

Towards a Unified Theory of Illocutionary Normativity

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1. Varieties of illocutionary norms

Speech act theory has traditionally been concerned with a particular subset of linguistic rules: *illocutionary rules*. Illocutionary rules are rules that govern the performance of illocutionary acts¹. For example: “You should *promise* to do something only if you intend to it”, or “*Advising* someone to do something is appropriate only if the action advised is in the audience’s interest”. Speech act theorists have been concerned with studying the nature and scope of these rules, and with identifying which rules govern which illocutionary acts. Throughout the years and in different areas of the world, various schools and traditions have emerged, each attempting to formalise and model the various norms governing illocutions.

Although these different traditions share a common background, there are often terminological and theoretical differences. Often, theoretical convergence between schools is fairly evident despite differences in vocabulary. For instance, Searle’s opposition between ‘defective’ and ‘unsuccessful’ illocutions parallels (and derives from) Austin’s opposition between ‘abuses’ and ‘misfires’². In other cases, it isn’t clear whether terminological divergencies reflect actual theoretical differences. For example, to describe the rational expectations that govern conversational exchanges, Grice (1989) chooses the term ‘maxims’ instead of ‘rules’. Whether this lexical choice reflects a concern for a genuinely distinct kind of normativity is up for dispute. Finally, there are traditions that use the same term in different ways. For instance, as we shall see, different schools characterise ‘constitutive rules’ in radically different, incompatible ways.

These terminological and theoretical differences can make the speech act theoretic literature difficult to navigate. Even experts often disagree on which

¹ For elaboration, see Searle (1969, chap. 2.5), Alston (2000, chap. 3 and 7), Sbisà (2018). Note, further, that in this chapter I will use the terms “rule” and “norms” interchangeably, unlike authors who adopt a narrower conception of rules (for discussion, Sbisà 2018, 44).

² The reader unfamiliar with these terms will find them explained in the next section.

differences are purely terminological (and were merely developed in parallel) and which are more substantial (and reflect genuine theoretical divides). The development of a unified framework and a common vocabulary would therefore be a substantial advancement in speech act theory. And while several authors have tried to pitch their own terminology as a solution, few have tried to review extant work in order to develop a more neutral, unified conceptual framework. A promising exception is Marina Sbisà's excellent 2018 essay, "Varieties of Speech Act Norms".

2. Sbisà's framework: the 'tripartite view'

2.1. The tripartite view

Sbisà (2018) introduces three categories within which we can fit the 'variety of illocutionary rules' independently developed in the speech act theoretic tradition. Sbisà's three categories are *constitutive rules*, *maxims*, and *objective requirements*. In this introductory section, aided by some illustrative examples, I shall present and discuss each category of the tripartition.

Constitutive rules, the first kind discussed by Sbisà, set conditions that need to be satisfied for a given illocution to be performed at all³. For example, you can fire someone only if you have the authority to do so. If I tell you that you are fired but I have no authority to fire you, my speech act 'fails' or 'misfires': I have not fired you at all. Generalising, if a constitutive rule isn't met, the speech act typically falls flat: it is void or null. The category owes its name to Searle (1969; 1979), who distinguished 'constitutive' rules from 'regulative' rules.

Regulative rules belong to the second family of rules identified by Sbisà, *maxims*. Violating a maxim doesn't lead to illocutionary failure: you can violate the maxims for *f*ing and still *f*. Compliance with maxims is only required for optimal performance (2018: 24, 29, 33). A speech act that violates a maxim is defective, and open to "blame and disrepute"⁴ (2018: 47). For example, an insincere promise is still

³ In passing, Sbisà (2018, 25) sometimes adds that "constitutive rules are widely recognized as rules *without which a certain act type would not exist*" (italics mine). I have argued elsewhere that this characterisation is problematic (Marsili 2019). For this reason, I shall stick to Sbisà's characterization of constitutive rules given in the main text – namely, as rules setting conditions that must be met for the speech act to be performed at all.

⁴ One might perceive a tension between the two characterisations of maxims offered by Sbisà: meeting maxims is merely needed for *optimal* performance (2018: 24, 29, 33), but failure to follow them leads to a *defective* speech act, making the speaker liable to *blame* and *disrepute* (2018: 30, 47). The former characterisation suggests that following maxims is merely supererogatory (*preferable*, but not *required*), the latter that it is *required*. Sbisà's choice of examples favours the second reading: sincerity,

a promise, but the speaker can appropriately be criticised and scolded for failing to be sincere. This second category of norms includes Grice's (1989) 'conversational maxims', from which it takes its name.

Objective requirements are the third member of Sbisà's taxonomy. They concern our assessment of the "correctness of the accomplished speech act with regard to the situation in the world to which it relates" (2018: 23). This notion derives from Austin, who noticed how different normative standards for 'accomplished utterances' (Austin 1975: 139) apply to different illocutions. For instance, an assertion is assessed on the basis of whether it corresponds to the facts; an argument on the basis of its soundness; a piece of advice based on whether it is good or bad (Austin 1975: 139-44). Notably, objective requirements are different from maxims, because an utterance can fail to meet its objective requirements even if it follows the maxims that regulate it. For instance, an assertion can be false even if it is sincere and warranted, a piece of advice can be bad even if it is in good faith, and so forth.

2.2. Applying the tripartition to existing notions

In the speech act theoretic tradition, several notions were independently developed for characterising the different kinds of normative constraints to which illocutionary acts are subject. It will be helpful to review how each of these notions fit into Sbisà's tripartition.

