

## REIMAGINING ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

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*Speech act theorists tend to hold that the illocutionary force of an utterance is determined by one interlocutor alone: either the speaker or the hearer. Yet experience tells us that the force of our utterances is not determined unilaterally. Rather, communication often feels collaborative. In this paper, I develop and defend a collaborative theory of illocutionary force, according to which the illocutionary force of an utterance is determined by an agreement reached by the speaker and the hearer. This theory, which builds upon linguistic and sociological work on adjacency pairs and conversational interaction, can accommodate the complexity of speaker intentions (which may be disjunctive, indeterminate, and/or inconsistent over time), and renders speech act theory more compatible with theories of common ground.*

**Keywords:** speech acts, illocutionary force, uptake, intentionalism, conventionalism, common ground.

When two people use language, it is like shaking hands, playing a piano duet, or paddling a two-person canoe: It takes coordination, even collaboration, to achieve.

Herbert H. Clark (1992: xvi)

### I. INTRODUCTION

We perform illocutionary acts all the time—we promise, we assert, we order, and we give consent. But how exactly do we perform these acts, and who is involved in their performance? Many assume that the potential illocutionary force of an utterance, understood as a token of an illocutionary act type (a promise, an assertion, an order, etc.), is determined by the speaker alone, usually by her expression of a particular communicative intention. The hearer's role (if one believes uptake is necessary at all) is limited to either recognising that intention and thereby rendering the illocutionary act a success or failing to recognise it and thereby rendering the illocutionary act a failure. Call this the 'ratification theory'. A problem with this theory is that it fails to recognise the ways in which hearers contribute to the force of utterances. In some cases,

a hearer's interpretation of an utterance seems to 'overrule' the speaker's intention when it comes to the utterance's illocutionary force.

This points towards an alternative theory of force, which we can call the 'constitution theory'. This holds that a hearer's interpretation of an utterance determines its illocutionary force, even if the hearer's interpretation is at odds with the speaker's intention. If a hearer interprets an utterance as a promise, it is a promise, even if the speaker did not intend to perform a promise. This theory is also vulnerable to criticism; it runs counter to the intuition that speakers have a greater say over what they do with words than hearers, by rendering speakers completely hostage to hearers' interpretations.

In short, the ratification theory neglects the role of the hearer, and the constitution theory neglects the role of the speaker. Moreover, both theories miss something important about illocutionary acts; sometimes the force of an utterance seems to be determined neither during its initial performance, nor during the moment of interpretation by the hearer, but even later on, as a result of negotiations and clarifications by both interlocutors. In this paper, I develop a theory of illocutionary force which takes this fact seriously, as well as recognising that neither the speaker nor the hearer is completely sovereign when it comes to illocutionary force. According to the 'collaboration theory', the illocutionary force of an utterance is determined by an agreement reached by the speaker and the hearer.

In Section I, I show how existing theories of illocutionary force fall short. In Section II, I develop the collaboration theory of illocutionary force and argue that it has several advantages, including preserving our intuition that hearers can contribute to force whilst also acknowledging that speakers contribute more, accommodating the complexity of intentions (which may be disjunctive, indeterminate, and/or inconsistent over time), and rendering speech act theory more compatible with theories of common ground. In Section III, I pre-empt some potential objections to the theory.

## II. EXISTING THEORIES

### *II.1 Groundwork*

The notion of illocutionary force originates in the work of Austin (1976), and was later developed by Searle (1969). Austin argues that there are three kinds of speech act: locutionary acts, perlocutionary acts, and illocutionary acts. To perform a locutionary act is to utter a string of words (often a sentence) with a 'certain sense and reference' (Austin 1976: 109). To perform a perlocutionary act is 'to produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons' (1976: 101). To

perform an illocutionary act is to constitutively change the normative statuses of the speaker and the hearer.

For example, if I say to you, ‘Your recent book was marvellous!’, I perform a locutionary act by uttering a meaningful proposition, attributing the property of being marvellous to your recent book. I may also perform the perlocutionary act of making you feel proud. And I perform the illocutionary act of giving you a compliment, which seems to change our normative statuses in a distinctive way, for example, by making you obliged to thank me. Different illocutionary acts institute different normative statuses for speakers and hearers. Had I made a promise to you, you would have gained an entitlement to my doing what I promised, while I would have gained an obligation to do what I promised.

There is some debate as to what role the hearer plays in an illocutionary act. Much of this debate concerns the necessity of *uptake* for illocutionary acts. Austin defines uptake as the hearer’s ‘understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution’ (1976: 117). Some argue that an illocutionary act can occur without the achievement of uptake (Alston 2000; Bird 2002; Harris 2019a; Jacobson 1995). To perform an illocutionary act, they argue, one merely needs to express a particular communicative intention, or utilise a set of illocutionary act conventions, and one need not be recognised by a hearer as doing this. The thought goes that if I say to you, ‘I promise to pay you £5’, in a way which satisfies the conventions for promising and expresses my intention to promise, then I have made a promise, even if you do not interpret me as making a promise.

Those who agree that uptake is not necessary for illocutionary success need not agree about what *is* necessary for illocutionary success, nor about what determines the potential illocutionary force of an utterance (regardless of whether it turns out to be successful). Intentionalists hold that the potential illocutionary force of an utterance is determined by the speaker’s expression of a Gricean communicative intention (Bach and Harnish 1979; Harris, 2016, 2019a,b; Strawson 1964; see also Grice 1957). A ‘pure’ intentionalist might think that expressing this intention both determines the potential force of an utterance and is sufficient for the act’s successful performance. An ‘impure’ intentionalist might think that the intention determines the potential force, but other conditions must also be met in order for the act to be successful.

