

# How To Do Things With Words and Wands: The Pragmatics of Casting Spells SallyFest!

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"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."  
*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Chapter 10.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of Harry Potter, the act of casting a spell generally takes the form of a wand motion and an incantation; only magical beings can cast spells, ordinary humans (i.e. Muggles) cannot, though there are Muggle-born witches and wizards. Some offspring of witches and wizards lack magical powers (Squibs). The basic ability to perform magic thus seems to be an innate attribute, but one that sometimes arises in Muggles sporadically and fails to surface in wizard families from time to time. Witches and wizards require training, and for this they attend the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

In this talk I will be examining two ideas:

1. In many spells, the wand component makes a significant contribution to the meaning of the utterance.
2. When viewed through the lens of speech act theory, casting spells raises interesting questions, particularly with regard to the characterization of performativity.

I did not have direct access to any native speaker witches/wizards for this talk. All data comes from a written corpus consisting of the following works by J.K. Rowling, all published by Bloomsbury in the UK, by Scholastic in the US. The titles are followed by the abbreviations by which they will be referenced.

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<sup>1</sup> My debt to Sally is of course enormous and obvious. The others who have contributed comments and encouragement in the preparation of this talk are (in random order): Carl Ginet, Rachel Hastings, Evelyn Browne, John Whitman, and Chris Potts.

<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's/Sorcerer's Stone</i> (1997/1998)	[SS]
<i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets</i> (1998/1999)	[CS]
<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i> (1999/1999)	[PA]
<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i> (2000/2000)	[GF]
<i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i> (2003/2003)	[OotP]
<i>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</i> (2005/2005)	[HBP]
<i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows</i> (2007/2007)	[DH]



## 2. THE DEMONSTRATIVE USE OF WANDS

Spells are mostly verbs based primarily on Latin (or something Latin-like) and English, with a few from Greek and other languages. The syntax of spells is somewhat erratic, but quite a number of them can be classified according to their VP structure, and the corresponding role of the wand.

A. There are spells which take no syntactic object, but seem to require a deictic function of the wand.  
REPARO (repairs damage to an object).

(1) a. 'Yeah,' said Harry. 'In ... in a minute. I'll just clear this up.' He indicated the smashed bowl on the floor. Ron nodded and left. '*Reparo*,' Harry muttered, pointing his wand at the broken pieces of china. They flew back together, good as new, but there was no returning the Murtlap essence to the bowl. OotP, Ch. 15<sup>2</sup>

Other spells of this type: EXPELLIARMUS (disarming spell), STUPEFY, AVADA KEDAVRA (killing spell), ALOHOMORA (door unlocking charm), EVANESCO (vanishing spell)...

b. "Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, '*Alohomora*!' The lock clicked and the door swung open. PS, Ch. 9

c. Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "*Expelliarmus*!" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet CS, Ch. 11

The pointing function of the wand here is clearly very important, acting as a pronominal object of some kind (compare with ASL deictic pronouns). More on this below...

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<sup>2</sup> I give only Chapter numbers, rather than page references, since the pagination varies across the different editions.

B. A spell that requires a syntactic object: LOCOMOTOR (moves objects).

(2) Professor Flitwick went scurrying after them, his wand held out before him; he squeaked '*Locomotor trunks!*' and Professor Trelawney's luggage rose into the air and proceeded up the staircase after her, Professor Flitwick bringing up the rear. OotP, Ch. 26

Object is a bare noun. Wand seems to be a definiteness or demonstrative marker.

This may be the only spell of this type.

C. A third type of spell takes an object, but permits object drop under certain conditions: ACCIO (the Summoning Charm).

Object present:

(3) "Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, "threaten me with a dragon. Right..." He raised his wand once more. "*Accio Dictionary!*" GF, Ch. 20.

(4) Harry seized the wand lying beside his camp bed, pointed it at the cluttered desk where he had left his glasses, and said "*Accio Glasses!*" DH, Ch. 7

Bare noun object, seems to require that caster of spell has some idea of where the object is. Note that when the object is proximal, the wand is pointed at it – again, the wand seems to be acting as a definiteness or (more likely) a demonstrative marker.

(5) 'We need to return to the castle at once,' said Dumbledore. 'Rosmerta,' and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation, 'we need transport – brooms –' 'I've got a couple behind the bar,' she said, looking very frightened. 'Shall I run and fetch –?' 'No, Harry can do it.' Harry raised his wand at once. '*Accio Rosmerta's brooms!*' HBP, Ch. 27

Exception to bare noun generalization, one of only two full NP cases in the corpus (the other is a failed spell/misfire). Perhaps here the full NP is required to override a default – "*accio broom(s)*" would normally summon the caster's own brooms?