In most cases, we have close matches. The distinction between 'success conditions' and 'felicity conditions' drawn by Bach and Harnish (1979: 55–56) parallels Sbisà's distinction between 'constitutive rules' (success conditions) and 'maxims' (felicity conditions). Austin's (1975) A-rules (misinvocations of a procedure) and B-rules (misexecutions) are both reclassified as 'constitutive rules' in Sbisà's framework. Austin's "Γ-rules" fall instead under the rubric of 'maxims'. Within Γ-rules Austin draws an important distinction, on which we will soon return (§3.1). Γ1-rules (or "*upstream norms*", as Macfarlane 2011 calls them) are rules for *performance*, which need to be met *as the speech act is performed*: for instance, you should believe what you assert (as you assert it). Γ2-rules ("*downstream norms*"), by contrast, are rules for *compliance*, which need to be met *once the speech act is performed*: for instance,

for instance, is not supererogatory. Accordingly, I will henceforth adopt the second reading, and take maxims to describe conditions required for cooperative performance, rather than supererogatory conditions for optimal performance.

after promising to f you should make sure that you in fact do f ⁵. Both are maxims for Sbisà.

The alleged ‘epistemic norm’ that governs assertion, as discussed by Williamson (2000) and other epistemologists, is trickier to classify within Sbisà’s framework. This norm, which is said to take the form “assert p only if p satisfies condition C⁶”, is often referred to as ‘the *constitutive* norm of assertion’ (or C-rule)⁷. Given that Williamson and other scholars call the C-rule “constitutive”, it is tempting to conclude that it is a constitutive rule also in Sbisà’s sense. But this would be a mistake. In Sbisà’s terminology, a constitutive rule *cannot* be violated while still performing the speech act (in contrast to regulative rules, which can). By contrast, Williamson’s C-rule *can* be violated while still asserting (for instance, if you assert what you are certain to be false), so it cannot be a constitutive rule in Sbisà’s sense.

Terminological traps like this one illustrate why reflecting on vocabulary is so important in speech act theory. Williamson and other epistemologists use the term ‘constitutive rules’ to refer to their traditional antonym, ‘regulative rules’⁸. Misunderstandings and confusion are likely to arise when the same term is used in radically different ways by different schools and traditions⁹. Introducing a shared vocabulary can help alleviate these misunderstandings.

If adopted, Sbisà’s taxonomy can serve this purpose. In this case, it reclassifies the C-rule: since it can be violated while still asserting, it cannot be a constitutive rule¹⁰. How should we classify it, then? For Sbisà, this depends on how we spell out the C-rule. If the C-rule is non-factive, and only establishes a truth-independent requirement for assertability (e.g., “assert only what you reasonably believe to be true”, “assert only what you believe with confidence”), it’s best classified as a maxim.

⁵ Some authors place special emphasis on downstream normativity, arguing that speech acts can be characterised in terms of their essential effects (e.g. Brandom 1994; Sbisà 2007, 2009; Geurts 2019).

⁶ What is “condition C”? For Williamson (2000), it is the property of being known by the speaker, so that one should assert only what one knows. A popular alternative is that an appropriate assertion requires rational belief in the asserted proposition (Douven 2006; Lackey 2007; Kvanvig 2009; Gerken 2012). Incidentally, the latter hypothesis is favoured by recent empirical research (Kneer 2018; 2021; Marsili and Wiegmann 2021)

⁷ For an overview, see Goldberg (2015) and Pagin and Marsili (2021, sec. 5.1). Notably, the assumption that there is a rule that satisfies this description has been forcefully questioned in the literature (Cappelen 2011; Pagin 2016; Marsili 2019; Greenberg 2020).

⁸ See Hindriks (2007), Maitra (2011), and Marsili (2019). For a defence of Williamson’s conception of ‘constitutive rules’, see García-Carpintero (2022).

⁹ I discuss the misunderstandings arising from Williamson’s use of the term in Marsili (2019).

¹⁰ Sbisà concedes that we might call Williamson’s C-rule “constitutive” of assertion in a *weak* sense of “constitutive”, which differs from the *strong* use of the term that she prefers (2018, 28). I come back to this and other terminological complications in the next section.

If the C-rule is factive, and establishes that only true assertions are permissible (e.g., “assert only the truth”, or “assert only what you know”), it’s best classified as setting an objective requirement (Sbisà 2018, 39)¹¹.

To help keep track of each notion introduced so far, it can be helpful to have a brief summary at this point. Figure 1 illustrates Sbisà’s tripartition, accompanied by a brief characterisation of each category¹², and a list of the kinds of norms it encompasses¹³:

<i>Kind of rule</i>	<i>Sets conditions for:</i>	<i>Consequences of violation</i>	<i>Kinds of norms falling under the category</i>
Constitutive rules	Conditions for <i>performance</i>	The speech act isn’t performed	Austin’s A-rules and B-rules
			Searle’s constitutive rules
			Bach & Harnish’s success conditions
Maxims	Conditions for <i>appropriate performance</i>	The speech act is defective, the speaker open to blame for the act they performed	Searle’s regulative rules
			Gricean Maxims
			Bach & Harnish’s felicity conditions
			Austin’s Γ-rules (<i>upstream</i> and <i>downstream</i>)
			Non-factive norms of assertion
Objective requirements	Conditions for <i>objective assessment</i>	The speech act is open to negative assessment (it is unfit for its purpose)	Austin’s terms of assessment (<i>true/false, fulfilled/unfulfilled, just/unjust</i> , etc.)
			Factive norms of assertion

Figure 1: *The three categories of rules introduced by Sbisà (2018)*

2.3. Terminology

While the aim of this chapter is to build upon Sbisà’s model, in what follows I will adopt a slightly different terminology. This is to avoid misunderstandings that may arise from the adoption of some terms. Consider the term ‘constitutive rule’.