Conventionalists, meanwhile, hold that the potential illocutionary force of an utterance is determined by its satisfaction of speech act conventions, sometimes known as ‘felicity conditions’ (Austin 1976; LePore 2015; Searle 1969). A ‘pure’ conventionalist might think that utilising what Austin calls the ‘accepted conventional procedure’ (1976: 14–5) for a particular illocutionary act type not only determines the potential force of one’s utterance but also suffices for a successful tokening of that type. An ‘impure’ conventionalist might think that the use of conventions predetermines the potential force of an utterance, but other conditions must be met in order for the act to be successful.

Conventionalism and intentionalism can also be combined; one might hold that the Gricean intention a speaker expresses determines the *potential* force of her utterance, but in order for the utterance to be a successful illocutionary act, it must satisfy the conventions attendant on acts of the type the speaker wants to token.<sup>1</sup>

Other theorists, myself included, hold that uptake *is* necessary for the performance of an illocutionary act (Austin 1976; Hornsby and Langton 1998; Langton 1993; McDonald 2021). For most of these theorists, uptake consists of the hearer's recognition of the speaker's communicative intention, but uptake could also consist of the hearer's recognition of the utterance's satisfaction of illocutionary act conventions (if one is drawn more to conventionalism than to intentionalism).<sup>2</sup> I propose we understand uptake in a minimal sense which accommodates both conventionalists and intentionalists. Let uptake be the hearer's interpretation of the utterance, such that to provide uptake is to hear an utterance and interpret it as a particular kind of illocutionary act. One might arrive at this interpretation by reasoning about the speaker's intention, or by noticing conventional features of the utterance, by a mixture of a two, or by some other process. The thought goes that in order for my utterance of 'I promise to pay you £5' to be a promise, it is necessary that you interpret that utterance as a promise.

The arguments of this paper will be premised on the assumption that uptake is necessary for the performance of an illocutionary act. This assumption may already alienate some readers, so I shall say something brief in its defence. I take it most of us agree that illocutionary acts are a form of communication; when we make promises, assertions, and requests, we are communicating. Part of what it means to communicate is to create a connection between two or more minds, be it by the transfer of information from one mind to the other, or by some agreement between minds. If a person's utterance is neither heard nor interpreted by anyone, it is implausible to say that they communicated with anyone, and therefore, I suggest, it would be implausible to say that they performed an illocutionary act.

Moreover, understanding uptake as necessary for the performance of illocutionary acts fits better with how we talk about illocutionary acts. Imagine that after uttering the words 'I promise to pay you £5', I never go on to pay you £5. This angers you, and you explain this anger by saying, 'I am angry with you because you promised to pay me £5 but didn't do it!' It cannot be that all you mean by 'You promised to pay me £5' is 'You expressed an intention

<sup>1</sup> One might also claim there are different kinds of illocutionary acts, some whose force is determined by convention, and some whose force is determined by speaker intention. Bach and Harnish (1979) endorse a view of this kind, calling the former 'conventional illocutionary acts' and the latter 'communicative acts'.

<sup>2</sup> Some argue that uptake is more than just a mental phenomenon and may also involve acting in certain ways; see, for example, Sbisà (2009).

to promise to pay me £5', because this fact alone does not explain why my not paying you £5 was wrong. Surely what you mean is that I successfully communicated something to you, in such a way that gave rise to certain obligations and entitlements, and my subsequent failure to meet those obligations has angered you. Thus, it seems that part of what it means to promise is to successfully communicate. When we say that someone made a promise or an assertion, what we are tracking is the fact that the speaker, by transmitting information to us, made us believe that all of our normative statuses had changed in a distinctive way. For these reasons, I assume that uptake, in some minimal sense, is necessary for illocutionary success.

Among those who share this assumption, there is disagreement as to precisely what role uptake plays in illocutionary acts. Following my recent survey of this disagreement, let us call the two main theories of uptake the 'ratification theory' and the 'constitution theory' (McDonald 2021). I will now explain these theories in a little more detail.

## *II.2 Ratification versus constitution*

The ratification theory holds that the potential illocutionary force of an utterance is predetermined by the speaker's intention (and perhaps constrained by conventions), and the hearer can either ratify the act, by recognising the speaker's intention, or fail to ratify it, by failing to recognise the speaker's intention. The hearer's response to the utterance determines whether the speaker's intended illocutionary act succeeds, but it cannot determine the nature of the illocutionary act. The potential force of the utterance is determined by the speaker alone.

The ratification theory fails to accommodate the intuition that hearers can contribute to the *nature* of illocutionary acts, not just to whether an illocutionary act succeeds. This objection is made forcefully by Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) using the following example (2014). Celia is a manager in a factory, and has institutional authority to give her employees orders. Yet when she attempts to do so, her male workers interpret her as making mere requests, because 'they are deeply unaccustomed to taking women as authorities in the male-dominated space of the workplace' (2014: 446). Kukla argues that if the workers respond to Celia as if her utterance is a request, for example, by taking themselves to be free to refuse it, then her utterance was a request.<sup>3</sup> Each illocutionary act type has a distinctive normative output, and Celia's utterance in this scenario has the normative output characteristic of a request, so it is reasonable to say that she made a request.

<sup>3</sup> On the different reasons and obligations generated by requests and orders, see Lance and Kukla (2013).

