Remarks on the Analysis of Assertion and the Conversational Role of Speech Acts
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REMARKS ON THE ANALYSIS OF ASSERTION AND THE CONVERSATIONAL ROLE OF SPEECH ACTS

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I. Introduction

Much of the previous work on speech acts had concentrated on what might be termed the internal structure of speech acts, in particular the specification of felicity conditions[1] and the question of what speech acts can be performed with the utterance of what sentences.[2] Relatively little work appears to have been done on their external structure, involving such questions as appropriate sequencing of speech acts in discourse, consequences of speech act performance, and similar matters.[3] A major exception is Stalnaker's (1976) paper "Assertion." The purpose of this paper is to offer some discussion and clarification of Stalnaker's analysis and to explore the possibility of using a modified version of his proposal as the basis for a general and formalizable account of the external and interactional nature of speech acts, which may shed light on their internal structure as well.

In his paper, a primary concern of Stalnaker's is to get at the consequences of the successful performance of a speech act.[4] Essentially, what Stalnaker does is to define the common ground of a conversation in terms of the propositions mutually presupposed by the conversational participants, to analyze assertion as the speaker's proposing to increment the common ground by the proposition asserted, and to simply say that if none of the other conversational participants object, the common ground is incremented.[5]

II. Incrementation[6]

Stalnaker proposes that assertion involves the incrementation of the common ground of a conversation. In fact, on his analysis, two incrementations are involved. Think of G_i as the common ground before the speaker utters his assertive sentence. The first incrementation, to G_{i+1} takes place simply as a result of the fact that the speaker utters his sentence. The second incrementation, to G_{i+2} is the one which takes place as the result of the tacit acceptance of the assertion, thus adding the asserted proposition to the common ground. This first incrementation Stalnaker takes to be essentially automatic and passive, in much the same way that

if a goat walked into the room, the fact that the goat was there would be taken for granted and might be referred to in subsequent conversation. The first incrementation, however, is not the one which Stalnaker takes to be involved in the essential effect of assertion; the second one is.

Stalnaker says that this first incrementation may normally be taken to occur simply by virtue of the speaker's speaking, but this "normally" covers a number of complicated and interesting facts. In a recent paper, Goffman (1976) discusses a number of problems which arise in what appears to be getting from G_i to G_{i+1}, and ways in which conversational participants deal with them.

There is first the matter of what Austin (1962, pp. 115-116) called the securing of uptake, which he described as "amount[ing] to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution." Goffman presents examples involving questions of understanding, including intelligibility and ambiguity, as in the following.[7]

(1) A_1: "It costs five."
B_2: "How much did you say?"
A_2: "Five dollars."
B_1: "I'll take it." (p. 295)
(2) (i) Do you have the time?
(ii) What did you say? (pp. 306-307)
(3) (i) Do you have the time?
(ii) What dime? (pp. 306-307)
(4) (i) Do you have the time?
(ii) Do you mean the magazine or the hour?
(my example, based on pp. 306-307)

The force side of Austin's uptake shows up in examples like the standard schoolboy retort of (6) and cases like (7).

(6) (i) I'll see you tomorrow.
(ii) Is that a threat or a promise?
(7) (i) Can you wiggle your ears?
(ii) Are you asking me a question, or do you want me to do it?

Pretty clearly these are all instances of hitches in getting to G_{i+1} which are normally settled before the conversation moves on.[8]

Once it is established what utterance and what speech act are intended, questions of felicity and presupposition, which also appear to hold off disposition of the speech act until they are

resolved, may be addressed. If these questions are not resolved, the disposition of the speech act appears to be rejection, either overt or tacit; if they are resolved, the initial incrementation is achieved, and the conversation can move on. Consider examples (8)-(12).

(8) (i) Do you have the time?
(ii) I'm sorry, we are not allowed to give out the time. Please call TI-6-6666. (Goffman, pp. 306-307)

(9) (i) "Carrie, stop sucking your fingers!"
(ii)"(No,) David, you're not the boss of me."[9]

(10) (i) I promise I'll pay you back the five dollars.
(ii) You don't have five dollars.
((iii) Look, Harry owes me ten. When he pays me, I'll pay you.
(iv) O.K.)