¹¹ Sbisà confirmed this point (mostly left implicit in her article) in personal communication. The classification of non-factive norm of assertions as maxims is in line with Grice’s terminology, since his Submaxims of Quality impose similar constraints. For more on the distinction between factive and non-factive norms, Marsili (2018a).

¹² These should be regarded as *prima facie* characterisations, not necessary and sufficient conditions. Sbisà (2018) carefully leaves open the possibility of exceptions. It is easy to imagine some. Violations of constitutive rules need not result in misfires, as when a group of people doesn’t notice that the speaker had no authority to issue an order, and executes it. Similarly, maxim-violation can lead to misfires, as when a maxim is violated so flagrantly that the audience doesn’t take the speaker to be attempting to perform the relevant illocution (as in Gricean irony).

¹³ Sbisà also describes some politeness norms as maxims. I have some doubts about this, but tackling them would lead us astray. For our purposes, politeness norms can simply be left out of the discussion.

We have seen that epistemologists use this term to refer to a norm (the C-rule of assertion) that is *not* constitutive in Sbisà’s sense. This makes the term ‘constitutive rule’ sub-optimal for our purposes: if the goal is developing a common vocabulary for speech act theory (one that can help us dispel confusion and avoid misunderstandings), it is better to avoid labels that have been used in radically different ways within different traditions.

To complicate matters, the definition of constitutive rule adopted by Sbisà also departs from Searle’s foundational use of the term. For Sbisà, constitutive rules can take an imperative form (e.g., “Do not order someone to *f* unless you have the authority to order them to *f*”) and can be violated (e.g., if I have no authority to order you to *f*). For Searle, constitutive rules *do not* take the form of imperatives (Searle 1969: 34, 36) and cannot be violated (1969: 41).

My aim here is not to enter exegetic debates¹⁴. More modestly, I am noting that the term ‘constitutive rule’ has been interpreted differently by different authors. To avoid misunderstandings, adopting a different term would therefore be preferable. Henceforth, I will adopt ‘validity conditions’ (or ‘validity rules’) instead of ‘constitutive rules’. This stipulative term doesn’t overlap with existing ones, and is self-explanatory: a speech act performance is *invalid* (null, void) if validity conditions are violated.

Terminological worries also arise about ‘maxims’. In Gricean pragmatics, this label identifies constraints for performance that are *not* illocution-specific¹⁵; in Sbisà’s taxonomy, it identifies illocution-specific ones. This departure from tradition may equally lead to misunderstandings. Since in Sbisà’s tripartition ‘maxims’ define the conditions under which a specific illocution is deemed appropriate and cooperative, I will adopt instead the term ‘cooperative rules’ – which avoids terminological confusion, and maintains the Gricean flavour present in Sbisà’s original terminological choice.

Summarising, I will depart from Sbisà in adopting the following terminological conventions:

Constitutive Rules	→	Validity Conditions
Maxims	→	Cooperative rules

¹⁴ I attempted to tackle some (primarily concerning different interpretations of Williamson’s notion of “constitutive rule”) in Marsili (2019).

¹⁵ Although a reasonable case can be made that Grice’s Quality maxims only apply to assertives, such a restriction isn’t explicit in Grice. Crucially, the other maxims (Relevance, Manner, Quantity) indisputably apply across the illocutionary board.

2.4. Revising and extending the model

Sbisà has developed a valuable framework for organising and critically examining scholarly work on illocutionary norms. Her model allows us to better understand the connections between various traditions. It helps us highlight similarities that would otherwise be obscure, and better track progress in the discipline. It is a useful map to navigate the complex body of research on illocutionary normativity, and has potential to facilitate scholarly advancement in this field. Indeed, some authors have already adopted this framework to tackle specific problems in speech act theory (see, e.g., Shields 2020; Corredor 2021).

While Sbisà's tripartition does help us understand and classify the 'varieties of norms' identified by scholars working on illocutionary normativity, it inevitably represents a starting point (rather than the finishing line) for the project of developing a unified framework for studying illocutionary normativity. The aim of this chapter is to make a further step in the same direction. To this end, the next section identifies some ways in which the tripartite model proposed by Sbisà could be refined and improved, whereas section 4 introduces a novel, more ecumenical theoretical framework that aims to address the widespread disagreement concerning which rules govern which illocution.

3. Two challenges for the tripartite model

3.1. Upstream rules and downstream obligations

Sbisà's tripartition identifies three kinds of norms: constitutive norms, maxims, and objective requirements. Ideally, each 'kind of rule' historically identified by speech act theorists (regulative rules, A-rules, Γ -rules, etc.) should fit neatly into one category or another. But perhaps there are some normative constraints that don't fit the tripartition all that neatly – like 'downstream' obligations that arise *from* the performance of the speech act (which partially¹⁶ overlap with Austin's Γ -2 rules). The tripartite view classifies Γ -2 rules as 'cooperative rules' (maxims). However,

¹⁶ I write "partially" because Γ -2 rules only concern downstream obligations that *the speaker* has to discharge.

there are some important ways in which downstream obligations differ from genuine cooperative rules¹⁷.

First, unlike cooperative rules, downstream obligations display some striking commonalities with objective requirements. Consider promises. A promise meets its objective requirement if it is fulfilled (the speaker performs the promised act)¹⁸; similarly, a speaker meets its downstream obligations if they fulfil the promise (they perform the promised act). There is a sense, then, in which the condition set by the objective requirement *coincides* with the condition set by the downstream obligation. This, in turn, indicates that it is unclear whether downstream obligations are really at home inside the ‘maxim’ category, or whether they would better fit the category of ‘objective requirements’.