This conclusion is incompatible with the ratification theory, which holds that the potential force of an utterance is determined by the speaker alone. Kukla proposes instead that the force of an utterance can be (at least partly) determined by the hearer's interpretation of it, even if that interpretation is at odds with the speaker's initial intention. This points us towards an alternative way of thinking about uptake, which I have called the 'constitution theory', according to which the hearer's interpretation of the utterance as a particular illocutionary act constitutes it as that particular illocutionary act.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the ratification theory, the constitution theory is sensitive to the power of hearers, especially in situations in which the speaker belongs to a historically oppressed group and the hearer does not, and it points to an interesting form of silencing hitherto ignored in the literature. Yet it runs counter to our intuition that, even if hearers do seem to contribute to the force of utterances, speakers contribute *more*. Surely a speaker has more authority regarding what she did with words than her hearer; if hearers can decide what we do with words, then it turns out we are profoundly lacking in autonomy. While the ratification theory errs by rendering hearers powerless, the constitution theory goes too far in the opposite direction and errs by rendering *speakers* powerless.

The ratification theory overlooks the role of hearers, while the constitution theory overlooks the role of speakers. In addition, both theories assume that the speaker's contribution to the force of her utterance ends when the utterance ends, when, in reality, the speaker's behaviour post-utterance can contribute to the force of that utterance. For example, when faced with their mistaken interpretation of her utterance, Celia may decide to 'correct' her workers. It would be unreasonable in this case to say that Celia performed a request, since after her 'correction' no one in the scenario is likely to believe that a request was performed. Alternatively, Celia may go along with the workers' misinterpretation, in which case it may be reasonable to say she performed a request.

All of this indicates that a speaker's behaviours post-utterance, especially in response to the hearer's interpretation, can affect the force of the utterance itself. The ratification theory cannot accommodate this, because it holds that

<sup>4</sup> Kukla's own theory of force is complex and resists categorisation as a 'pure' constitution theory. I am using their discussion of Celia as a jumping off point for thinking about the constitution theory rather than as a clear cut example of it. I take advocates of (something like) the constitution theory to include Navarro-Reyes (2010, 2014), Langton (2018), Tanesini (2019), and Butler (1997). I have previously disambiguated a strong and a weak version of the theory (McDonald 2021). The strong version holds that a hearer's uptake can make an utterance constitute any kind of illocutionary act, regardless of whether the utterance satisfied any of the conventions for that utterance. The weak version holds that a hearer's interpretation of an utterance is bound by rationality and conventions, such that though she can make an utterance constitute a different kind of illocutionary act from the one the speaker intended to perform, the act the speaker ends up performing must at least resemble the act the speaker intended to perform. As such, 'an attempted greeting cannot become a declaration of war, but an attempted order could become a request' (McDonald 2021).

the speaker's contribution to the illocutionary force of her utterance is exhausted by her performance of that utterance. The constitution theory cannot accommodate it either, since it assumes that the hearer's first interpretation of the utterance settles the matter of the utterance's force.

### III. THE COLLABORATION THEORY

Both the ratification theory and the constitution theory hold that the potential force of an utterance is unilaterally determined by one interlocutor alone. I will now develop a third theory which offers an egalitarian middle ground between the two theories and foregrounds the collaborative nature of communication. This 'collaboration theory' holds that an utterance has illocutionary force  $\Phi$  iff both (a) and (b) occur:

- (a) The hearer communicates to the speaker that she interprets the utterance as having force  $\Phi$ .
- (b) The speaker then communicates to the hearer that she accepts the hearer's interpretation of the utterance as having force  $\Phi$ .

For example, an utterance has the illocutionary force of an order if the hearer communicates to the speaker that she has interpreted the utterance as an order, and the speaker communicates to the hearer that she accepts the hearer's interpretation of the utterance as an order.

Why think of force in this way? Let us start by observing that, typically, once a speaker has attempted to perform an illocutionary act, the hearer will say or do something which signals both that she has heard the utterance and the way in which she has interpreted it. This does not usually take the form of a direct assertion like 'I interpreted you as performing act  $\Phi$ '. Instead, if the hearer interprets an utterance as act  $\Phi$ , she acts in a way which would be appropriate if the speaker had performed act  $\Phi$ , making it reasonable for the speaker to assume that the hearer interpreted the utterance as act  $\Phi$ . Sometimes this signalling process will be verbal, and other times non-verbal. If someone asks you if you are well, you might say 'Yes, thanks', or you might nod. Both of these signal to the speaker that you have interpreted them as asking you a 'yes or no' question.

This signalling process is facilitated by conventions; for many illocutionary act types, there are conventional responses which we expect the hearer to provide, such that using one of these responses conventionally signals how you have interpreted the utterance. For example, if we interpret someone as giving us an order, we might say in response, 'Yes, sir/ma'am'. If we interpret them as giving us a compliment, we express gratitude. If they ask us a closed question, we say, 'Yes' or 'No', or we nod or shake our head. All of these behaviours make clear to the speaker how we have interpreted her utterance. These

pairs of illocutionary act and conventional response are known in linguistics as adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 2007).

Herbert Clark argues that the reason why hearers often vocalise their uptake of speakers' utterances in this way is to give speakers the opportunity to 'validate or correct' the hearers' interpretations of their speech (1996: 215). One of the primary goals of conversation is arriving at some kind of common ground or common knowledge, and we can only get there if, as hearers, we tell speakers how we are interpreting them and give them the opportunity to ratify or reject our interpretations. The collaboration theory captures this idea; it holds that force is not grounded solely in either the speaker's intention or the hearer's recognition, but rather results from some agreement between speaker and hearer, where that agreement need not reflect the speaker's original intention or the hearer's original interpretation. After the hearer has signalled her interpretation of the utterance, the speaker may choose to correct the hearer's interpretation, or she may continue the conversation, which signals that she accepts the hearer's interpretation.