Object drop: several types of this occur–

(6) Harry pointed his wand at the bullfrog that had been hopping hopefully towards the other side of the table – '*Accio!*' – and it zoomed gloomily back into his hand. OotP Ch. 18.

– Wand pointing determines the object – maybe the wand point *is* the object. Pronominal.

(7) 'Quills down, please!' squeaked Professor Flitwick. That means you too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parchment! *Accio!* Over a hundred rolls of parchment zoomed into the air and into Professor Flitwick's outstretched arms, knocking him backwards off his feet. OotP, Ch. 28

- A distributive/collective summons?

(8) "George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped. "What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody. "What is that in your pocket?" "Nothing!" "Don't you lie to me!" Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "*Accio!*" Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley's outstretched hand. "We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. "We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!" It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all. "*Accio! Accio! Accio!*" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans. "We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away. "Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!" GF, Ch. 6

- Context-dependent (pointing the wand is not sufficient). "*What is that in your pocket?*" determines (at least the initial) target of the spell – compare to E-type pronouns of Evans (1980), where pronouns are anaphoric on definite descriptions – is the wand-point a W-type pronoun? (W for “wand”, of course.)

What is a W-type pronoun? A demonstrative pronoun (**that**) whose referent is determined either deictically (exx. 1,6), or (as in this case, ex. 8) anaphorically.

In (8) there are probably in fact multiple wand-points, but the target (object) is already determined.

D. Some spells seem to have incorporated nominal objects. MOBILI-

(9) Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, "*Mobiliarbus!*" The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. PA, Ch. 10

(11) "There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little -- overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er -- perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safety back in the castle. We can take him like this...." He muttered, "*Mobilicorpus!*" As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. PA, Ch. 19

- Noun incorporation (NI) of direct object (cf. Baker 1988)

- Wand point may be pronominal (W-type) (similar to doubling in NI)
- But, wand could also specify direction – difficult to speculate here. These are the only two examples in the entire corpus.

E. Spells in which the wand is the object of the spell itself: LUMOS/NOX (illuminates, turns off light), conjuring spells: AVIS (birds come out of wand), ORCHIDEOUS (flowers), AGUAMENTI (water)...

(12) "*Lumos*," Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. PA, Ch. 3

(13) "Yes... hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees. . . quite rigid. . . ten and a quarter inches. . . *Aviz!*" The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight. GF, Ch. 18

I don't have much to say about these at this point – they may involve covert imperatives directed at the wand itself (John Whitman, p.c.): "Produce X!"

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Even this rather incomplete overview<sup>3</sup> illustrates a number of crucial points.

1. the incantation itself is not sufficient to cast a spell – the wand is needed  
a broken wand causes trouble: misfire (more below)
2. function of the wand varies:
  - spatial/directional: aimed at target, specifies direction (cf. "directional" signs in ASL)
  - object of the spell itself: when illuminated, conjuring
  - pronominal – W-type pronoun
  - demonstrative marker – when bare noun is present
3. licensing of object drop relies on the context as well as wand  
Wand-point serves as both a demonstrative marker (for bare nouns, exx. 2,3,4) and as a  
W-type pronoun (in cases of object drop)

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<sup>3</sup> For example, I have not discussed such lexical oddities as DESCENDO – which is transitive, and causes the object to move downwards. Example:

"*Descendo*," muttered Ron, pointing his wand at the low ceiling. A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder slid down to their feet. DH, Chapter 6

A more detailed examination of these possibilities will have to be postponed to future research.

No distance distinction, but this is not unheard of cross-linguistically (French, German) and languages with only one demonstrative pronoun exist (Koromfe, Niger-Congo; Kera, Chadic; Koyraboro Senni (Songhai), and Supyire, Gur).<sup>4</sup>

4. this leads to: spells which take syntactic objects prefer the minimal object (bare nouns) needed to specify the desired “target” the spell; this constraint can be overridden (“Rosmerta’s brooms”)



### 3. SPEECH ACTS AND SPELLS

At the sentence level, analyzing the syntax is made a bit tricky by the use of fake Latin, Greek, Aramaic, etc. One possibility is that there is no subject, as in a common sentence type in English – the imperative.

- (14) a. Bring me my Firebolt!  
b. Move the trunk!  
c. Lower the ladder!  
d. Move that tree!

