How to test a test for perlocutionary act names

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Steven Davis (1979) assumes—following Austin (1975)—that a perlocutionary act is one whereby, as a result of performing an illocutionary act, we succeed in bringing about "certain effects on the thoughts, actions, or feelings of our hearers" (Davis 1979: 242). Davis is aware of the fact that the grammatical tests Austin once tried to apply for distinguishing perlocutionary from non-perlocutionary act names fail; so, after reviewing the reasons why they do, he goes on to propose a complex test of his own which, he believes, does not. "I would like to propose", he writes, "a linguistic test which, I believe, does distinguish perlocutionary act verbs from other verbs" (Davis 1979: 237).

The test is defined by reference to the following frames, where S is "a variable for a designation for a speaker", H is "a variable for a designation for a hearer", φ "ranges over illocutionary and propositional act verbs", and X and Y can be substituted by "any linguistic expressions or nothing as long as grammaticality is preserved" (Davis 1979: 237):

(i)   By φ-ing X S ψ-s H Y.
(ii) S's φ-ing X ψ-s H Y.
(iii) H was ψ-ed Y by S's φ-ing X.

The test runs as follows: "A verb substituted for ψ is a perlocutionary act verb just in case there are substitution instances for the other variables which render [(i), (ii) and (iii)] grammatical" (Davis 1979: 237).

In order to show that verbs strongly suspected to be perlocutionary, such as "to amuse", do qualify as perlocutionary by his test, Davis points out that all of the following sentences are grammatical:

(1)   By objecting to her criticism Abel amused Mabel.
(2)   Abel's objecting to her criticism amused Mabel.
(3)   Mabel was amused by Abel's objecting to her criticism.

And in order to show that verbs strongly suspected not be perlocutionary, such as "to suggest", do not qualify as perlocutionary by his test, he points out that not all of the following sentences are grammatical:

(4)   By telling Mabel it was late Abel suggested to her that she leave.
(5)   Abel's telling Mabel it was late suggested to Mabel that she leave.
(6)   * Mabel was suggested that she leave by Abel's telling her it was late.

These examples create a problem that must be faced before any attempt at evaluating Davis' test is undertaken. The problem stems from the fact that they cannot possibly show what Davis claims they show, since the first two of the sentences cited for both "to amuse" and "to suggest" are not substitutions instances of the frames they are said to be substitutions instances of: in these frames, ψ is coded to past tense rather than to present tense morphemes. Since it is not evident whether Davis would opt for the past tense course or for the present tense course in order to remedy this particular anomaly, it is not evident which of the two corresponding versions of the test should be accepted as authoritative. Consequently, if one wants to show beyond doubt the test's incapacity to accomplish the task it was expected to accomplish, one must show this by reference to each one of the versions in question. And the most economical way of doing this is by means of counterexamples whose grammaticality or ungrammaticality would remain unaffected by changes from past to present or from present to past in the relevant substitutes for ψ. We are now in a position to evaluate Davis' test for distinguishing perlocutionary act verbs from other verbs.

The test fails to establish this distinction because, in each of its two possible versions, (A) it marks as perlocutionary act verbs certain verbs which are not action verbs at all, (B) it marks as perlocutionary act verbs two types of action verbs that are clearly not perlocutionary act verbs, and (C) it marks as non-perlocutionary act verbs certain action verbs that are clearly perlocutionary act verbs. Let us establish each of these points in order.

(A) Leaving a person entirely unaffected in its thoughts, feelings, and actions is certainly not *doing* something (and it is even less bringing about certain effects on that person's thoughts, feelings, and actions). Davis, however, must admit that leaving a person entirely unaffected in its thoughts, feelings, and actions *is* doing something (and, what is more, that it *is* bringing about certain effects on that person's thoughts, feelings, and actions). This happens because the following sentences, which are substitution instances of (i), (ii) and (iii) respectively (for either past or present tense versions of ψ in the first two) are all grammatical, and because verbs grammatically substituted for ψ in (i), (ii) and (iii) are, according to the test, perlocutionary act verbs:

    (7)   By pointing out that there are still chances for world peace Abel left/leaves Mabel entirely unaffected in her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

    (8)   Abel's pointing out that there are still chances for world peace left/leaves Mabel entirely unaffected in her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

    (9)   Mabel was left entirely unaffected in her thoughts, feelings, and actions by Abel's pointing out that there are still chances for world peace.

Since, therefore, the test makes it necessary to accept as perlocutionary act verbs certain verbs which are not even action verbs, it cannot itself by accepted.

(B) Let us now turn to *action* verbs which are not *perlocutionary* act verbs but which qualify as *perlocutionary* act verbs by the test under examination. Speech act verbs of this sort can be either illocutionary or non-illocutionary, as the following cases illustrate.