According to the collaboration theory, force itself is still a matter of interlocutors acquiring a distinctive set of normative statuses, but it is determined by agreement rather than by intention or interpretation alone. This is intuitive, because often our reasons for believing we have acquired new normative statuses as a result of performing an illocutionary act include beliefs about what other people believe. If I believe I have made a promise, for example, I believe I have acquired a new obligation. And I believe that I have acquired this obligation (a) because I believe that the hearer believes I have that obligation and (b) because I believe that the hearer has acquired (and believes she has acquired) an attendant entitlement. If I attempted a promise, but came to believe that you did not hear me do so, or did not interpret what I said as a promise, it's not clear I would still consider myself obligated to do the action I was attempting to promise to do.

This theory is not without precedent. The idea that 'meaning', broadly construed, results from negotiations and deliberations between interlocutors is central to conversation analysis (Heritage 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). John Heritage argues, for example, that interlocutors use a three-turn structure to establish intersubjective meaning. After the hearer completes (or appears to complete) the adjacency pair initiated by the speaker, the speaker then has opportunity for 'explicit correction or repair of any misunderstanding which was displayed in the second speaker's turn' (1984: 257). If the speaker does not challenge the hearer's response, they 'tacitly [confirm] the displayed understandings in the sequence so far' (1984: 258). In this way, 'a context of publicly displayed and continuously up-dated intersubjective understandings is systematically sustained' (1984: 259).



We also find similar ideas in interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and pragmatics (Arundale, 1999, 2008, 2010a,b, 2013; Elder and Haugh 2018; Haugh, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012). Robert Arundale argues that conversational phenomena are not always reducible to the mental states of the speakers and hearers, but rather result from ‘evolving, reciprocal co-creatings of meanings and actions in on-going address and uptake’ (2010a: 2079). Chi-Hé Elder and Michael Haugh, meanwhile, develop a formal account of how meaning is negotiated in conversation, building on the three-part structure identified by the conversation analysts (2018), and Antonella Carassa and Marco Colombetti offer an account of ‘joint meaning’, which ‘is formed every time a speaker and a hearer jointly commit to the fact that a specific communicative act has been performed’ (2009: 1849).

Most of this work eschews talk of illocutionary force, however. My collaboration theory of force is therefore an attempt to combine the insights of this linguistic and micro-sociological work with a broadly Austinian/Searlean speech act framework. I am developing an argument for how illocutionary force in particular, as opposed to ‘meaning’ in general, is collaboratively constructed.

This project has philosophical ancestry in the work of Marina Sbisà, who stands apart from other speech act theorists in her emphasis on the intersubjectivity of illocutionary force (1984, 2001, 2002, 2009). According to Sbisà, a defining feature of an illocutionary act is its production of conventional effects on interlocutors, where those conventional effects consist of assignments of and removals of deontic modal values, like rights, entitlements, and commitments (2001). These effects, she argues, are ‘founded on intersubjective agreement’ between speakers and hearers (2001: 1796). This entails that ‘a speaker may even turn out to have done (with his or her words) something he or she did not intend to do’ (2001: 1797), since the speaker and hearer may reach an agreement about the conventional effect of the utterance which is at odds with the effects the speaker intended to produce. And if no agreement can be reached, no illocutionary act has been successfully performed (2002: 75).

Sbisà and I use different frameworks and terminology; for example, I do not use Sbisà’s Austinian notion of conventional effects, and while she uses narrative semiotics to explain conversational dynamics (2002), I prefer the three-part structure outlined by conversation analysts like Schegloff, Sacks, and Jefferson. We also endorse different accounts of illocutionary force; interlocutors’ beliefs play a greater role in my account than in Sbisà’s, for example. Yet despite these differences, I take my collaboration theory to be broadly in the spirit of Sbisà’s work.

### III.1 *The best of both worlds*

I will now set out the several good reasons we have to endorse the collaboration theory. A first is that it retains the best bits of both the ratification and constitution theories, while avoiding their flaws. Like the ratification theory and unlike the constitution theory, the collaboration theory accommodates the intuition that a speaker ultimately has more authority when it comes to the force of her utterance than the hearer. Yet like the constitution theory and unlike the ratification theory, the collaboration theory acknowledges that hearers can play an active role in the constitution of force.

To see how the collaboration theory walks this line, consider the following scenario:

**Coffee Order:** Alex and Zoe are colleagues. Their jobs are of equal rank and neither has any official authority over the other. Alex attempts to order Zoe to bring her coffee. Zoe, however, interprets this as a request and says, ‘Sorry, I can’t right now!’ Alex realises that Zoe has interpreted her utterance as a request.

After this interaction, Alex has several options available to her. She might correct Zoe by saying something like ‘I wasn’t asking’, which implicates that Zoe was wrong to interpret the utterance as a mere request. If this happens, Zoe still has the power to make the act fail; she might believe that Alex does not possess the authority to order her around, and therefore the attempted order fails because it does not satisfy an authority-based felicity condition. Yet if Alex rejects Zoe’s interpretation of the utterance as a request, then it cannot be a request; this possibility gets ruled out. Therefore while the collaboration theory renders communication a more collaborative affair than on the ratification theory, speakers still retain a ‘veto’, in line with the intuition that speakers have more authority over the force of their utterances than hearers.

Instead of correcting Zoe, Alex might instead decide to reply to her with ‘That’s okay’. If she does this, she signals to Zoe that Zoe’s interpretation is acceptable to her. In which case, it seems plausible to say that Alex performed a request after all, regardless of her intentions. Zoe may never find out that her interpretation was at odds with Alex’s initial intention, and both interlocutors will likely regard themselves as now having the normative statuses typically created by requests. The collaboration theory of uptake does not allow that speakers can be non-consensually over-ruled, but it does allow that a speaker can cede to the hearer’s interpretation. The hearer plays a much more significant role here than she does on the ratification theory, but not quite as significant a role as she plays on the constitution theory.