Of course, imperatives are *addressed* to someone, with the intention that they should *do* something, or respond in some way. This is not the case with spells – they have *targets* (C. Ginet, p.c.).<sup>5</sup>

It has been observed, however (Sadock and Zwicky 1985), that English imperatives are very similar syntactically to curses – not necessarily the magical kind.<sup>6</sup>

- (15) Screw you.

Note that is difficult to compare the verb forms – the imperative/curses have a bare form, while the spells have non-canonical lexical forms.

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<sup>4</sup> Haspelmath (2005), thanks to John Whitman for pointing out the facts and the reference.

<sup>5</sup> Though there are ordinary language performatives with targets – such a christening ships (Sally McConnell-Ginet, p.c.).

<sup>6</sup> Not all curses in English take this form:  
(a) You swine!

Another possibility is that there is (as in real Latin) *pro*-drop in expressions like.

(16) a. Accio Firebolt!

“(I) summon (my) Firebolt!”<sup>7</sup>

b. Locomotor trunk.

“(I) move (the) trunk”

c. Descendo. (see footnote 3)

“(I) lower (target).”

d. Mobiliarbus.

“(I) move-tree (to target).”

- (target) is indicated by pointing the wand

- Identity of dropped subject is open to question. Is it the speaker, or some Magical Force? Is there a difference, since the Magical Force is presumably contained within the speaker?

This latter syntactic possibility (first person, present tense, indicative, active...) looks rather like this Ordinary English sentence type.

(17) a. I object.

b. I apologize.

c. I give you my word.

d. I bet you 17 dollars it will rain tomorrow.

e. I sentence you to ten years of vacuuming.

f. I bequeath you my snow shovel.

g. I dub thee Sir Walter.

h. I warn you that any attempt to plant Brussels sprouts will be thwarted.

i. I hereby christen this ship the H.M.S. Flounder.

These are PERFORMATIVE sentences.<sup>8</sup> They have the peculiarity that once uttered; they bring about the acts they describe (given appropriate conditions). So, if you utter (17d), you say you make a bet, and by saying it you make a bet (Austin 1962). Performativity arises from a number of factors: the meanings

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<sup>7</sup> A Firebolt is a type of broom.

<sup>8</sup> Austin called “performative” a “new and ugly word”. I don’t know about its ugliness, but it did have to be added to the dictionary of my spell-checker, while “Brussels sprouts” (definitely revolting), did not.

of words, powers invested in people by social institutions, rules and regulations, social conventions, etc.

As noted in Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet (1990 – among others), all of the following can be uttered as performatives.

- (18) a. We find the defendant guilty as charged.  
b. I bid three clubs.  
c. I promise to share my chocolate with you.  
d. You're fired.  
e. You may have dessert tonight.  
f. Gentlemen are requested to wear jackets and ties to dinner.

(a–c) are explicitly performative, while (d–f) might also be used to report. Thus, Ginet (1979) has suggested that in these cases (such as bidding three clubs) performativity works via descriptive content: to claim (sincerely and under the right preparatory conditions, etc.) that one is bidding 3 clubs is just what it takes to bid three clubs. There is a communicative underpinning (telling an addressee that one is bidding three clubs).

With the spells, there are clearly certain words that carry this sort of power. Indeed, as far as I know, the words used in spells are used only in spells. They differ from many ordinary language performatives in that they have TARGETS rather than addressees.

In the Muggle world, a performative “does not simply convey a message, but performs some substantive action” (Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet 1990, 174). In a non-magical world, such actions will be limited to certain kinds of social actions – like promising, betting, giving permission, making requests, christening, etc. Witches and wizards, on the other hand, have the power to do far more with their words.

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Muggle Performatives are subject to being uttered “under appropriate conditions”. That is, they can “misfire” or be “abused”.



Hard as I might try, I can't christen ships, or dub knights. It just doesn't work – my saying "I dub thee Sir Walter" just doesn't make it so. To account for this, Austin suggested that successful performatives are subject to felicity conditions.

Austin's Felicity Conditions

A. (i) There must be a CONVENTIONAL PROCEDURE having a CONVENTIONAL EFFECT; (ii) the circumstances and the person must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.

B. The procedure must be executed (i) correctly and (ii) completely.

C. Often, (i) the person must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must do the specified act.

Misfire: felicity conditions fail to be satisfied – Act is not performed (classic example: saying "I do" in a marriage ceremony when you are already married)

Abuse: insincere – Act succeeds, but participants don't have the "requisite thoughts..." (saying "I do" in a marriage ceremony while intending to run off with the caterer after the ceremony).

