

Linguistic Principles of English Grammar, ENG 595G

Handout: Speech Acts and Mood

(Third supplement to Berk, ch. 3)

There is a lot of interesting and helpful information in Chapter 3 concerning the usages of verb phrase categories (tense, aspect and mode) in discourse. We will not specifically be dealing with much of this – only what we discuss in class, and/or appears on your Study Questions. However, I encourage you to read and understand the entire chapter. There is a lot of good material there that will be helpful to you and your students as you deal with the English language in use. The main point of this class is to provide a *Linguistic Perspective* on the grammar of English. In order to do that we are concentrating on the relationship between the structures of language and their functions as tools for communication.

Speech Acts and Mood:

Normally we think of language as functioning to express information. In fact, this is only one of the functions of language. Language is a tool for accomplishing many social tasks. Some of these are:

Apologizing, Promising, Naming, Greeting . . .

These are "speech acts," (Austin 1965), i.e., sociocultural tasks normally accomplished using speech. Language is a good tool for accomplishing these tasks (and many others). Of course, not all sociocultural acts are speech acts, e.g., hugging, smiling, washing dishes . . .

A **performative** utterance is one which *simultaneously describes and enacts a speech act*. In order to qualify as a performative, the main verb has to describe a speech act, it has to be in the present tense, and have a first person subject. For example:

"I apologize for being late." This counts as an apology. It is not just a description.

"He apologizes for being late." This is not an apology. It is a description of an apology."

"I promise to be there at eight." This is a promise.

"I promised to be there at eight." This is not a promise.

Some acts may or may not be accomplished with speech, e.g., helping, entertaining. However, there are some acts for which speech is particularly useful. What are they?

Expressing information

Requesting information

Getting other people to do something

Because these acts are so common, so useful, most (all?) languages have "well-oiled" (i.e., fully habitualized, automated, and regular) grammaticalized structures to express them. In order to perform these acts, we don't need an overt "performative" verb, although we can if we want:

"I declare that Oregon is a beautiful state." This accomplishes the act of declaring something. It doesn't make Oregon a beautiful state, but it does count as a declaration of that idea.

"I ask you where the honey is." This counts as an act of requesting information.

"I command you to finish your peas." This counts as a command.

However, these acts are so common, so useful, that languages rarely require overt performative verbs in order to express them. Rather, they are expressed with grammaticalized clause types. These grammatical structures are what traditional grammars (and Berk) call "Mood." The typical "moods" that languages express grammatically are:

Declarative: Prototypically function to express information.

Interrogative: Prototypically function to request information.

Imperative: Prototypically function to get someone to do something.

Like all grammatical structures, these structures can be used to express a variety of functions. Although their prototypical functions are as given above, the moods are so useful that they can be used to accomplish other speech acts as well. When a given mood is used to accomplish an act that is not prototypical, we call that an **indirect speech act** (Searle 1975). Indirect speech acts are particularly useful when it comes to getting other people to act (the imperative function). In many circumstances it is considered impolite to simply command someone to do something. Therefore declarative and interrogative moods can be used to accomplish manipulative functions, depending on the context:

"It's cold in here." This might be an indirect way of asking someone to close a window.

"Can you close the window?" This is more direct, but is in the form of a question.

"Please close the window." This is direct, but polite. It would be appropriate if the speaker has some kind of authority over the addressee.

"Close the window!" This is very direct, and would be impolite, unless there were some kind of emergency that required the window to be closed immediately.

Exercise: For each of the following expressions, what is the mood, and what speech act is being accomplished (some additional context may be necessary)?

"Please be home."

"The midterm is in two weeks."

"What time is it?"

"It's warm for this time of year."

"Did he ever yell!"

"Could you pass the salt?"

"You're baking bread."

"It's hot in here."

A (16 year old daughter): "Who left the eggshells in the sink!!!"

B (Her father): "It's annoying when people don't clean up after themselves."

A: "I clean up after myself!"

References

Austin, J. L. 1965. How to do things with words. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, John R. 1975. Indirect speech acts. Syntax and semantics, vol. 3: speech acts, ed. by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. 59-82. New York: Academic Press.