

# Against the Locutionary Thesis

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## Abstract

For Austin, Grice, and many others, undertaking a speech act like asserting or promising requires uttering something with a particular sense and reference in mind. We argue that the phenomenon of open-ended promises reveals this ‘Locutionary Thesis’ to be mistaken.

**Keywords** locution, illocution, promising, meaning

## 1 Introduction

On the Austinian picture of speech acts, illocution requires both locution and uptake. While it is controversial both what uptake is and whether it is required for illocution, the claim that illocutions require the speaker to utter something ‘with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference’ has gone

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relatively uncontested (Austin 1962, p. 95). On the rival Gricean account of speech acts, both force and content derive from the speaker's uttering something with the intention of that utterance having a particular effect on the addressee—for instance, their coming to believe that  $p$ , partly in virtue of recognizing this very intention (Grice 1957, p. 385). Again, this requires the speaker's meaning some particular content, intending for the listener to recover that content or form a particular belief with that content.

Call this assumption, common to both these frameworks, the 'Locutionary Thesis': for a speaker to engage in a forceful speech act, like asserting or promising, there must be some more-or-less definite content that they intend to assert or promise.<sup>1</sup> Provided that whatever other conditions necessary for the speech act to succeed are met, that intended content, in turn, will constitute the content of the speech act.<sup>2</sup> Asserting some more-or-less definite content thus requires having an intention to assert that same more-or-less definite content, regardless of how we ultimately cash out such intentions.<sup>3</sup> And likewise for all other speech acts.

Recently, authors like Buchanan (2010) and King (2018) have pushed against the traditional reading of the Locutionary Thesis, according to which

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<sup>1</sup>Consider also Davidson (2005, p. 171): '[I]t is a necessary mark of linguistic action that the speaker or writer intends his words to be interpreted as having a certain meaning.'

<sup>2</sup>See, *inter alia*, Austin (1962) and King (2013, 2014a,b) for some different takes on these further requirements.

<sup>3</sup>In other words, the Locutionary Thesis is neutral on whether intentions to assert or promise that  $p$  are best understood in the Gricean manner, as intentions to have some more-or-less determinate effect on the listener. It is likewise neutral on whether such intentions need be explicit, or can be something more like 'intentions-in-action'.

what is required for a speaker to engage in a forceful speech act is for them to have in mind a specific proposition that they intend to assert, promise, etc. On the basis of a range of interesting cases involving speakers whose intentions fail to specify one particular proposition as the content, Buchanan and King have argued that sometimes the sort of more-or-less definite content required to satisfy the Locutionary Thesis can be constituted by a cluster, or even a vague cluster, of propositions.<sup>4</sup>

We shall push further still, arguing that there are cases of speakers engaging in forceful speech acts while failing to have even a loose cluster of propositions in mind as the content asserted, promised, etc. In other words, we shall argue for the wholesale abandonment of the Locutionary Thesis.

We shall do this by investigating the hitherto-overlooked phenomenon of open-ended promises. Such promises hinge on the flexibility of the terms involved, which extends well beyond anything the speaker antecedently anticipated — and hence, we shall argue, beyond what they could possibly intend to bind themselves with respect to, even in the loosest manner. This spells trouble for even the loosest understandings of the Locutionary Thesis.

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<sup>4</sup>See also Viebahn (2019, §3.1.4) for further discussion of these issues which overlaps substantially with King's. These authors seem to have been working on these issues independently of each other at roughly the same time.

## 2 Background

Consider a challenge to the Gricean understanding of communicative intentions raised by Buchanan (2010, p. 347): it seems that the speaker can mean something by uttering (1), even though it would be irrational of them to mean anything too specific.

(1) Every beer is in the bucket.

The communicative content of (1) clearly isn't the unrestricted reading, i.e. every beer *in the universe* is in the *unique* bucket. And yet there are any number of possible contents the speaker might mean, any of which would seem reasonable here: every beer *we bought at the bodega* is in the bucket *in the backyard*; every beer *we will serve at the party* is in the bucket *decorated in pirate motif*; etc. The issue is that, if meaning that  $p$  requires intending for the listener to come to believe that  $p$ , partly in virtue of one's utterance, then one cannot rationally mean any one of these contents. For it would be a minor miracle if the speaker and listener were to coordinate on any one of these in particular (Ibid., pp. 349–50).

