is, (12), and not (11) itself.

(12) I declare that [I request that you close the window since I have my arms full].

Because its deep structure is that of a declarative, (11) is specified for assertive force only and it should not be possible to use it with directive force at all. One therefore wonders why it is compared with the imperative (10) in acceptability judgements.

Second, data concerning non-directive uses of imperatives provide evidence against the APH. The examples below can easily be imagined in contexts where the directive meaning is missing: (13) is a threat and (14) a good wish.

(13) Hit me (and we all die). (COCA)

(14) Enjoy your trip. I'll take care of things here. (COCA)

Within the APH framework, the uses of imperatives exemplified in (13) and (14) should be set apart and considered deviant cases. A possible solution for the APH to explain why they lack directive force would be to include other performative verbs in the deep structure of these sentences, which boils down to postulating massive ambiguity at the deep structure level.

Finally, the acceptability of utterances such as (15), which, according to the APH, cannot have an abstract performative structure corresponding to the directive meaning of a request ('I REQUEST YOU [since I have my arms full you will close the window]), casts doubt on such an analysis of ISAs.

(15) Since I have my arms full, could you close the door?

This problem is reminiscent of Sadock's observation that parentheticals are licensed by the illocutionary force of an utterance rather than by its underlying deep structure. If the deep structure of utterances fully determines their actual illocutionary force, this poses a problem for a theory of ISAs.

The solution Sadock (1974) proposes is that *Can you VP?* indirect requests are linguistically ambiguous. For him, the illocutionary force of the utterance of a sentence is reflected in its surface structure. These syntactic cues, however, are sometimes ambiguous when it comes to illocutionary force identification. In fact, these syntactic properties are neither necessary nor sufficient for illocutionary force assignment. For instance, it is a well-known fact that imperative sentences can be used as requests, but also with several other illocutionary forces, each of which has distinct syntactic properties (Sadock 1974: 149).

Concerning the ambiguity of indirect request forms, Sadock illustrates the differences in syntactic markers of illocutionary force with the following three examples, which have in common the syntactic constituents of *Can you close the window?* (Sadock 1974: 123–4):

(16a) Can you close the window?

(16b) Can you close the window, please?

(16c) Can you please close the window?

Following Sadock's view, (16a) is ambiguous between a request for information, a 'survey requestion' (question asked as part of a survey) and a request for action. (16b) is also ambiguous, but it can only be used as a survey question or as an indirect request for action. The presence of *please* partially disambiguates this utterance, as *please* cannot co-occur with genuine requests for information. There is still some ambiguity, however, as sentence final *please* can originate from a clause whose main verb is TELL (i.e., 'S TELLS A to close the window'), but also from the clause with *close* as main verb (that 'A will close the window'). Finally, (16c) is not linguistically ambiguous, because the SA of requesting is the only one for which *please* is allowed to precede the main verb of the clause that is the direct object of the illocutionary verb.

To sum up, the generative semantic approaches reviewed in this section are able to account for speech acts typically associated with the deep structure of the sentences uttered, such as directives performed using imperative sentences and *You will VP* directives. However, they cannot satisfactorily explain non-imperative directives, and more generally mismatches between sentences' deep structures and SAs actually performed with these sentences. Sadock proposes a solution based on linguistic ambiguity, which accounts for the observation that *Can you VP?* sentences can be used with both a question and a request for action meaning. It is doubtful, however, that this solution can be applied, beyond the modals *will* and *can*, to other request forms and to other SA constructions.

1.3 AUSTIN

The notion of an ISA was first introduced by Searle's (1969) speech act theory (see Section 1.5), which is a direct development of the theory sketched by Austin (1962). Unlike Searle, Austin says very little on ISAs. For example, one case of indirect communication he discusses is (17) uttered by a player during a bridge session.

(17) I bid three clubs.

At first glance, if you are not well acquainted with the rules of bridge, you would think that all the player is doing with her utterance is bidding three clubs. This is the straightforward interpretation of a performative utterance. However, as Austin rightly points out, saying (17) amounts to performing, in addition to the SA consisting in bidding three clubs, another SA: conveying the information that one has no diamonds in one's game. This is an instance of an ISA insofar as the player informed the other player that she has no diamonds 'by means of' her bidding three clubs. Thus the performative utterance by means of which the SA of bidding is performed is used to convey something else in addition to the bid. To retrieve this extra informative content, other players will rely on the conventions associated with the game of bridge, that is, extralinguistic conventions. It is doubtful, however, that ISAs are produced and understood the same way in everyday communication as in card games. Unfortunately, Austin does not tell us much about the former sort of situations.