Second, and more importantly, the constraints set by upstream rules and downstream obligations are radically different. Upstream rules establish under which conditions an illocution is valid, cooperative, and appropriate: they establish whether the speaker (not someone else) is in a position to *perform* the speech act. Downstream obligations are different: they regulate different kinds of actions. They specify what one has to do *once* the speech act has been successfully performed, to fulfil the obligations *generated by* the speech act.

If these two complications arise, I want to argue, it isn’t because of a genuine flaw in Sbisà’s tripartition. Rather, it is because downstream obligations belong to an altogether distinct realm of normativity – norms for *compliance*, rather than norms for *performance*.

The idea that downstream obligations fall outside the taxonomy is already implicit in some of Sbisà’s comments. Her essay opens by stating that it is concerned with “the rules for the *performance* of illocutionary acts” (2018: 24, italics mine). This characterisation doesn’t include downstream obligations, which are rules *for compliance*, not for performance. I find this characterisation (which excludes downstream obligations from the tripartition) more plausible, and consistent with the work of authors who draw a sharper distinction between upstream normativity and downstream normativity (e.g., Rescorla 2009; MacFarlane 2011).

We can therefore build on the tripartite model while acknowledging the special status of downstream obligations. My suggestion is to take the tripartition to only apply to illocutionary rules *for performance*. Downstream obligations are not norms

¹⁷ To be sure, Sbisà acknowledges that the Gricean notion of maxims would not include downstream normativity. Her rationale for expanding the category is that upstream norms and Γ -2 norms have a feature in common: it is up to the speaker to comply with them (2018: 31).

¹⁸ I briefly motivate this claim in §3.2. Sbisà (2018: 35) stipulates a different requirement: that the promise turns out to be a “righteous action”. No argument, however, is provided for this claim. I find the idea counterintuitive, and inconsistent with other objective requirements (truth for asserting, soundness for arguing, etc.).

for performance: they are norms *for compliance*. As such, they fall outside the trichotomy. They are a topic of investigation on their own, potentially with their own varieties of norms and subdivisions. The resulting model doesn't depart much from Sbisà's original proposal, and is summarised in Figure 2.

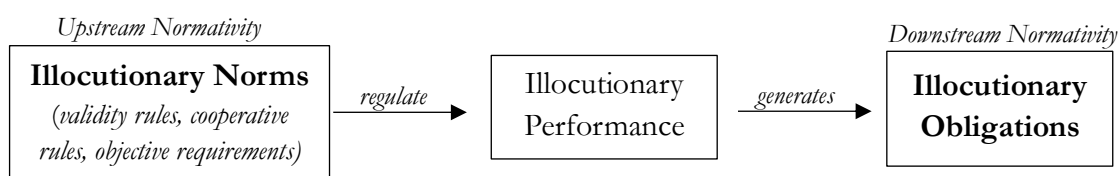


Figure 2: An alternative model that maintains the distinctions between three kinds of norms *for performance*, while introducing a fourth, independent category, ‘illocutionary obligations’, setting conditions *for compliance*.

3.2. A neglected category: aims

Sbisà's (2018) paper focuses on the normative constraints imposed by rules. Arguably, communication is normatively guided by its goals, too. This point is easily illustrated by drawing an analogy with games. In games, both rules and goals contribute to determining which moves are appropriate and which are not¹⁹. Consider football. Clearly, rules guide the action of football players: they motivate (for example) players not to touch the ball with their hands, and to refrain from tackling their opponents too violently. Crucially, aims play an equally central role in shaping player behaviour. Players compete to kick the ball into the opponent team's goalpost because that's the aim of the game. If the aim of the game was different (e.g. the team who scores an odd number of points wins), players would behave differently. Both goals and rules play a normative role in games, shaping how agents behave and our evaluation of their actions.

Are illocutionary performances like games, in the sense that they are regulated by both illocutionary rules and illocutionary *goals*? We can find a substantial case for a positive answer in the literature. Directions of fit are often interpreted as setting *goals* or *success-conditions* for illocutions (Humberstone 1992, cf. also Searle 1976: 2-3).

¹⁹ Oddly, some authors use ‘rules’ and ‘aims’ as synonymous. I take them to identify two distinct categories: rules define conditions for permissible action, goals for successful action (Marsili 2018a, 643–46). Sometimes I will prefer the term “aim” to “goal”, especially when confusion can arise (e.g. in relation to football). The reader should not conclude that I am talking about two different notions: for our purposes, the terms can be considered synonymous.

Thetic²⁰ (fact-stating) speech acts are said to have truth as a *success* condition: these illocutions put forward descriptions whose purpose is to ‘fit’ the way the world is. Telic (behaviour-directing) speech acts, by contrast, achieve their goal when they bring about the desired state of affairs²¹. Unlike cooperative rules, which set conditions for *appropriate* or *permissible* performance, directions of fit set conditions for *successful* performance. They set, in other words, goals for illocutions.

Illocutionary goals are also discussed in the literature on assertion. Some authors (Dummett 1973; Williams 2002; Marsili 2018a; 2021a) argue that assertoric speech is governed by an illocutionary goal: truth²². A point often emphasised in this literature is that illocutionary goals are speaker-independent. The idea is that a speaker making an assertion necessarily *purports* to be aiming to tell the truth, not that all speakers *actually* pursue this goal (after all, people lie).