Buchanan's tentative response to this challenge isn't to abandon the Locutionary Thesis. Rather, he proposes to expand the bounds of what counts as the sort of 'more-or-less definite sense and reference' that a speaker must have in mind in order to assert. Whereas earlier authors tended to assume this must be a unique, fully-determinate proposition, Buchanan is willing to countenance that perhaps all that is required in order to assert is for the

speaker to utter something with a vague set of propositions in mind—a set all belonging to the same type, partially determined by the overtly uttered sentence. ‘Uptake’ now becomes the listener recovering at least one of these more fleshed-out propositions (Ibid., pp. 357–59).

In a similar vein, King (2018) points out that a sentence like (2) can be uttered felicitously even when the speaker doesn’t have a particular time interval in mind regarding John’s schooling:

(2) John went to private school.<sup>5</sup> (Ibid, p. 641)

Likewise, one can point to a particular car and utter (3) while failing to distinguish between the type- and token-readings of this sentence in one’s meaning intentions.

(3) That is a beautiful car. (Ibid. p. 645)

King takes both of these examples to represent successful assertions. He thus concludes that the speaker’s intentions needn’t single out a unique, truth-evaluable proposition in order for their utterance to count as felicitous. Like Buchanan, however, King thinks that felicitous utterances of this sort do require the speaker’s having a range of possible specifications in mind to assert, even if the exact borders of that range are vague.<sup>6</sup> (Ibid., pp. 641–49)

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<sup>5</sup>The example originally comes from Partee (1973).

<sup>6</sup>Note that King (2018) speaks primarily of ‘metasemantics’ determining the meaning of an utterance in context, as opposed to the speaker’s intentions. But King’s own account of metasemantics, as developed in King (2013, 2014a,b) runs in terms of the speaker’s intentions. We have simplified the discussion in the main text by omitting this middleman-term.

While King and Buchanan both put pressure on the Locutionary Thesis, none of their cases ultimately push us to abandon it. That's because the Locutionary Thesis appeals to what is essentially a placeholder notion—that of a 'more-or-less definite sense and reference'—and we can reinterpret this in a loose sense, such that a speaker satisfies the Locutionary Thesis so long as they have a vague cluster of propositions in mind to assert, promise, etc. This leaves us unable to appeal to the speaker's intentions to fix the unique truth-conditions of the utterance, but it is hardly clear that cases like these have well-defined truth conditions in the first place.<sup>7</sup> So this would seem to be no great loss.

Below, we will push against even this loosened understanding of the Locutionary Thesis by offering a case where the speaker seems to have an even more tenuous grasp on the content of what they are saying at the point when they are saying it, and yet that utterance appears to be associated with some rather specific satisfaction conditions nonetheless.

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<sup>7</sup>Consider just how much the different expansions of (1) will vary, truth-conditionally, when embedded under various modals, for instance.

### 3 Open-Ended Promises

Chapaev, a military commander of sorts, is trying to motivate a group of soldiers to go into battle.<sup>8</sup> The chances of success are slight, so there is pressure on Chapaev to raise their morale. He tells them:

- (4) You've got to go, no two ways round it, and I promise you my hand-deed as your commander.

It seems to work, although nobody knows what a hand-deed is.

Pyotr, who works for Chapaev, later asks him about this. Chapaev says that the expression means nothing, so far as he knows, and he himself had nothing particular in mind that he intended to promise his soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

As it happens, the soldiers talk about this strange utterance and decide that 'hand-deed' must be an archaic term with which they are unfamiliar, but which, after some reflection, they take to mean *three acres of land*. This has the effect of making Chapaev's promise neither too extravagant nor too miserly. Three of them survive the battle and ask for their three acres, which Chapaev, considering himself bound by his promise, makes sure they receive.

There is also a slight variant on this case worth considering: 'hand-deed' turns out to actually be an archaic term, one which neither Chapaev nor

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<sup>8</sup>The example is inspired by Pelevin (2001). In the respective passage, there is no explicit use of the term 'promise', nor is it ever decided that the promise is for three acres of land specifically.