(11) (i) Have you stopped beating your wife?
(ii) (No (, I haven't).) I never did beat her.

(12) (i) The Duke of Pudney has cholera.
(ii) (No he doesn't.) There <u>is</u> no Duke of Pudney.
((iii) Yes there is. Don't you remember the funny-looking guy with the pince-nez? Well <u>he's</u> the Duke.
(iv) Oh yeah. Too bad.)

In order for a speech act to have an effect, or play an integral role, in a discourse, it must, of course, first be <u>performed</u>. It must also be <u>understood</u> by the other conversational participants, which is the point of uptake. In addition, its performance and presuppositions must generally be judged acceptable by the other participants before it is accorded common ground status in the discourse. We have terms for the first two steps, performance and uptake, but none for the felicity and presupposition step,[10] which I suggest calling <u>admittance</u>, in view of the fact that its successful completion results in the speech-act's being admitted to common ground status. If, of course, questions of uptake, felicity, or presupposition do not arise, then the speech act is automatically, or better, perhaps, tacitly admitted to the common ground. This, I take it, is what <u>normally</u> means when it is said that the incrementation from G_i to G_{i+1} may normally be taken to be accomplished by virtue of the performance of the speech act. The incrementation from G_i to G_{i+1}, then, involves the admittance to the common ground of the proposition representing the fact that the speaker performed a particular speech act, where, to be admitted, the act must be understood by the addressee(s), and judged acceptable.

What then of Stalnaker's second incrementation, G_{i+1} to G_{i+2}, which is the most important one for explaining the consequences of assertion? This step I suggest we call disposition. Recall that essentially, what Stalnaker suggests (p. 19) is that to make an assertion is to propose to add the proposition asserted to the common ground, provided none of the conversational participants object. The logic of dividing the analysis of assertion between performance (plus, as we have seen, admittance) and disposition was the aspect of Stalnaker's analysis which puzzled me the longest--until I saw its analogy to betting. It is universally recognized that betting is a two-step operation. In order for a bet to be in effect, it must first be offered by one of the parties involved and then be accepted by the other. Only after acceptance does the state of reciprocal conditional obligation between the two bettors exist. Stalnaker's analysis of assertion is like that. A speaker may perform the act of assertion, and that performance may be admitted, but the assertion is not in effect, i.e., the asserted proposition (as opposed to the proposition of assertion) is not admitted to the common ground until it is accepted by the addressee, either tacitly or overtly.[11] Stalnaker deals only with tacit acceptance, which is enough to establish the essence of his proposal, but not with overt acceptance or with rejection.

Speech acts like assertion, betting, suggesting, proposing, and perhaps in general all of Searle's (1976) representatives and McCawley's (1977) advisories appear to differ from what we probably tend to think of as more typical speech acts such as promises, orders, appointments, excommunications, and perhaps in general Searle's commissives, declarations and representative declarations and McCawley's directives, in a simple and fundamental way. If I perform the speech act of, say, promising someone to do something, and the person I am promising understands what I say and what speech act I intend and admits my performance as felicitous and presuppositionally acceptable (in other words, if the incrementation from G_i to G_{i+1} is successful) then a positive disposition from G_{i+1} to G_{i+2} is automatic. The proposition that I am obligated to that person to do what I promised to do is automatically added to the common ground as a consequence merely of admittance. Similarly with orders, appointments, excommunications, etc. They are all automatically "in effect" as a result of admittance. The admittance step and a positive dispostion step esentially collapse for this class of speech acts. For bet-type speech acts these are separate steps.

As a consequence of the fact that for bet-type acts, admittance is separate from acceptance, it is perfectly permissible

for the same common ground to contain opposing admitted (but not accepted) bet-type speech act propositions, provided they are performed by different speakers, such as "A asserted that X = Y." and "B asserted X ≠ Y.", because the propositions which increment the common ground differ. On the other hand, a common ground containing opposing accepted propositions will be inconsistent, as in "X = Y" and "X ≠ Y." For order-type speech acts, however, inconsistency arises immediately. Consider admitted felicitously executed orders "A ordered C to do Z." and "B ordered C not to do Z." C is both obliged to and obliged not to do Z.