Question: Are there felicity conditions for spells? Can they misfire? Be abused?

Required procedure:

1. must be a witch/wizard
2. incantation must be correctly uttered ("never forget Wizard Baruffio...")
3. wand, wand movement

Requisite thoughts:

1. intention
2. concentration

Also: Regulation by the Ministry of Magic... (institutional component)

Misfires: Not satisfying the required procedure

Failure of (1) – easy to show – act not accomplished.

Failure of (2) – doesn't lead to "misfire" in the Austinian sense (act not accomplished), but a botched spell.

Failed disarming spell (EXPELLIARMUS):

(19) 'Oh no,' said Cho rather wildly as he approached. '*Expelliarmious!* I mean, *Expellimellius* – oh, sorry, Marietta!' Her curly-haired friend's sleeve had caught fire; Marietta extinguished it with her own wand and glared at Harry as though it was his fault. OotP, Ch. 18

Failure of (3) – various kinds

Broken wand – botched spell, failed spell

OBLIVIATE (memory-erasing charm) – backfires

(20) "The adventure ends here, boys!" he said. "I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body – say good-bye to your memories!" He raised Ron's Spellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, "*Obliviate!*" The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thundering to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock. "Ron!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Ron!" "I'm here!" came Ron's muffled voice from behind the rockfall. "I'm okay – this git's not, though – he got blasted by the wand" CS, Ch. 16

Various failures:

(21) The holly and phoenix wand was nearly severed in two. One fragile strand of phoenix feather kept both pieces hanging together. The wood had splintered apart completely. Harry took it into his hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury. He could not think properly. Everything was a blur of panic and fear. Then he held out the wand to Hermione. "Mend it. Please." "Harry, I don't think, when its broken like this –" "Please, Hermione, try!" "*R-Reparo.*" The handling half of the wand resealed itself. Harry held it up. "*Lumos!*" The wand sparked feebly, then went out. Harry pointed it at Hermione. "*Expelliarmus!*" Hermione's wand gave a little jerk, but did not leave her hand. DH, Ch. 17  
Improper movement– failed spell: SILENCIO (silencing charm)

(22) '*Silencio!*' The large and ugly raven in front of him let out a derisive caw. '*Silencio. SILENCIO!*' The raven cawed more loudly. 'It's the way you're moving your wand,' said Hermione, watching Ron critically, 'you don't want to wave it, it's more a sharp jab.' OotP, Ch. 18

⇒ Some misfires result in spells being produced (though not with the desired effect), others produce no result (act not accomplished).

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What about "abuses" – not having the "requisite thoughts"?

Failure of concentration/intent can result in a failed or partial spell.

Faulty transfiguration (lack of concentration):

(23) He and Ron both tapped the teacups they were supposed to be charming with their wands. Harry's sprouted four very short legs that could not reach the desk and wriggled pointlessly in midair. Ron's grew four very thin spindly legs that hoisted the cup off the desk with great difficulty, trembled for a few seconds, then folded, causing the cup to crack into two. OotP, Ch. 9

Failed CRUCIO (Torture Curse – failure of intent)

(24) Hatred rose in Harry such as he had never known before; he flung himself out from behind the fountain and bellowed, 'Crucio!' Bellatrix screamed. the spell had knocked her off her feet, but she did not writhe and shriek with pain as Neville had ... 'Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?' she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. 'You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain –to enjoy it ' OotP, Ch. 36

Failed boggart-banishing spell (RIDDIKULUS – lack of concentration, wrong state of mind)

(25) *R – r – riddikulus!* Mrs Weasley sobbed, pointing her shaking wand at Ron's body. *Crack* Ron's body turned into Bill's, spread-eagled on his back, his eyes wide open and empty. Mrs Weasley sobbed harder than ever. *R – riddikulus!* she sobbed again. *Crack* Mr Weasley's body replaced Bill's, his glasses askew, a trickle of blood running down his face. 'No!' Mrs Weasley moaned. 'No ... *Riddikulus Riddikulus RID-DIKULUS Crack*. Dead twins. *Crack*. Dead Percy. *Crack*. Dead Harry ... OotP, Ch. 9

⇒ From even these few examples, we see that lack of “requisite thoughts” can cause total failure of the act as well as an improper spell.

⇒ Abuse/misfire distinction is not so clear-cut. – Speaker’s intention is often crucial.