Also Grice (1989: 28–29) acknowledges the guiding role played by communicative goals. His Cooperative Principle places teleological normativity at the centre of communicative exchanges, characterising cooperative contributions as those that aim to meet the accepted goal of a conversation:

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted *purpose or direction* of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Grice 1975:45, italics mine).

While Grice leaves the purpose of the conversation unspecified, other authors identify more specific goals. Szabó (2020), for instance, takes²³ conversations to be governed by a putative knowledge-goal:

²⁰ Here I adopt Humberston’s thetic/telic distinction instead of the classic (but lexically confusing) Searlean distinction between word-to-world/world-to-word directions of fit.

²¹ In this chapter, I assume that the *illocutionary* goal of many directives is to get the addressee to do something. Sbisá (2013b, 36, 60) has argued that getting the audience to do something is rather a *perlocutionary object* (a perlocutionary effect tightly linked to the illocutionary type, cf. Austin 1975, 118). To accommodate Sbisá’s suggestion, we could weaken the assumption (e.g. assume that directives only aim at *inviting* the addressee to do something). But there is another possibility: we might decide to call a goal illocutionary iff a speaker cannot perform the illocution without thereby representing themselves as aiming to achieve that goal. This characterisation is plausible, since it draws the right distinctions about (e.g.) assertions. It captures assertion’s goal, since I cannot assert a proposition without thereby presenting myself as attempting to *tell the truth* (Dummett 1973, 300-3), and excludes assertion’s perlocutionary objects, since I *can* (e.g.) assert without presenting myself as attempting to *convince* my audience (Alston 2002, chap. 2). By the same principle, getting the addressee to do something is an illocutionary goal (rather than a perlocutionary object) of request and orders, since one cannot perform these illocutions without thereby presenting oneself as attempting to get the addressee to do something.

²² Mehta (2016) suggests that *knowledge* could be regarded as the aim of assertion instead.

²³ Wrongly, in my opinion – for non-assertoric exchanges surely need not share this goal.

The goal of conversation is to share private knowledge pertaining to a topic of common concern (2020: 62).

A like-minded idea is found in Stalnakerian pragmatics, which regards discourse as a communal inquiry whose *end* or *purpose* is finding out “the way things might be” (the set of possible worlds that is compatible with the propositions that are mutually accepted as true in the conversation; Stalnaker 1978: 151; 2002: 704). This conversational goal, in turn, determines which contributions are appropriate and which are not (Roberts 2012: 4).

Substantial scholarship, then, supports the hypothesis that communicative exchanges have speaker-independent goals. Now, goals can play a normative role in the practices within which they occur: they *guide* action, and ground our assessments of an action as good or bad, correct or incorrect – both in ordinary action and in communication. Taken together, these observations highlight an important connection between goals and objective requirements.

So, for instance, an action in a game (say, shooting a penalty) can be assessed positively when it meets its purported goal (scoring a goal), and negatively when it doesn't. Similarly, a speech act (say, asserting) can be assessed positively when it meets its presumed purpose (when it ‘fits’ the way the world is), and negatively when it doesn't (Searle 2007: 34). Given their role in grounding our assessment of illocutions as successful or unsuccessful, illocutionary goals establish “normative standards for ‘accomplished utterances’”. In other words, they are ‘objective requirements’ in Sbisà's (2018: 32) sense.

Crucially, like objective requirements, illocutionary goals establish *objective* standards of assessment. Objective truth is the goal of assertion: if it seems to you that you have asserted the truth (but you haven't), your assertion has not met its illocutionary goal. Similarly, if it seems to you that your request has been satisfied (but it hasn't), your request has not met its illocutionary goal. Objective requirements and success conditions²⁴ identify speaker-independent, objective standards of assessment.

Sbisà herself draws connections between objective requirements and illocutionary goals. To characterise objective requirements, she adopts a teleological vocabulary. She notes that objective requirements have to do with “the *point* of a

²⁴ I am using “success conditions” in the sense established above: conditions required for an action (like shooting a penalty) to be deemed successful. This usage is not to be confused with Bach and Harnish's, who adopt the expression “success condition” to refer to a condition that must be met for the speech act to be performed all. For more on my understanding of “successful” illocutions, see Marsili (2018, 2021a).

certain type of illocutionary act” and that failure to meet them renders the illocution “unfit to contribute to the achievement of the *goals* of the speaker or [...] other participants” (2018: 47, italics mine)²⁵.

A plausible case can be made, then, for replacing the notion of ‘objective requirements’ with the notion of ‘illocutionary goals’. A first advantage of this reformulation is that it broadens Sbisà’s third category, which was originally only meant to capture some sparse Austinian remarks about the different terms we use for assessing speech (true/false, fair/unfair, etc., cf. Austin 1962, 140-1). The notion of illocutionary goals casts a much wider net on the existing literature. We can accommodate fitness conditions (set by directions of fit), overarching conversational goals (as hypothesised by Grice, Szabó, or Stalnaker) and assertoric aims (as in Dummett and others). The resulting model is summarised in Figure 3.

Validity Rules	Austin’s A-rules and B-rules	Conditions for (actual) performance
	Searle’s constitutive rules	
	Bach & Harnish’s success conditions	
Cooperative Rules	Searle’s regulative rules	Conditions for cooperative performance
	Bach & Harnish’s felicity conditions	
	Gricean maxims	
	Williamson’s C-rule	
	Austin’s Γ-1 rules	
Illocutionary Goals	Austin’s terms of assessment	Conditions for success
	Fitness conditions (DOF)	
	Purpose of conversation (Grice, Stalnaker, etc.)	
	Assertoric goals (in Dummett, etc.)	
Illocutionary Obligations	Austin’s Γ-2 rules	Conditions for compliance
	Downstream normativity (Brandom, etc.)	