"To give permission" is a clear case of an illocutionary act verb and, correspondingly, an equally clear case of a non-perlocutionary act verb (it is perfectly consistent, in fact, to say that one gave someone permission to do a certain thing while denying that one has thereby had any effect on that person's thoughts, feelings, or actions). This verb, however, qualifies as a *perlocutionary* act verb by Davis' test, since it can be grammatically substituted for ψ in (i), (ii) and (iii)—with either past or present tense forms in (i) and (ii)—as the following sentences show:

(10)   By declaring to her "You may leave" Abel gave/gives Mabel permission to leave.
(11)   Abel's declaring to her "You may leave" gave/gives Mabel permission to leave.
(12)   Mabel was given permission to leave by Abel's declaring to her "You may leave".

"To give permission", then, represents a first variety of non-perlocutionary act verbs which qualify as perlocutionary act verbs by Davis' test, and which thereby disqualify the test in question.

"To echo" is clearly not an illocutionary act verb and it is clearly not a perlocutionary act verb either (it is perfectly consistent, in fact, to say that one echoed someone while denying that one has thereby had any effect on that person's thoughts, feelings, or actions). This verb too, however, qualifies as a perlocutionary act verb by Davis' test, since it can be grammatically substituted for ψ in (i), (ii) and (iii)—with either past or present tense forms in (i) and (ii)—as the following sentences show:

(13)   By arguing that people like Pavel are incorrigible Abel echoed/echoes Mabel.
(14)   Abel's arguing that people like Pavel are incorrigible echoed/echoes Mabel.
(15)   Mabel was echoed by Abel's arguing that people like Pavel are incorrigible.

"To echo", then, represents a second variety of non-perlocutionary act verbs which qualify as perlocutionary act verbs by Davis' test, and which thereby disqualify the test in question.

(*C*) Let us finally turn to action verbs which *are* perlocutionary act verbs, but which qualify as *non*-perlocutionary act verbs by the test under examination.

As Davis observes in the course of discussing an independent topic (Davis 1979: 238), frightening someone (by saying something) and causing someone to become frightened (by saying something) are both perlocutionary acts (it is, in fact, hardly consistent to say that one frightened someone, or that one caused someone to become frightened, and deny that one has thereby had any effects on that person's thoughts, feelings, or actions). What Davis has failed to observe, however, is that, although "frighten *x*" can be grammatically substituted for ψ throughout (i), (ii) and (iii), "cause *x* to become frightened" *cannot* be grammatically substituted for ψ throughout (i), (ii) and (iii). The following examples illustrate this last point.

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(16)   By telling her that the Vikings are coming Abel caused/causes Mabel to become frightened.

(17)   Abel's telling her that the Vikings are coming caused/causes Mabel to become frightened.

(18) * Mabel was caused to become frightened by Abel's telling her that the Vikings are coming.

Since "cause x to become frightened" cannot be grammatically substituted for ψ throughout (i), (ii) and (iii), Davis' test cannot accept it as a perlocutionary act verb. And since, by Davis' as well as by everyone else's admission, it is as much a perlocutionary act verb as "frighten x" is, it is the test itself that cannot be accepted.

In short, Davis' test for distinguishing perlocutionary act verbs from other verbs fails in each version and in every respect, and the problem of giving grammatical guarantees for this distinction remains accordingly where it always was, namely, in the list of problems awaiting solution.

Would the search for such a solution be a reasonable enterprise? I very much doubt that it would. If the *semantic* contrast between illocutionary and perlocutionary verbs—namely, that the former do not whereas the latter do denote instigations of changes in the thoughts, feelings, or actions of addressees—can effectively separate the two verb classes, the question whether these two *semantically* separable classes have or do not have, as classes, proprietary grammatical properties has no obvious theoretical motivation or interest. And there is, to my knowledge, no compelling evidence that the semantic contrast *cannot* be relied upon to separate the two classes. Indeed, it may well be that the cases where a verb can *appear* difficult to categorise as semantically illocutionary or semantically perlocutionary are in fact cases of ambiguity (specifically, of *polysemy*), in which the verb has distinct illocutionary and perlocutionary senses. To give just two examples, one may, at first glance, find it difficult to tell whether the verb "to insult" is semantically illocutionary or perlocutionary; however, by the time one notices that a sentence like (19) is *not* contradictory,

(19)   I insulted him repeatedly, but he wouldn't be insulted.

one is forced to acknowledge that the verb "to insult" has two distinct *senses*, one of which (the sense in which it denotes the actual *instigation* of a certain type of emotional effect on a person) is clearly perlocutionary, and the other one of which (the sense in which it denotes the *attempt to instigate* that type of emotional effect on a person) is clearly illocutionary. Similarly, it may, at first glance, appear difficult to decide whether the verb "to encourage" is semantically illocutionary or perlocutionary; however, by the time one notices that a sentence like (20) is *not* contradictory,

(20)   He encouraged her many times to submit a proposal, but she was not encouraged.

one is forced to acknowledge that the verb "to encourage" has two distinct *senses*, one of which (the sense in which it denotes the actual *instigation* of a certain type of cognitive or behavioural effect on a person) is clearly perlocutionary, and the other one of which (the sense in which it denotes the *attempt to instigate* that type of cognitive or behavioural effect on a person) is clearly illocutionary. It is in the detailed description of such cases of regular polysemy, and in the exploration of their causes and consequences, that, I believe, the real theoretical interest lies.

References

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