

On Human Communication

Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish

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Human linguistic communication is the action of issuing an utterance with a certain kind of intention whose fulfillment consists in its recognition. Communicative acts can be classified according to the kinds of intentions that are expressed. For example, if I utter *This difference is nonsignificant*, with the belief that the difference in question is nonsignificant and the intention that you believe that the difference is nonsignificant, and if you recognize thereby that I believe that the difference is nonsignificant and that I intend that you believe that the difference is nonsignificant, then I have succeeded in stating that the difference is nonsignifi-

cant. If, in addition, you come to believe that the difference is nonsignificant, then I have done more than communicate with you; I have convinced or persuaded you that the difference is nonsignificant. Both stating and convincing are speech acts, but they are of different types. The act of stating is a form of communication and is called an *illocutionary act*. The act of convincing is not a form of communication and is called a *perlocutionary act*. (These terms are those of the philosopher J. L. Austin.)

As part of the study of the problem of human action, the study of speech acts is of great philosophical and psychological interest. Since the means by which speech acts are enacted is linguistic and the milieu in which they are enacted is social, the study of speech acts is of great linguistic and sociological interest as well. All four disciplines—philosophy, psychology, linguistics and sociology—are brought together in this book, which attempts to lay out a philosophically satisfactory theory of speech acts that is grounded in the best current psychological, linguistic, and sociological research.

The major problem that a speaker faces in communication is one of design: she must construct her utterances so as to facilitate the hearer's recognition of her intentions. The hearer's problem, on the other hand, is computational: he must determine the speaker's intentions from the utterances he hears. On the speaker's problem, Bach and Harnish have little to add to the philosopher H. P. Grice's boy-scoutish conversational maxims: be relevant, be brief, avoid ambiguity, and so forth. On the hearer's problem, however, Bach and Harnish have a great deal to say

of interest to psychologists, since they take cognizance of current research in speech perception and recognition in their formulation of a highly articulated model for computing speakers' intentions from their utterances.

Bach and Harnish see the computation as proceeding in essentially four stages. First, the hearer determines on the basis of his perception of the acoustic signal and his knowledge of the language what expression the speaker uttered. Second, he determines what the speaker meant by what she uttered (operative meaning). Operative meaning provides the sense of the speaker's utterance and is computed on the basis of the hearer's knowledge of the language together with certain beliefs that the hearer has about the speaker, including those that he believes the speaker has about him. These beliefs, called *mutual contextual beliefs*, figure prominently in Bach and Harnish's model of speech-act determination. Here they are used primarily to eliminate ambiguity; that is, to select the operative meaning out of all the semantic interpretations that the expression might have in context.

Third, given operative meaning and certain other mutual contextual beliefs, the hearer goes on to determine what the speaker says (locutionary act). The locutionary act provides both the sense and the reference of the speaker's utterance, along with an indication of what type of saying it is (declarative, imperative, etc.). Mutual contextual beliefs provide a reference for an expression either within its denotation (as when the phrase *the children* is taken to refer to a particular group of children) or outside of it (as when *the children* is taken to refer to a group of adults who are passed out in the backyard at the end of a party).

To understand the fourth stage, the determination of how illocutionary acts are recognized on the basis of locutionary acts and still other mutual contextual beliefs, it is necessary first to say something about the way in which illocutionary acts are represented. In general, illocutionary acts are of the form $F(P)$, where F is the illocutionary "force" of the act and P is its propositional content. The force of the act

represents the attitudes that are expressed in performing the act, and that must be recognized by the hearer as held by the speaker if the act is to be fulfilled.

According to Bach and Harnish, the simplest kind of illocutionary act is the direct literal illocutionary act, in which P is the propositional content of the locutionary act and F is compatible with the type of saying of the locutionary act. For example, any force that represents the attitude of believing the propositional content of the act is compatible with a declarative locutionary act; among the forces that express the attitude of believing the propositional content of the act are the following: stating, informing, responding, assenting, conceding, reporting, and predicting. Hence a declarative locutionary act may be used to perform literally and directly any one of several illocutionary acts. Which act (if any) is actually performed depends on additional properties of what is said and mutual contextual beliefs.

Given the recognition that a literal illocutionary act has been performed, one may go on to conclude that yet another illocutionary act is being performed. For example, there are circumstances under which the utterance *It's getting late* is used, and is intended to be recognized as being used, to request the hearer to hurry. Such an illocutionary act, which is computed on the basis of another illocutionary act (in this case the act of stating that it's getting late), is called an *indirect illocutionary act*. Indirect illocutionary acts are usually, though not necessarily, nonliteral.

Indirect nonliteral illocutionary acts are to be distinguished from direct nonliteral illocutionary acts; the latter, unlike the former, are directly computed on the basis of the locutionary act together with mutual contextual beliefs. Examples of such acts include familiar cases of sarcasm and hyperbole, such as *I'm all thumbs*. The speaker, in this case, would not be recognized as having expressed the belief that she consists entirely of thumbs; rather she is directly recognized as having stated that she is having difficulty in coordinating her purposive hand movements. Indeed, direct nonliteral illocutionary acts can be used as a basis for computing further indirect nonliteral illocutionary acts, as when one states *I'm sure the cat just loves having its tail pulled* to request the hearer to stop pulling the cat's tail.

The analysis of the distinction between indirect, possibly nonliteral, and direct nonliteral illocutionary acts is one of the original contributions of this book. The authors also apply their theory of indirect illocutionary acts in novel and controversial ways to the analysis of explicit performative utterances such as *I order you to leave* and of what they call *standardized indirect illocutionary acts*, such as the act of requesting action by means of an interrogative locutionary act, for example *Can you pass the salt?* Since the book contains so much that is original and insightful into the analysis of speech acts and linguistic communication, it will be at the center of interesting research and controversy for many years to come.

*Books are the true metapsychosis—they
are the symbol and presage of immortality.
The dead men are scattered, and none shall
find them. Behold they are here! They do
but sleep.*

—HENRY WARD BEECHER

*There is a great deal of difference be-
tween the eager man who wants to read
a book, and the tired man who wants a
book to read.*

—G. K. CHESTERTON