Figure 3: A table visualising which family of rules falls under which category under the revised model. The triple line separates rules for performance (upstream normativity) from rules for compliance (downstream normativity)

The revised model also has the advantage of drawing its distinctions in a homogenous way. Each family of norms is identified by the kind of normative constraint (condition) that it establishes. The distinctions are simple and parallel each other. *Validity rules* set conditions for (actual) performance. *Cooperative rules* set

²⁵ A further point of convergence is the following: just like illocutionary goals are speaker-independent, objective requirements also set standards that the speech act should meet “irrespective of the perspective of participants” (Sbisà 2018, 24).

conditions for cooperative performance. *Illocutionary goals* set conditions for successful performance. Finally, *illocutionary obligations* set conditions for compliance²⁶.

A final advantage of this model is that goals can be regarded as the normative source for many of the cooperative rules governing each illocution. I will explore this suggestion in the next section, as I challenge ‘checklist accounts’ of illocutionary normativity.

4. Cooperation, rules, and illocutionary concepts

4.1. Disagreement about rules

The proposed model is able to systematically classify a variety of illocutionary norms, overcoming differences between schools and traditions. Strong divisions persist, however, when we consider how each author characterises the norms governing specific illocutionary types.

Take, for example, Searle’s (1969) and Sbisà’s (2018) characterisation of the speech act of advising. Like most scholars, they agree that advising to *f* is appropriate only if you believe that the hearer would benefit from *f*-ing. But they disagree about other conditions. For Searle (1969: 66-7), advising H to do A is appropriate only if “it is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A”. Sbisà rejects this condition, but endorses some requirements that Searle had not included: for instance, that “the speaker must have authority over the addressee with respect to the field of activities with which the piece of advice is concerned”²⁷. Similar disagreements are widespread in speech act theory: given a speech act type SA, theorists often disagree about which rules regulate SA.

²⁶ We may still wonder (cf. §3.1) if the notion of ‘compliance’ and ‘success’ sometimes overlap. The *success-condition* for commands, for instance, seemingly coincides with its *compliance-condition*: both are satisfied when the deed is done. Even if they can be satisfied at the same time, however, these requirements capture different dimensions of assessment. About an order, for instance, we can say that A *succeeded* in getting B to do something (evaluating the accomplishment of a goal), but also that B *complied* with the order, or that B *discharged* their obligations (evaluating whether B has fulfilled their duty).

²⁷ Incidentally, Sbisà classifies this as a validity rule for advising: if violated, the speaker is *not advising at all*. However, this seems wrong: this is at most a condition for *appropriate* advising. The same could be said about many of the putative ‘constitutive rules’ described by Sbisà (2018, section 5). For instance, for promises (2018, 35), the requirement that the speaker must be able to perform the promised fact (arguably, a promise to do something I cannot do is still a promise – as long as the audience is unaware of my inability to deliver); or, for congratulations (2018, 37), the requirement that the speaker must have an obligation to acknowledge the speaker’s achievement (I can congratulate you for your achievement even if I don’t have an obligation to do so).

4.2. The Checklist View

Scholarly disagreement about which precise set of norms governs each illocutionary act is usually regarded as unproblematic and predictable. It is, however, at odds with a foundational assumption accepted by most speech act theorists – namely, that speech acts are *constituted* by the unique set of rules that regulates them. According to this hypothesis, speech acts are regulated by their illocutionary rules by conceptual necessity. Necessarily, a given speech act is defined by the unique set of rules that governs its performance (Searle 1969; Pollock 1982; Searle and Vanderveken 1985; Williamson 2000; Alston 2002, chap. 8; García-Carpintero 2022). To have a command of the concept of a speech act SA, then, is to know which unique set of rules governs SA. Just like a chess player cannot know what ‘castling’ means unless they know what the rules for castling are, *knowing what an illocution is* and *knowing its rules* are on this picture the same thing.

Call this view the “Checklist View” of illocutionary normativity, since it presupposes a ‘checklist theory’ (Fillmore 1975) of illocutionary concepts and their rules (that is, it stipulates a strict relation of ontological dependency between illocutionary types and a “checklist” of rules). As noted by some commentators (Pagin 2016; Greenberg 2020; Pagin and Marsili 2021), widespread scholarly disagreement about which norms governs each illocution is at odds with some assumptions of the Checklist View. If illocutionary acts are defined by their rules, having command of any given illocutionary concept requires knowledge of the set of rules that regulates it (just like knowing what castling is requires knowledge of its rules). Widespread disagreement among experts, then, should be difficult, if not impossible. Scholars should converge on identifying a similar set of rules, or at least they should come close in their characterisations²⁸.

This isn’t what generally happens. Recall the above-mentioned disagreement concerning which cooperative rules regulate advising, and the disagreement about which exact norm regulates assertion²⁹. If there really is a unique set of rules that necessarily regulates each illocution (a set whose knowledge is required for having command of the concept), scholars should converge on identifying a single correct solution. Since experts cannot agree on a unique set of rules, we must conclude that either the Checklist View is misguided, or experts lack knowledge of these illocutionary concepts, and none of them really knows what ‘advising’ or ‘asserting’

²⁸ For like-minded criticisms to checklist theories, see Levinson (1979; 1983, chapter 5), Harnish (2005), Harnish and Plunze (2006), Pagin (2016, sect. 4), Green (2019, sec. 1).