In fact, one might see any performative utterance as giving rise to an 'indirect' interpretation. Consider (18).

(18) I order you to leave the room.

There are other peculiarities of performative utterances, but it is important to stress that a description of an illocutionary act is not equivalent to the actual performance of that illocutionary act. After all, I could tell you that I am closing the door while opening it (making a mistake) or reassuring you that I am telling the truth while I am in fact lying. Thus, at the semantic level, (18) predicates of the speaker the property of issuing an order, and at the pragmatic level (18) can be a statement, an order, or even both – although this is a controversial issue. For instance, some propose that such utterances are understood both as a direct statement and as an indirect order, as in the speech act theoretic analysis (e.g., García Carpintero 2013; Recanati 1987: 143–50), while others argue against this view, claiming that these utterances are not statements (e.g., Jary 2007; Pagin 2004).

A working definition of indirectness can be achieved if we use Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. According to him, the performance of a 'locutionary act' amounts to uttering a meaningful sentence; an 'illocutionary act' (or 'speech act', for short) is necessarily performed by way of a locutionary act. For instance, in saying (19), S would perform the locutionary act of uttering a linguistic expression with some content.

(19) You can close the window.

As Austin (1962: 95) remarks, the locutionary act performed with a declarative sentence can be reported by using indirect speech, as in 'S said that A could close the window'. By contrast, for an imperative sentence such as (1), the locutionary act would be that 'S told A to close the window'.

(1) Close the window. (repeated)

The acts of 'saying' and 'telling to' thus correspond to the same level of analysis, that is, the locutionary level of the meaning of utterances. This suggests that, for Austin, the declarative, interrogative and imperative sentence-types express different types of locutionary meaning. At the illocutionary level, possible SAs performed with (19) are an assertion that A can close the window and a request that A close the window. It makes sense to consider that a request performed using (19) would be indirect inasmuch as there is a discrepancy between the locutionary act of saying, typically associated with the assertive illocutionary act type, and the directive illocutionary act performed with such declaratives. By contrast, direct realizations of SAs would be characterized by a typical association between the locutionary and illocutionary acts performed with the type of sentence uttered. However, Austin does not make it clear whether, in the case of ISAs, another SA is necessarily performed alongside the direct SA associated with the sentence-type of the utterance. Moreover, the interpretative processes that are necessary to understand ISAs fall beyond the scope of his work.

1.4 GRICE

Grice's contribution to the study of communication has been, and still remains, highly influential. Virtually any approach at the semantics–pragmatics interface includes a Gricean component.

A first tool that is useful to deal with indirect communication is Grice's (1975) distinction between what is explicitly communicated by an utterance ('what is said') and what is merely implied by that utterance ('what is implicated', the content of an implicature). While the former sort of meaning is closely tied to the meaning of sentences, the latter often arises from speakers departing from conversational expectations. An example of implicated meaning is the request

interpretation of the utterance (20), the explicit content of which is the statement about the temperature; in contrast, the request meaning corresponds to what is said in (1).

(20) It's cold in here.

(1) Close the window. (repeated)

Conversational implicatures, as triggered by utterances such as (20), are differentiated from *conventional* implicatures. Unlike the former, the latter concerns the meaning of sentences. That is, a sentence that gives rise to a conventional implicature cannot be used without the implicature being triggered. For instance, the sentence *He is tall and, therefore, he could be a basketball player* cannot be used without triggering the implicature that 'he could be a basketball player because he is tall'. In this book, I will not assume that conventional implicatures give rise to cases of indirectness. I will only be concerned with conversational implicatures, which roughly speaking correspond to ISAs.

Grice's distinction between 'what is said' and 'what is implicated' bears some similarity to Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. However, for Grice, illocutionary acts can be performed both at the levels of what is said and of what is implicated. Thus in the case of a request performed with an imperative, the request meaning would be explicit (corresponding to what is said with the utterance). By contrast, at the level of what is said, (21) is a question, and its request meaning is implicit because it is conversationally implicated.

(21) Could you close the window?

Conversational implicatures are conceptualized against a background of linguistic cooperation between interlocutors. For Grice (1975: 45–6), it is rational and reasonable for speakers to adhere to a general 'Cooperative Principle', according to which one would be expected to '[m]ake a conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [one] is engaged'. This Cooperative Principle subsumes at least the following four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. According to the maxim of Quantity, speakers should say as much as, but no more than, required. The maxim of Quality relates to the fact that one should not say something one believes to be false or something for which one lacks evidence. The