### III.2 Complexity of intentions

A second reason to endorse the collaboration theory is that it can accommodate the fact that speakers sometimes have indeterminate or disjunctive intentions, and that speakers' intentions can change over time. I will illustrate this using the following three modifications of the above *Coffee Order* case.

**Changing Intention:** When she first starts to speak, Alex intends to order Zoe to get her a coffee. In the course of speaking, her intention changes, and by the time she has finished speaking, she intends her utterance to be a request and hopes that Zoe will interpret it as such. When Zoe indicates that she does interpret it in this way, Alex is relieved, and goes along with this interpretation.

**Disjunctive Intention:** Alex wants Zoe to get her a coffee, and she intends that her utterance be either a request or an order for Zoe to get her that coffee. She does not care whether her utterance ends up a request or an order; she just intends to perform one of these acts. When Zoe indicates that she interprets the utterance as a request, Alex goes along with this interpretation.

**Indeterminate Intention:** Alex wants Zoe to get her a coffee, and she intends to perform an illocutionary act that brings this about, but she has no particular illocutionary act in mind. She chooses to let Zoe's interpretation of the utterance settle the matter. When Zoe indicates that she interprets the utterance as a request, Alex goes along with this interpretation.

I think that it is reasonable to say that Alex performed a request in all three of these scenarios. This is also the result the collaboration theory delivers, because Alex and Zoe come to an agreement that Alex performed a request.

The ratification theory (and, indeed, intentionalism in general), meanwhile, struggles with these scenarios. Regarding *Changing Intention*, the theory has no way of deciding which of Alex's intentions (the initial intention to order, or the later intention to request) takes precedence. Regarding *Disjunctive Intention*, the theory seems forced to say either that Alex performed both an order and a request, or that she performed neither. Neither result is plausible. And regarding *Indeterminate Intention*, it seems the theory must say that Alex cannot and does not perform an illocutionary act, since she had no determinate intention which could determine her utterance's force. Yet intuitively Alex can perform illocutionary acts in all of these cases, and the collaboration theory allows for this, because it denies that the speaker's intention ultimately settles the force of an utterance.

The constitution theory fares a bit better with these cases, in so far as it delivers the right results, but it does not arrive at these results for the right reasons. Surely it is not just the fact that Zoe interpreted the utterance as a request that determines the utterance's force in all of these scenarios; Alex's

beliefs and intentions regarding what she did matter, too. For example, in *Changing Intention* it is significant that the intention Alex ultimately arrives at coheres with the interpretation Zoe offers.

### III.3 *Compatibility with common ground theories*

A third reason to endorse the collaboration theory is that it renders speech act theory more compatible with common ground theories of communication. Most theories, regardless of their stance on the necessity and role of uptake, struggle to explain how a speaker's performance of an illocutionary act becomes common ground in a conversation. This is because they assume that information transfer goes only one way during an illocutionary act (from speaker to hearer). Yet the collaboration theory holds that information flows in both directions (from speaker to hearer and from hearer to speaker), making common knowledge, or something close to it, more achievable.

The common ground of a conversation, according to Robert Stalnaker, is the set of attitudes and beliefs mutually accepted by all participants in a conversation (2002). Acceptance is weaker than belief, such that a proposition is in the common ground if we all *treat it as true*; we need not actually *believe* that it is true. Though he originally characterises common ground in terms of sets of possible worlds, in his later work Stalnaker makes the iterative nature of common ground more explicit, building on David Lewis's work on common knowledge (1969) and Stephen Schiffer's work on mutual belief (1972):

Since the body of information that we are calling 'common ground' is what is presumed to be common knowledge among the participants in a conversation, it is a concept with an iterative structure: a proposition is common ground between you and me if we both accept it (for the purposes of conversation), we both accept that we both accept it, we both accept that we both accept that we both accept it, and so on. (Stalnaker 2014: 25)

The notion of common ground is useful because it helps us understand how interlocutors can formulate joint plans of action and share information. For example, Stalnaker uses the notion of common ground to explain the nature of presupposition, and the process by which presuppositions are 'accommodated' [a notion also discussed in Lewis (1979)]. Mitchell Green writes of Stalnaker's theory of common ground that it 'possesses unquestionable explanatory power; shedding light on presupposition, presupposition accommodation, the behaviour of certain types of conditionals, epistemic modals, and related phenomena' (2017: 1589).

The notion of common ground may not appear to be in tension with standard speech act theory. Indeed, Stalnaker seems to successfully synthesise the two by arguing that we can understand different illocutionary acts in terms of their relation to the common ground. For example, the illocutionary act of assertion is a proposal to add a proposition to the common ground (2014:

51). Yet if common ground consists of something like common or mutual knowledge, as Stalnaker suggests, standard speech act theory cannot explain *how* common knowledge that someone has performed a particular illocutionary act is achieved.