Clearest cases of “spell failure” are due to spells being blocked by actions of other witches/wizards – either spells put in place beforehand, or defensive actions taken face-to-face.

Door-unlocking charm blocked by previous spells:

(26) They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm. PS, Ch. 16

Summoning Charm blocked (previous spell, Shield Charm):

(27) He pointed the wand at the silvery shape and murmured, “*Accio Sword*” It did not stir. He had not expected it to. IF it had been that easy, the sword would have lain on the ground for him to pick up, not in the depths of a frozen pool. DH, Ch. 19

(28) The words were hardly out of his mouth when the female Death Eater shrieked. '*Accio proph*—' Harry was just ready for her: he shouted '*Protego*!' before she had finished her spell, and though the glass sphere slipped to the tips of his fingers he managed to cling on to it. OotP, Ch. 35

But does this sort of case have to do with misfires (improper procedures) and/or abuses (insincerity of intent)? Arises in the competitive dimension...

Blocking counterparts in Ordinary Language (Sally McConnell-Ginet, p.c.):

1. Playground chants – “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me”: as a response to bullies
2. Games – bridge: you bid 2 spades, hoping your partner will go to game in spades, my bid of 3 no-trump blocks you and your partner's getting to game; poker: bluffing to knock a bet off the table
3. Formal debate – the rebuttal as a means to counter the opponent's argument. Each participant is trying to get assertions accepted by the conversational participants; strategies include counter-assertions, arguments, even impugning the original asserter's veracity or competence--all these can have the effect of countering an attempted speech act, preventing its content becoming an ongoing part of what the participants assume.
4. Parental influence on children: conversations about the content of TV ads, racism, sexism, bullying, etc. – all intended to have some sort of protective effect by teaching about flaws in arguments, alternatives...

Ordinary Language counterparts to counterspells emerge in the competitive and collaborative dimensions of “doing things with words” – in both non-magical and magical situations we have to look beyond the utterance level to the more interactive aspects of speech.



#### 4. JUST WHAT IS A SPELL?

Where do spells fit into the typology?

Consider first these three “aspects of communication” proposed for performatives by Sadock (1994):

1. an informational, representational aspect (INF) in which conversational negotiations are conducted in terms of propositions that can be judged for accuracy against real or possible worlds;
2. an effective, social aspect (EF) by means of which conventional {or magical} effects on societally{/magically} determined features of the world are achieved;
3. an affective, emotive aspect (AF) that is used to give vent to and/or display real or apparent feelings of the speaker.

Represented as features:

Expressives: [-INF, -EF, +AF]

Spells: [+INF, +EF, +AF]

Promises: [+INF, +EF, +AF]

⇒ Spells are not just another case of expressive, despite the facts that many spells are curses.

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But how to distinguish spells from promises?

Return to the target vs. addressee idea, also role of speaker intention.

Three Possible Types of Performatives from A Different Point Of View:

1. Promises: require sincerity of intention on the part of the speaker, some sort of acceptance or understanding on the part of the addressee (cf. input/output conditions of Searle 1969) [+I,+U]
2. Spells: speaker intention is likewise essential, but no addressee understanding needed (target) [+I,-U]
3. Expressives: speaker intention can be irrelevant, addressee understanding crucial<sup>9</sup> [-I,+U]

– missing type [-I,-U]: speaker intention irrelevant, no addressee understanding needed (Dad cursing at the coffee table?) – expressives would then have more than one type.

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On the irrelevance of speaker intention in expressives, a cautionary example from Potts (2006):

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Potts, p.c., though this leaves unexplained the phenomenon of people cursing at inanimate objects.

(29) In March 2004, Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U2, uses the phrase *really fucking brilliant* during the televised Golden Globe Awards. Originally, this passes muster with the FCC, since he isn't describing a sexual act, but rather using *fucking* as a kind of emphatic (expressive!) modifier. But the FCC chairman eventually sides with the special interest groups and issues a formal ruling denouncing the broadcast's "obscene and indecent material"

- Bono's intention is clearly irrelevant, only the FCC's ultimate "understanding" matters.

Contrasts between promises, spells and expressives are thus drawn along the lines of the roles (if any) played by the speaker and the addressee/target.

Spell differs from a promise mainly in the role played by the "addressee" – it is a target rather than a participant in a communicative exchange.

The target can (in some instances) take measures to block a spell, just as other "ordinary" speech acts can be countered. In one sense, this is not so much linguistic as social – arising from the strategies of duels, games, debates, and other such things. Yet, these strategies are also ways of "doing things with words", and have an effect on the success of speech acts.



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