<sup>9</sup>Here is what the character actually says: 'if you wish to learn what "hand-deed" means, then it is not me you should be asking, but the men standing back there on the square' (Pelevin, 2001, p. 76).

the soldiers were familiar with. One of the soldiers manages to discover this, however, along with its meaning: three acres of land. On the basis of this discovery, the surviving soldiers ask Chapaev for three acres of land, which he provides to them.<sup>10</sup>

## 4 The Problem for the Locutionary Thesis

We take it that, in both versions of this scenario, Chapaev has both successfully and intentionally promised his soldiers something—namely, to give them three acres of land if they survive the battle. He considers himself bound by this promise, he acts on it, and he fulfills his promissory obligation in doing so. The soldiers also act on it, first by going into battle, and then by asking for their due. Chapaev did have some sort of illocutionary intention here, though a rather open-ended one: to promise whatever the soldiers were going to make of ‘hand-deed’, presumably within certain limits. But this isn’t plausibly the content of the Chapaev’s promise.

Why not? At this point, we need to say a bit more about promising—which should also serve to make it clear why we have chosen to focus on this speech act in particular. According to Thomson (1990), Scanlon (1998), and Darwall (2011), among others, in order for a promise to obligate the promisor to  $\phi$ , the promisee must (a) recognize that the relevant speech act is a promise, (b) recognize that it is a promise to  $\phi$  in particular, and (c)

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<sup>10</sup>Thanks to Alexander Dinges for suggesting this variant to us.



accept the promise. This Standard Theory of Promising thus has it that, for a promissory obligation to arise, the promisee must not only understand what has been promised, they must accept the promise as well.

Assuming this is correct, then, if a promissory obligation arises in our case, the content of that obligation must also have been the content of the illocutionary act of promising. For that content must first be recognized and accepted by the promisees in order for it to bind the promisor. In other words, if Chapaev ended up with a promissory obligation *to give his surviving soldiers three acres of land*, then it would seem that *to give his surviving soldiers three acres of land* must have been the content of his promise. This follows from claims (b) and (c).

Perhaps that was too quick, however. For couldn't we equally well say that Chapaev intended to give his soldiers *whatever they asked for, within reason at least* and that this, in turn, constituted the content of his promissory obligation? The problem is that, if this had been the content of Chapaev's promissory obligation, then, per (b) and (c), his soldiers would have had to recover this as the content of his promise before ultimately accepting the promise. That would have left the soldiers in a much stronger negotiating position than they appear to have been, with reason to test the limits of Chapaev's generosity. Perhaps they would have asked for six acres, or four acres and a cow, or whatever.

The point is that, as we have laid out the case (which strikes us as perfectly coherent), the soldiers were in no position to reason along these lines. So

this could not have been the content of Chapaev’s act of promising, assuming that the Standard—and, we take it, rather plausible—Theory of Promising is correct. In other words, the combination of the Locutionary Thesis and the Standard Theory of Promising yields four distinct roles that some content  $\phi$  is supposed to play with respect to a binding promise:

- (i) The speaker must intend to promise to  $\phi$ .
- (ii) The promisee(s) must recover  $\phi$  as the content of the promise.
- (iii) The promisee(s) must accept the promissory offer to  $\phi$ .
- (iv)  $\phi$  gives the content of the promissory obligation.

Our claim is that no single content can play all of these roles in the case of open-ended promises. *Whatever they ask(ed) for, within reason at least* can play roles (i) and (iv), but cannot plausibly play roles (ii) and (iii) in either version of the case we have described.

Our case raises an additional concern for Austin’s view of illocutionary acts. So far, we have been focused on Austin’s claim that any illocutionary act requires, or is partly constituted by, a *rhetic* act—i.e. an act using words with certain meanings. But rhetic acts in turn require, or are partly constituted by, *phatic* acts, or ‘the uttering of certain vocables or words [...] belonging to and as belonging to, a certain vocabulary, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar’ (Austin 1962, p. 95). In our original version of the case, Chapaev is not using words of Russian, nor of any other

established vocabulary. He is pretending to, but he knows full well that he is not. Strictly speaking, then, Austin’s view predicts that it should be impossible for Chapaev to promise anything. For he cannot perform a phatic act with what he utters, and hence cannot manage to illocute.<sup>11</sup>

Our modified version of the case runs slightly differently: there, Chapaev *is* using a word which belongs to (at least an archaic version of) Russian. But we very much doubt that he is using it *as belonging to* that vocabulary. For if there is any sensible distinction to be drawn between these two notions, surely it must lie in something having to do with the speaker’s intentions or the like. And Chapaev’s unawareness of this archaic term would seem to undermine the possibility of his intending to use it in the archaic sense. And yet, we take it, despite his inability to use the term ‘hand-deed’ as belonging to a certain vocabulary, we take it that the archaic meaning does indeed settle the content of Chapaev’s promissory obligation.