Imagine again that Alex expresses a communicative intention to perform an order, and Zoe recognises Alex's intention. Many accounts of speech acts, including the ratification theory, would grant that Alex has successfully performed an order, and would want to say that the proposition that Alex has performed this illocutionary act has now entered the common ground of the conversation. Yet we cannot infer from this interaction, as described, that the proposition that Alex has performed an order has entered the common ground of the conversation. The hearer in this exchange, Zoe, correctly identifies the speaker's (Alex's) intention, but this does not entail that Alex knows that Zoe has recognised her intention, nor that Zoe knows that Alex knows that Zoe has recognised Alex's intention. Thus standard speech act theory struggles to tell us how the performance of illocutionary acts enters the common ground of conversations.<sup>5</sup>

The collaboration theory *can* do this. Force, according to this theory, results from an agreement between speaker and hearer, reached by way of the hearer indicating her interpretation and the speaker accepting or rejecting that interpretation. After Zoe interprets Alex's utterance as an order, she will likely express that interpretation, even if in a very minimal fashion (for example through her body language). This provides Alex with knowledge of how Zoe interpreted her utterance. Alex can then reject or accept Zoe's interpretation, which in turn gives Zoe knowledge of Alex's beliefs about Zoe's interpretation. As a result of their interaction, the following beliefs exist:

- Zoe believes that Alex performed an order (based on her interpretation of Alex's utterance).
- Alex believes that Zoe believes that Alex performed an order (because Zoe signalled her interpretation of the utterance as an order).
- Zoe believes that Alex believes that Alex performed an order (because Alex accepted Zoe's interpretation).
- Alex believes that Zoe believes that Alex believes that Alex performed an order (because she believes Zoe recognised her acceptance of Zoe's interpretation).

<sup>5</sup> Arundale raises a similar worry for Gricean theories of communication in general, observing that they fail 'to address how participants themselves could come to know whether the recipient's inference and attribution regarding that [speaker's] intention is in any way consistent with it' (2008: 241). Similarly, Istvan Kecskes and Fenghui Zhang argue that most pragmatic theories are incompatible with accounts of common ground because 'they usually retain a communication-as-transfer-between-minds view of language' (2009: 331).

Thus the proposition that Alex has performed an order becomes common knowledge, or at least something very close to it.<sup>6</sup> This entails that Alex and Zoe recognise themselves and each other as having acquired the normative statuses constitutive of an order, and can hold one another to their new obligations. Thus the collaboration theory explains how the performance of illocutionary acts enters the common ground of conversations, if common ground is construed as consisting of common knowledge.

#### IV. OBJECTIONS

Despite its selling points, the collaboration theory also faces several potential objections, which I will now set out and then attempt to disarm.

##### *IV.1 Illocutionary acts without ratification*

Firstly, we might worry that the collaboration theory makes illocutionary acts too hard to come by, rendering many utterances which we intuitively regard as successful illocutionary acts ultimately failures. The theory holds that for a speaker to perform an illocutionary act, the following sequence of events must occur:

Stage 1: the speaker performs an utterance.

Stage 2: the hearer communicates her interpretation of the utterance to the speaker.

Stage 3: the speaker communicates to the hearer that she accepts the hearer's interpretation of the utterance.

In ordinary conversations, Stage 2 and Stage 3 often seem to fail to occur, yet the speaker still seems to perform illocutionary acts. Let us first consider cases in which a hearer does not seem to signal her interpretation—i.e., Stage 2 does not occur (and therefore Stage 3 cannot occur, either)—and yet the speaker still seems to perform an illocutionary act. For example, imagine Alex attempts to order Zoe to bring her coffee, and Zoe says nothing in response, even though she has in fact recognised what Alex was trying to do. Surely Alex could still perform an order in this scenario?

I agree that she could, but this is compatible with the collaboration theory. Note that the theory does not require that hearers signal their responses verbally, so the fact that Zoe does not say anything does not entail that she

<sup>6</sup> One might worry that common knowledge, construed in this recursive way, is impossible, since it seems to require that interlocutors possess infinite iterative beliefs. Lewis offers a response to this worry, arguing that this list of iterations is 'a chain of implications, not of steps in anyone's actual reasoning', thus 'there is nothing improper about its infinite length' (1969: 53).

does not signal her response. She could signal her interpretation through gesture and facial expression.

Yet what should we say of cases in which the hearer does nothing (verbal or non-verbal) to indicate her interpretation? In these cases, we should note that the hearer's act of signalling her interpretation need not come immediately after the speaker's utterance. Stages 1, 2, and 3 need not occur immediately after one another; they can be and often will be interspersed with other conversational contributions. Zoe could provide evidence of her interpretation later on in the conversation. She may simply be taking her time, waiting for Alex to say more and then using these new utterances to help her make sense of the original utterance. Conversation analysts working on adjacency pairs explicitly acknowledge that other talk can occur in between the first and second part of an adjacency pairs (Heritage 1984, Ch. 8; Jefferson 1972; Schegloff, 1968, 1972). This, I suggest, rings true to our actual experiences of conversation. Force is rarely determined then and there. Rather, we will process an utterance, then continue thinking about it, listening more to the speaker, sounding her out, seeking clarification, et cetera. Thus that Alex can seem to perform an illocutionary act without any immediate signals from Zoe regarding Zoe's interpretation is not a counterexample to the collaboration theory.

Next, let us consider cases in which the hearer's signalling of her interpretation is ambiguous. Imagine that after Alex's attempted order, Zoe nods. A nod could signal either that she interpreted the utterance as an order, or that she interpreted it as a request. This makes it hard for Stage 3 to proceed, since there is no singular interpretation for the speaker to ratify or reject. Yet some might want to say that Alex can still perform an illocutionary act in this scenario.

I wish to push back here; I think in some cases like this, no illocutionary act has been performed. Imagine that Alex attempts an order, Zoe interprets the utterance as a request and nods, and Alex believes that Zoe has interpreted her utterance an order. In this scenario, the ambiguity of Zoe's response has led to crossed wires. Zoe believes they both believe Alex's utterance was a request, and Alex believes they both believe Alex's utterance was an order. There is therefore no agreement about what has been done, and so neither an order nor a request has been made. This is plausible, because an order institutes a distinctive set of normative statuses for speakers and hearers, but in this situation that particular set is not instituted; instead Alex takes herself to have the entitlement concomitant with having performed an order and believes Zoe has the obligation concomitant with having been ordered to do something, while Zoe takes herself to have a reason concomitant with having been requested to do something and believes Alex has an obligation to be grateful for her doing so; this is not the standard normative upshot of an order, nor the standard normative upshot of a request.