The basic difference between these two types of speech acts seems to lie in whether or not the addressee has an option about whether the consequences of the speech act go into effect or not, given that it is admitted. It seems then that assertion, as a speech act is a one-step affair, but that as a conversational element, it involves two steps, whereas orders are one-step in both functions.[12]

What we seem to have established here is that in order to understand the role of speech acts in conversation, we need to draw a three-way distinction among the performance of a speech act, the admittance of a speech act to common ground status, and the disposition (acceptance, rejection, or whatever) of that speech act. Performance simply refers to the utterance of the words by some speaker with some illocutionary force in some language. In performing a speech act, the speaker proposes a certain incrementation of the common ground, what incrementation depending in general upon both the illocutionary force and the propositional content of the speech act performed.[13] And by proposing, he implicitly warrants both that he believes his performance to be felicitous and that the presuppositions involved in that speech act are satisfied. Admittance of the speech act involves the addressee's, usually tacit, agreement that he understands the speech act, that he recognizes its performance as well-formed and that he therefore admits the proposition representing the fact that it has been performed to the common ground of the conversation. Acceptance (or other disposition) is for assertion and bet-type speech acts, a further step, although it is not a separate step for order-type speech acts. Acceptance involves the addition to the common ground of a further "operative" proposition, in the case of assertion, the asserted proposition, in the case of orders, roughly that the addressee is obliged to perform some act, etc. The addition of this operative proposition seems, logically, to be a separable step from admittance, even though, in the case of order-type speech acts, it is an automatic consequence. Obviously, for bet-type speech acts, the disposition

step may involve rejection rather than acceptance, and acceptance may be non-tacit, but I don't want to get into how those might work here.

III. Presupposition and Common Ground

Stalnaker views the relationship between presupposition and common ground as a very tight one. In fact, he defines the common ground of a conversation in terms of the presuppositions of its participants. Thus he says:

> A proposition is presupposed if the speaker is disposed to act as if he assumes or believes that the proposition is true, and as if he assumes or believes that his audience assumes or believes that it is true as well. Presuppositions are what is taken by the speaker to be the common ground of the participants in the conversation, what is treated as their common background knowledge. (p. 14)
>
> We may define a non-defective context as one in which the presuppositions of the various participants in the conversation are all the same. (p. 16)
>
> Think of a state of a context at any given moment as being defined by the presuppositions of the participants as represented by their context sets [sets of possible worlds in which the presupposed propositions are true AR]. In the normal, non-defective case, the context sets will all be the same, so for this case we can talk of the context set of the conversation. (pp. 17-18)

The context set of the conversation is, I take it, Stalnaker's formal representation of the notion common ground of the conversation, or context. What Stalnaker seems to be getting at is that by employing an expression which bears a presupposition, one gives one's audience to believe that one believes that the presupposed proposition is true, although one may not in fact believe it to be true, and that further the use of a presupposing expression is somehow inappropriate if one doesn't also assume that one's audience believes it to be true, although they may not believe it either.[14]

Similarly, in Karttunen (1974), it is claimed that both speaker and audience normally assume or take for granted the truth of the presupposed proposition, and that in those instances where this condition is not met, due to the fact that the audience does not assume the truth of the presupposed proposition, the audience

is expected to accept its truth, somehow as a result of the presupposing expression's being employed by the speaker. It is further explicitly stated that these are "leaps" or "short-cuts" in the "ideal orderly fashion" of conversational interaction which this notion of presupposition sets up. Unfortunately, little is said about exactly how these shortcuts are taken, so, as that analysis stands, such shortcuts are deviant, and in any case, they are labelled as at least somehow aberrant.

The kinds of examples these discussions are attempts to deal with are like (13)-(16), where the addressee does not, before hearing the sentences used, believe that the presupposed propositions are true. The relevant presupposition-bearing expressions are underlined.