## 5 Objections and Responses

Of course, there are ways that one might try and resist our argument here. First, one might try claiming that Chapaev has only made as if to promise, but hasn’t really promised. The simplest way to work out this claim would

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<sup>11</sup>One might worry that, in the Austinian framework, this issue will arise for any neologism or other type of lexical innovation. Indeed, we share this concern. However, we take it that in most instances of lexical innovation, there will be additional resources—including, crucially, intentions to express a more-or-less definite content—to appeal to in order to help explain the felicity of the cases. For helpful discussion, see Armstrong (2016).

be to expand Grice's notion of making as if to say, where you go through the motions of saying, but you do not say what the sentence would normally express in that context.<sup>12</sup> In the case at hand, one might then claim that, though Chapaev ends up with an obligation to his soldiers to give them each three acres of land, this is to be explained not in terms of a promissory obligation, but rather in terms of the kind of responsibility that Chapaev bears for having intentionally, or at least non-accidentally, brought it about that his soldiers take him to have promised them each three acres of land. No genuine speech act of promising is required.

The problem with this response is that the utterance in question doesn't pattern with other purported instances of making as if to say. If M makes as if to say that the movie was fantastic in order to speak ironically, there is something amiss about my reporting this event to you by saying 'M said that the movie was fantastic'.<sup>13</sup> In our case, in contrast, it seems perfectly apt for Chapaev's soldiers to say, once things have been settled, 'Chapaev promised us three acres of land, and he delivered on that promise.'

To underscore this contrast, consider that in the situation above one can truly report of M that they uttered the words 'The movie was fantastic.' But one cannot truthfully say of them that they said or asserted that the movie was fantastic. In the Chapaev case, on the other hand, the soldiers can

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<sup>12</sup>See Grice (1989, p. 30), Neale (1992, p. 554), and Tamburini (2023).

<sup>13</sup>As Camp (2012) points out, if the original was uttered in a sneering tone, then one could offer a felicitous indirect speech report by mimicking this sneering tone in the report. It is sufficient for our purposes even if the claim holds only utterances and indirect speech reports as delivered in perfectly flat tones.

truthfully say of Chapaev that he promised them ‘his hand-deed’ and also that he promised them three acres of land.

A second objection hearkens back to the sort of view developed by Buchanan and King: why not treat this as a sort of underdetermination case? In other words, why not say that the content that Chapaev had in mind to promise was a (vague) cluster of acts (not propositions here, since we’re dealing with promises) rather than any single one? The first thing to say in response is that, as we have set up the case, we don’t think it matters to either felicity or content if we stipulate that Chapaev has nothing at all in mind as the content of his promise. Clearly, this suggestion cannot handle a version of the case with such a stipulation in play. But suppose that we stipulate instead that Chapaev does have a vague set of acts in mind as the content of his promise. Even then, this way of interpreting the case faces two serious problems.

First, the Chapaev case doesn’t pattern with the cases offered by Buchanan and King. The satisfaction conditions of Chapaev’s promise are fairly precise: to live up to his promissory obligation, Chapaev must give each of his soldiers three acres of land. In (1)-(3), in contrast, it was unclear what truth-conditions to associate with each of these assertions (if any). If the cases really are instances of the same phenomenon, we should expect for the satisfaction conditions—the promissory equivalent of truth-conditions—to pattern together.

Second, this suggestion is incompatible with the Standard Theory of Promising outlined above. According to the Locutionary Thesis, the content

of the promise must be the content the promisor intends to communicate. According to the Standard Theory of Promising, this same content must be recovered and accepted. If Chapaev intended to communicate only a vague set of satisfaction conditions, then this vague set should have been what the soldiers would need to recover and accept in order for a promissory obligation to arise. In neither version of the case, however, was this vague set what the soldiers seemed to recover—let alone accept. And yet, in both versions of the case, Chapaev ended up with a binding promise to provide each soldier with three acres of land.