²⁹ As anticipated in footnote 6, scholars cannot agree as to whether appropriate assertion requires knowledge, truth, justification, belief, or something else altogether (Goldberg 2015; Pagin and Marsili 2021, sec. 5.1).

is – just like a person who doesn't know the rules for castling doesn't really know what castling is.

A similar point applies to ordinary speakers, who are also typically unable to articulate the rules governing a given illocution, if asked. If knowing what it is to perform a given speech act (promising, advising, asserting, etc.) really presupposes knowledge of the unique set of rules that regulates it, we must conclude that laypeople lack command of basic illocutionary concepts, too³⁰.

To be sure, laypeople do exhibit knowledge of *some* illocutionary norms. There are some speech acts (like marrying, baptising, or condemning) whose rules are recorded (and enforced) by dedicated institutions, and whose conditions for appropriate performance people familiar with those institutions can explicitly articulate. Similarly, laypeople are clearly able to articulate the sincerity rules for basic speech acts, like promising and asserting (“don't break a promise”, “don't lie”). There is also empirical evidence that children master these rules at a relatively early stage of their linguistic development (Maas 2008; Isella, Kanngiesser, and Tomasello 2019).

Laypeople's general familiarity with sincerity rules (and rules for institutional speech acts) is in line with the predictions of the Checklist View. But it is doubtful that their competence extends to other rules and other illocutions. If asked under which conditions an assertion or a promise is sincere, competent speakers will give fairly confident and consistent answers. But their answers will be much less confident and consistent (if not utterly confused) if you ask them which *further* conditions are required for a promise or an assertion to be permissible. Articulating a complete “checklist” of rules should prove difficult also for other illocutions, considered that even researchers disagree on the content of such checklists.

Perhaps the Checklist View can be refined to overcome these difficulties. However, further problems lurk around the corner. Since illocutionary rules are said to regulate speech acts by conceptual necessity, checklist theorists typically assume that there is a *unique* set of rules that defines each speech act – rather than many equally good alternatives. However, this assumption is also controversial. It is

³⁰ Perhaps the Checklist View could be interpreted as only requiring *implicit (procedural)* knowledge of the relevant rules. Implicit knowledge of rules could be understood (broadly) as a general disposition to behave in accordance with the rules, and to correct behaviour that violates them (cf. Chomsky 1965, 16:4–8; Searle 1969, 41–42; Mikhail 2011). Still, if competent speakers possessed such implicit knowledge, we should expect them to be able to spell out (if asked, and given sufficient time) the rules that uniquely define an illocutionary act – just like competent football players are able to work out the rules for a corner kick or a penalty kick, if prompted to. The claim that ordinary speakers (and experts alike) cannot articulate illocutionary rules (nor agree on their content) is therefore still at odds with the Checklist View. For further difficulties with this reply, see Pagin (2016: 190-1).

doubtful that each speech act is regulated by precise, well-defined requirements that can be synthesised into uniquely correct formulas. A more plausible alternative is that, like moral norms for action (Watson 1996, 237–39) (and arguably norms for semantic reference, cf. Marconi 1997), the norms regulating speech acts are loose, imprecise, and not easily formalizable.

Consider a simple case, like the sincerity rule for promising. It could take any of the following forms, since violating any of (1-5) results in an infelicitous promise:

- (1) Don't promise to *f* if you lack an intention to *f*
- (2) Don't promise to *f* if you actively intend not to *f*
- (3) Don't promise to *f* if you believe that you will not *f*
- (4) Don't promise to *f* if you believe that it is likely that you will not *f*
- (5) Don't promise to *f* unless you are convinced that you will almost surely *f*

Since none of these rules can be violated felicitously, there seems to be no ground to claim that only one of these rules is *the* sincerity rule for promising³¹. The Checklist View, however, seems committed to maintain that only one of these rules is the true sincerity rule for promising.

The problem is generalisable. For every rule regulating a speech act, suitably similar alternatives can be derived, generating analogous dilemmas. Take the sincerity rule for requesting something. First, there is the issue of which mental state Ψ is mandated for making an appropriate request: a desire that the addressee complies, or a wish, a hope, or a mere preference? Second, does one need to positively Ψ that the addressee brings about the state of affairs, or lacking the opposite attitude is enough? Third, we may wonder how precise the attitude should be: should the speaker Ψ that the addressee performs the exact deed specified in the request, or is it sufficient to Ψ that something in its ballpark is done? The list can go on. But my point here is that it is highly doubtful that a correct, ultimate answer can be given to this sort of questions. Illocutionary acts are likely governed only by loose expectations, not inflexible (and metaphysically necessary) imperatives that admit only one, uniquely correct periphrasis.

³¹ I take these rules not to be reducible to each other, because I take intentions not to be reducible to beliefs or credences about the future (nor vice versa, see Marsili 2016, esp. Appendix II). A related (but independent) question concerns whether our ordinary concept of lying tracks the infraction of only one of these rules. For discussion, Marsili (2016; cf. also 2018b; 2019; 2021b). For a parallel argument concerning semantic norms, see Marconi (1997).

4.3. Cooperative rules as rational expectations

Summarising, checklist theories have trouble accommodating (A) widespread disagreement among scholars about which cooperative rules govern each illocution³², (B) laypeople’s inability to articulate illocutionary rules, and (C) the looseness of the normative constraints imposed by illocutionary rules. None of these problems is necessarily decisive: perhaps we only need to refine checklist theories in order to accommodate them. As they are, however, checklist accounts are not especially well-suited to make sense of these data points³³.