(13) I have to pick up my sister. (Stalnaker, 1974, p. 202)
(14) We regret that children cannot accompany their parents to commencement exercises. (Karttunen, 1974, p. 191)
(15) It has been pointed out that there are counter-examples to my theory. (Karttunen, 1974, p. 191)
(16) I'm sorry I'm late, my car broke down. (Gazdar, 1976, pp. 173-174)

Even worse, for analyses which impose belief or knowledge conditions on the hearer, or on the speaker's beliefs or knowledge about the hearer, are such well-formed discourses as (17), where the speaker of (i), who is the addressee of (ii), explicitly asserts the negation of the presupposition involved in (ii).

(17) (i) She didn't do it.
(ii) I regret that she did.

On Karttunen's analysis, these are all at worst deviant and at least short cuts. On Stalnaker's analysis the speaker must be somehow pretending to assume that the audience believes the presupposed propositions.

There are at least two issues here. First, there is the matter of Stalnaker's "disposed to act as if" qualification in the definition of presupposition (p. 14). That, I think, is included because speakers sometimes employ presupposing expressions when they do not in fact hold the beliefs which the use of those expressions requires. People also lie, but I do not see much point in building that fact into an account of the rules for asserting. Speakers simply do not always follow the rules, and in so doing they may deceive others as to the truth or their beliefs, but they can only do so by taking advantage of conventions concerning truth or belief.

The second, more controversial question is whether or not any condition involving addressee belief is involved in presupposition. We have seen that such a condition gets one into difficulty in cases like (13)-(17). Suppose we eliminate the addressee condition. The claim implicit in Stalnaker and Karttunen's analyses is that any proposition which is non-defectively presupposed is also a part of the common ground and that any proposition which is a part of the common ground is non-defectively presupposed. If we drop the addressee condition, then only the latter condition holds.

To see this more clearly, let us review what the status of the common ground is, based on the discussion of section II. The only mechanism I have proposed for admitting propositions to the common ground is agreement, either tacit or overt, among the conversational participants in the process of either admitting speech act performances or accepting the consequences of speech act performances. On this way of looking at it, the common ground of a conversation is a sort of scorecard for the conversation, listing all and only those propositions, including presupposed propositions, which the conversational participants have agreed to in the course of their conversation. In performing a speech act, a speaker proposes to increment the common ground by a certain proposition or propositions, including presupposed propositions. Since the common ground is to include all and only the propositions which the conversational participants have agreed to, by proposing this incrementation, the speaker is implicitly expressing his belief in the proposed incrementing proposition(s). In admitting or accepting, the addressee agrees to consider it (them) true for purposes of the conversation as well. Thus any proposition, once it is admitted to the common ground, will, from that point on have the status of a presupposition in the discourse.

Now, what accounts for the fact that there are constraints, although not as strong as Stalnaker and Karttunen claim, on the use of presupposing expressions? The answer is very simple. In order for a proposition, even a presupposition, to enter the common ground, it must be accepted by the addressee. Thus there is normally little point in the addressee's use of a presupposing expression unless he has reason to believe that the addressee will accept it. Obviously the safest bet is to use presuppositions which the speaker believes the addressee already believes, but if the speaker has other reason to believe that the addressee will or may accept the presupposition, there is little risk involved in using it. Interestingly enough, all of the examples that I know of in which it is generally agreed that

it is felicitious for a speaker to utter a sentence even though the speaker does not believe that the addressee shares his belief in the truth of the presupposed proposition are examples in which the speaker is in a vastly better position to determine the truth of the presupposition than is the addressee, so that it is extremely unlikely, though possible, for the addressee to reject the proposed incrementation on the basis of that presupposition.

Consider again examples (13)-(16).

(13) I have to pick up my sister.
(14) We regret that children cannot accompany their parents to commencement exercises.
(15) It has been pointed out that there are counter-examples to my theory.
(16) I'm sorry I'm late, my car broke down.