Other times, a signal could be ambiguous, but the speaker could hit upon the correct interpretation of the signal nonetheless. For example, maybe Alex successfully interprets Zoe's nod as signalling that Zoe interpreted the utterance as a request. Whether the utterance was a request will then depend on whether Alex ratifies that interpretation. In these cases, the ambiguity does not preclude the successful performance of an illocutionary act. In cases where a signal is ambiguous, speakers can also seek clarification from their hearers; they are particularly likely to do this in high stakes scenarios.

Finally, let us consider cases in which a speaker does not seem to accept or reject a hearer's interpretation; i.e., cases in which Stage 1 and Stage 2 occur, but Stage 3 does not. Maybe after Zoe signals her interpretation of Alex's utterance, Alex appears to do nothing, seemingly failing to ratify or reject Zoe's interpretation. I venture that these kinds of cases are rather rare, because a speaker's silence in the face of a hearer's signalled interpretation is usually sufficient to constitute ratification of that interpretation; ratification will typically consist simply of a failure to reject an interpretation. Sbisà similarly writes that 'when the speaker fails to reject the hearer's uptake, he or she accepts to have done what he or she has been taken to do' (2001: 1797, fn.5; see also 2002: 74–5).

#### IV.2 *Regress*

A second potential objection is that the theory is vulnerable to regress. We might think that the hearer's signalling her interpretation is itself an illocutionary act, in which case we fall into an endless regress of ratification procedures. Yet I deny that the hearer's signalling of her interpretation is an illocutionary act in its own right. Often, the hearer's interpretation might be signalled by the not-at-issue content of what she says, for example, as a presupposition. Marina Sbisà endorses something like a presuppositional theory of signalling when she writes that often, when we respond to an utterance, 'the response produces its own backward effect on the illocutionary force of the previous speech act not by virtue of its being a perlocutionary effect, but because it presupposes and therefore indicates how the speech act has been taken' (Sbisà 1992: 102–3).

One might also signal one's interpretation by way of a Gricean maxim of relation (Grice 1979). Imagine that I ask you, 'Do you like this paper?' and you reply, 'Yes, I do'. I attempted to perform an illocutionary act—a polar question—and you attempted to perform an illocutionary act in response—an affirmative assertion. Your response would only be conversationally appropriate, i.e., in accordance with the cooperative maxims of conversation, had I asked you a polar question, so your response *signals* that you interpreted my utterance as a polar question. This act of signalling is not itself an illocutionary act, as it does not involve the kind of reflexive intention which is a hallmark of illocutionary acts.



That said, it is certainly true that we often respond to illocutionary acts with other illocutionary acts, and this means that throughout the conversation there will be multiple overlapping negotiations regarding the force of utterances. I am happy with this consequence; humans have sophisticated processing abilities, and conversations are indeed structurally complex.

### IV.3 *Bad faith vetoes*

A flaw of the constitution theory is that it makes speakers highly vulnerable to moral bad luck, by allowing that a speaker could end up performing an objectionable illocutionary act even if she did not intend to do so. The collaboration theory does not have this result; speakers can veto interpretations of their utterances which do not mesh with their original intentions, and so cannot end up on the hook for performing illocutionary acts they did not intend to perform. Yet we might worry that the theory allows for speakers to engage in bad faith vetoes; they can refuse to ratify perfectly reasonable interpretations of their utterances and therefore unfairly take themselves off the hook for objectionable illocutionary acts. Consider the following scenario:

**Gaslighter:** Alex attempts to order Zoe to bring her a coffee. Zoe recognises Alex's interpretation, and is hurt. She says, 'Please don't boss me around like that'. Alex replies, 'I wasn't bossing you around, it was just a request!' Zoe is then unsure how to interpret the utterance.

This case involves gaslighting, a phenomenon so-called because of the 1938 play *Gas Light*, in which a husband attempts to make his wife think she is going insane by secretly dimming the lights in their home while denying that anything has changed. Kate Abramson defines gaslighting as 'a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds' (2014: 1). In *Gaslighter*, Alex is gaslighting Zoe by performing an utterance which resembles a particular illocutionary act, thereby causing Zoe to reasonably interpret it as such an illocutionary act, then denying that she performed that act, which may make Zoe doubt her perceptions.<sup>7</sup>

If Zoe does not come to accept Alex's 'correction' of her interpretation, then the collaboration theory seems to entail that Alex did not perform any illocutionary act in this scenario, since no agreement was reached as to the illocutionary force of her utterance. Thus Alex's claim that her utterance was

<sup>7</sup> It may be that Alex is trying to withdraw her implicit claim to have the authority needed to give orders to Zoe, perhaps to save face. If so, the scenario may involve an implicit negotiation regarding Alex's authority, which Zoe, not Alex, 'wins'. I thank a reviewer for discussion on this point.

a request is false. But she still possesses the power to reject Zoe's reasonable interpretation, rendering her utterance neither a request nor an order. Yet one might want to say that Alex did in fact perform an order, and she should not be able to take herself off the hook so easily.

The collaboration theory seems to have the unsavoury result that many people who appear to have performed objectionable illocutionary acts did not in fact perform objectionable illocutionary acts, provided they reject any interpretations of their utterances as such. Here is where the ratification theory seems to have an advantage, because it does not allow for these kinds of vetoes. It holds that if the hearer recognises the speaker's intention, then the speaker has performed the illocutionary act they intended to perform, regardless of whether the speaker then attempts to backtrack by redescribing the utterance.