A third objection runs: perhaps we can simply treat the case disquotationally. So what Chapaev intends to promise is simply his hand-deed, nothing more. And what the soldiers understand the promise to be about, when they accept it, is again his hand-deed. This allows us to hew to the Locutionary Thesis while nonetheless granting the felicity of Chapaev's speech act.

We should note that this sort of suggestion is likely to prove rather tricky for someone like Austin to endorse. The problem is that, when it comes to determining *which* rhetic act a speaker has performed, Austin appeals to indirect speech reports (Austin 1962, p. 96). So, if we treat the case disquotationally, we should expect for Chapaev's soldiers to be able to say of him 'Chapaev promised us his hand-deed,' with the term 'hand-deed' being used here rather than mentioned. It seems to us that this term is much more likely being mentioned here, given how natural it would be for the soldiers to say things like 'Chapaev promised us his hand-deed, whatever in the world that

means.’ But use and mention are notoriously difficult to tease apart, so we merely flag our concerns here and move on to our real worry.

Here is that worry: if we allow that disquotational intentions are enough to satisfy the Locutionary Thesis, we end up with some very odd results when it comes to demonstratives and other ‘impure’ indexicals. Consider an utterance of (3) where the speaker fails to have anything in mind as the reference of ‘that’: as best we can tell, this is infelicitous even if the speaker intends for this instance of ‘that’ to be interpreted disquotationally (whatever exactly that means for a demonstrative). King has shown that the speaker needn’t have anything *specific* in mind when using a demonstrative—not that they needn’t have anything in mind at all.<sup>14</sup> So we take it that there is a serious cost to endorsing the claim that, in general, the Locutionary Thesis can be satisfied by intentions centered on disquotational readings.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, and finally, one might try claiming that our case is simply an outlier and that bad cases make bad law.<sup>16</sup> But we aren’t trying to make law here; we are trying to understand the nature of speech acts. And, ultimately,

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<sup>14</sup>Imagine the potential follow-up to such an utterance of (3): ‘Oh, which car did you mean?’ Reply: ‘Oh, by ‘that’ I just meant that.’ This seems bad.

<sup>15</sup>A referee suggests that this disquotational claim might be restricted as follows: for the demonstratives and similar terms, something more than a disquotational intention is required to satisfy the Locutionary Thesis. The problem with this suggestion is that the Locutionary Thesis was meant to be a very general thesis about meaning, so allowing that the sorts of intentions which satisfy it can differ across terms would serve to undermine much of its appeal—at least as we understand it.

<sup>16</sup>This can be a principled point about the goal of theorizing: if our theories are meant to describe the typical, central functions of language, perhaps it is not incumbent upon them to describe all other uses of language. See, for instance, Unnsteinsson (2022).

we should hope for a theory that explains the full panoply of cases rather than some privileged subset.

## 6 Conclusion

We have argued that the Locutionary Thesis is flawed. One could try holding on to it, but only, as best we can tell, by giving up on the plausible claim that, for a promise to succeed, the promisee must understand, and ultimately accept, the content of the promise. If we give up on that claim, then the defender of the Locutionary Thesis will be free to hold that Chapaev can intend to promise *to give his soldiers whatever they ask for, within reason*, which can turn out to be three acres of land, without it mattering that his soldiers never recover the content of his promise.

We are loathe, however, to give up on the idea that promising involves something like a ‘meeting of the minds’—which, in turn, we take to involve coordination on a particular content. What we are open to is such coordination coming not from the listener’s recognizing what the speaker intended, but the speaker’s recognizing what the listener took them to have intended.

Our claims here are consonant with recent arguments to the effect that the meanings of utterances of particular sorts of terms, like natural kinds and names, can, counter-intuitively, depend on how things go in the future (cf. Jackman 1999, 2005, 2020, Haukioja 2020, Ball 2020, Michaelson 2022). Earlier temporal externalists could still endorse a version of the Locutionary



Thesis, however, so long as they were willing to give up on the claim that the content a speaker has in mind to assert must ultimately match the content asserted. Our cases push us further still, towards giving up on the idea that a speaker must have in mind any content at all in order to be able successfully assert or promise something.

All of this makes rather pressing the question: if not the Locutionary Thesis, then what? To that question, we do not yet have an answer.<sup>17</sup>

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