Under normal circumstances, I am far more likely to know whether or not I have a sister than someone else is, and the same goes for my having a car. In example (14), the we who regret is the we who are staging the commencement or at least someone "in the know," and the similar we regret to inform you locution the regretting we is also the informing we. As for (15), who is more likely to know whether the things pointed out are counter-examples than the man whose theory they are about? Notice that if we substitute your for my in (15) then the tone of the sentence shifts from confidently authoritative to less authoritative and more contentious. If the we of (14) is not taken also to be somehow in authority over the commencement exercise, or "in the know," sentence (14) becomes decidedly peculiar as a sentence for informing someone about a prohibition on children at commencement.

Example (17) is somewhat more complicated, and the following is only an approximation, but, I think a credible one, pending further work on rejection.

(17 (i) She didn't do it.
(ii) I regret that she did.

In uttering (17i), its speaker is proposing to add the asserted proposition to the common ground. Just as clearly, the utterance of (17ii) in response constitutes a rejection of that proposal. How does it constitute a rejection? As we saw earlier, by using a presupposing expression, a speaker represents to his audience that he believes the proposition which the expression represents. Since that proposition, in the case of (17ii) contradicts the proposition asserted in (17i), by uttering (17ii), its speaker

indicates his rejection of the asserted proposition, since the speaker of (17ii) cannot consistently believe both the proposition asserted in (i) and the one presupposed in (ii).

IV. Conclusion

The proposals made in this paper are put forth tentatively, and obviously an enormous amount of work remains to be done in formulating a theory of speech-act interaction. Much of what I have suggested is very sketchy, and doubtless much of it will turn out to be wrong, when examined more carefully. I think, however, that the basic ideas of the performance/admittance/disposition distinction and the elimination of the addressee condition on presupposition will prove fruitful, both in the analysis of speech acts and presupposition, and, in the longer run, in the analysis of discourse, which I take to consist of sequences of speech act performances. Specific areas in which I believe these proposals will prove useful include presuppositional filters (cf. Karttunen 1974 and Gazdar, 1976), felicity conditions on speech acts, indirect speech acts, and a number of problems in the analysis of conversational interaction, such as those discussed in Labov and Fanshel, Goffman, Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff.

NOTES

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[1]Notably Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Alston (1974).

[2]E.G. Grice (1975), Gordon and Lakoff (1971), Green (1973).

[3]Interesting work has been done in these areas by such workers as Sacks, Schegloff, Goffman, and Labov, but not, by and large, in speech act terms. See also Searle (1975).

[4]This notion of speech act consequence is similar to Searle's (1976) notion of illocutionary point.

[5]This bare-bones paraphrase does Stalnaker's analysis considerable injustice, and is not intended as an anywhere-near adequate representation of it. In particular, I have greatly oversimplified his analysis of conversational context. I will rectify this somewhat in section III.

[6]This section owes much to discussion with Larry Martin and Carlota Smith.

[7]These are not cited as observed data, but as plausible exchanges, although I assume that the use of quotation marks implies source data.

[8]There is a fairly voluminous literature on hitches of various kinds in discourse, which it would behoove speech act theorists to read. Cf. Goffman (1976), Jefferson (1972), Merritt (1976), Ervin-Tripp (1976), and references therein.

[9]Dialogue frequently heard in the presence of the author's children.

[10]Or, I suppose, steps. I have nothing to say about whether this is really one step or two, and, if two, what their logical order is.

[11]Betting and assertion appear to differ in that many speakers are reluctant to declare that, strictly speaking, the speech act of betting has taken place when, in fact, no acceptance is forthcoming; whereas for assertion, no particular response is required. This apparent difference is complicated by the fact that one commonly says that a person bet who in fact only made the offer of a bet. I have no account of these facts, some of which I was reminded of by Lauri Karttunen.

[12]See footnote 11.

[13]See Searle's (1976) discussion of illocutionary point.

[14]Gazdar (1976) argues that what is involved is knowledge and not belief, to my mind, fairly convincingly, but I will employ the more traditional term belief for purposes of this paper. I do not believe that the distinction affects the arguments here.

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