In response to this objection, it is important to point out that the collaboration theory does not entail that the speaker is not responsible for *any* aspects of her utterance. Even if it is true that the speaker did not perform the illocutionary act she seemed to perform (because there was no agreement between her and the hearer regarding the force of her utterance), we can still hold her responsible for using conventions in such a way that made it reasonable for the hearer to interpret her in a particular way, and we can still hold her responsible for generating certain perlocutionary effects. So she can still plausibly be said to have committed wrongdoing.

Something similar can be said about a different kind of 'bad faith veto'. Imagine a speaker attempts to perform an objectionable illocutionary act, but when the hearer signals her interpretation of the utterance as such an act, the speaker replies, 'I was only joking!' This is different from *Gaslighter* because the speaker is not rejecting merely the particular illocutionary force the hearer has attributed to the utterance, but rather is disputing the hearer's interpretation of the utterance as any kind of illocutionary act at all. 'I was only joking!' is an attempt to characterise one's utterance as a non-serious speech act, or what Austin calls an 'etiolation' (1976: 22). As before, the collaboration theory entails that no illocutionary act has been performed in this scenario, because there is no agreement between speaker and hearer. Yet, once again, this speaker can still be morally on the hook, both because of the effects they have produced in their hearer (willfully or otherwise), and because if they were attempting to engage in non-serious discourse they had a duty to make this clear from the beginning.

In addition, it may sometimes be obvious that the speaker's rejection of the hearer's interpretation is insincere. Though she may claim that she did not intend to perform the objectionable illocutionary act the hearer interpreted her as performing, she may continue to *act* as if she did in fact intend to perform it and believes that she succeeded, and that she is doing this may be obvious to the hearer. In which case, maybe there *is* an agreement here as to what has been done, after all, since both the speaker and the hearer

recognise (and recognise that the other has recognised) that the speaker's rejection of the hearer's interpretation was something like a bald-faced lie, and both believe, and believe that the other believes, that the speaker performed the objectionable illocutionary act in question.<sup>8</sup> So there is a tacit agreement as to the utterance's force, after all—the speaker is simply refusing to let this fact be 'on the record', perhaps to give her plausible deniability in the eyes of any bystanders.

#### *IV.4 Conversational power dynamics*

Fourthly, and finally, we might worry that the collaboration theory is insensitive to the ways in which conversational power dynamics limit speakers' abilities to ratify or reject interpretations. Consider the following scenario:

**Attempted Refusal:** Zoe's partner asks if she will have sex with them. Zoe says, 'No', in an attempt to refuse the request. Zoe's partner believes rape myths like 'No means yes', and interprets Zoe's utterance as an act of consent. They indicate this by laughing. Zoe recognises that she has been misinterpreted, but is too scared to correct her partner, so goes along with this interpretation of her utterance as an act of consent.

The collaboration theory generates the result that Zoe has consented to sex with her partner, because she and her partner appear to have reached an agreement that this is what Zoe did. Surely, we do not want our theories of force to yield such results.

This is a difficult case. I am inclined to suggest that agreements about illocutionary force only have constitutive power when the speaker and the hearer can participate freely in the interaction. This entails that in this scenario, because Zoe is not properly free to accept or reject her partner's interpretation of her utterance, no 'agreement' reached about what she did can determine the illocutionary force of her utterance. This move will have quite radical consequences, because situations in which all interlocutors participate freely seem few and far between, due to widespread social power asymmetries along many axes. The result is that a significant number of utterances will lack illocutionary force. We may need to bite this bullet.

It is worth stressing, however, that freedom need not be an absolute; rather, agents can be more or less free. Maybe it suffices for the performance of illocutionary acts that agents are sufficiently free, not that they are fully free. Quill Kukla has recently suggested, for example, that in situations of compromised autonomy, agents can still perform the illocutionary act of consenting, provided their ability to do so is 'socially and interpersonally scaffolded' (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Bald-faced lies are 'utterances that seem to lack the intent of the speaker to deceive the hearer, which is usually assumed in the definition of proper lying' (Meibauer 2018: 252).

We could extend this argument to all illocutionary acts; maybe agents who are not fully autonomous can still perform illocutionary acts, provided certain social supports are in place in the context of utterance.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have developed and defended a new theory of how the illocutionary force of an utterance is determined. I began by considering two ways in which a hearer can contribute to the illocutionary force of an utterance. Perhaps her powers are limited to ratifying or rejecting attempted illocutionary acts, and she makes no contribution at all to the potential force of the utterance. Alternatively, perhaps her interpretation of an utterance as having a particular force gives the utterance that particular force, regardless of the speaker's intentions. I argued that neither of these theories seems quite right; the former is insensitive to the ways in which force is jointly determined, while the latter seems to afford hearers and their interpretations an unrealistic level of sovereignty.

I proposed instead that we think of illocutionary force as determined by way of an agreement between the speaker and the hearer. This theory, which builds upon linguistic and sociological work on adjacency pairs and conversational interaction, not only captures our intuitions but can also accommodate the complexities of speakers' intentions, as well as proving more compatible than the previous theories with common-ground-based theories of communication.

Some aspects of the theory may need refining. For example, I am open to the possibility that there are other ways in which an agreement about force may be reached, which do not necessarily follow the sequence of utterance, signalled interpretation, and then rejection or ratification of that signalled interpretation. It may also be that the theory only applies to particular kinds of illocutionary acts, and not all illocutionary acts. Nonetheless, I think the general idea that force is (at least sometimes) collaboratively constructed is intuitive and plausible, despite having been curiously neglected in speech act theory. Thus even if the nuts and bolts of the collaboration theory need work, I hope that it can open up a fruitful new area of inquiry.<sup>9</sup>

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