Are there alternative models that fare better? A promising suggestion comes again from Sbisà, who notes that cooperative rules are neither arbitrary nor conventional: they are based on “rational motivations” (2018: 47)³⁴. This suggestion is also found in Grice, who regards maxims as derivable rationally from his Cooperative Principle (1989: 29–30)³⁵. To illustrate the idea, consider how the Maxim of Relation (“*Be relevant*”) can be derived from the Cooperative Principle. Intuitively, one’s contribution cannot be cooperative if it is completely irrelevant to “the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange”. To expect speakers to be cooperative, then, is to expect them to try to make relevant contributions to the conversation – that is, to follow the Maxim of Relation.

Can we derive illocutionary rules from the Cooperative Principle in the same way? Grice passes silence on whether *illocution-specific* norms can be derived along the same lines. But if such a derivation is possible, the resulting model would represent a promising alternative to checklist theories. We would have that illocutionary rules are not a matter of conceptual necessity, but rather rationally derivable expectations of cooperation. I have limited space here to develop this suggestion in detail, but I would like to sketch a tentative model of how such a derivation might work.

³² It is not clear if this problem also arises for *illocutionary obligations* and *validity rules*. Here I am limiting myself to suggest that *cooperative rules* generate difficulties for checklist theories.

³³ While I have no space to discuss it in detail, there is a further issue that might be regarded as posing a challenge for the Checklist View. Illocutionary relativists argue that in some contexts it is indeterminate whether the speaker is performing an illocutionary act or another (or both) (Sbisà 2013a; Johnson 2019; cf. Witek 2015b; Lewiński 2021, 6689, 6703). If the relativist is right, we have further ground to endorse (C), because on this view illocutions are not always subject to determinate normative constraints.

³⁴ Intention-based analyses (e.g. Bach and Harnish 1979) also avoid many of the difficulties of checklist theories, but are known to be subject to other compelling objections (Alston 2002, chap. 2).

³⁵ The Cooperative Principle was stated explicitly at page 10. On deriving conversational expectations from the principle, see also Roberts (2012: 4). For more on Grice’s conception of rationality, see Sbisà (2006; 2007) and Labinaz (2016).

Illocutionary goals are a natural starting point for deriving illocution-specific cooperative rules from the Cooperative Principle³⁶. Take, for example, the speech act of advising. If the purported goal of giving advice is to get someone to do something that is in their interest, it is only rational to expect that a *cooperative* speaker will only give advice that they believe to be in the audience's interest. After all, giving advice that you don't believe to be in the audience's interest is incompatible with meeting the presumed goal of giving advice. Just as the Maxim of Relevance can be derived from the Principle of Cooperation, the sincerity rule for giving advice can be derived from its illocutionary goal.

The speech act of assertion provides another example of how cooperative rules could be derived from illocutionary goals. If saying something true is the aim of assertion, presumably a speaker cannot make a cooperative assertion unless they are *trying* to tell the truth. After all, unless you are trying to assert a true proposition, you are not trying to meet the goal you are presumed to have, and therefore you are not cooperating³⁷. Interestingly, this requirement ("Try to only assert propositions that are true") ramifies into further ones. Asserting what you believe to be false is incompatible with attempting to tell the truth: a sincerity condition ("Don't assert what you believe to be false"), then, can also be derived from assertion's presumed goal. Further sincerity norms can be derived, too. Arguably, asserting what you believe to be likely false, or what you do not believe to be true, is equally incompatible with trying to tell the truth. If this is right, the corresponding injunctions ("Don't assert what you believe likely false", "Don't assert what you do not believe") can similarly be derived from assertion's goal.

Crucially, on the proposed view, none of these rules is *the* sincerity rule for asserting. I regard this as a strength of the proposed account, rather than a weakness, because it means that this alternative model can naturally accommodate (C) (the looseness of illocutionary rules). The idea envisaged here is that multiple normative constraints (dictated by considerations of consistency and rationality) can be derived from the Cooperative Principle, so that multiple cooperative rules are bound to arise for each illocutionary type – rather than a unique set of precise, well-defined rules, as the checklist theorist would have it.

I have argued that *some* cooperative rules can be derived inferentially from illocutionary goals. But I do not mean to suggest that *all* cooperative rules admit this sort of derivation. Consider Grice's suggestion that a contribution should be "as informative as required". The Searlean rule that advising H to do A is appropriate

³⁶ Although Grice doesn't discuss illocutionary goals, he suggests that conformity to the maxims isn't just reasonable, it is reasonable given the *aims* of the conversation (Grice 1989: 29-30, cf. also Roberts 2012: 4), establishing a link between goals and maxims.

³⁷ For discussion of this claim, see Marsili (2017, sec. V.4.4; 2018a, 645).

only if “it is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A” (1969: 66-7) is easily derivable from this assumption. The same goes for the requirement that an assertion is appropriate only if “it is not obvious to both S and H that H knows (does not need to be reminded of, etc.) p” (Searle 1969: 55-66). This suggests that not all cooperative rules are derivable from illocutionary goals.

Similarly, we do not need to assume that all these expectations have the same strength and form. A more plausible view is that illocutions are governed by a loose spectrum of norms of different strength and nature³⁸. At one pole we have well-defined, stricter requirements, like institutional illocutionary rules, which are explicit and well-defined, enforced by dedicated institutions, and associated with precise sanctions. Close to this pole we also find rules that competent speakers can easily articulate, like the rules against lying or against breaking promises, which are actively policed by competent speakers of the language. At the lower end of the scale, by contrast, we find loose expectations that are not associated with clear penalties, that often admit exceptions, but that is still rational to expect other communicators to follow (like the Searlean rules against redundant illocutions).

This account of illocutionary normativity can easily accommodate also (A) and (B). Given that the expectations falling at the weaker end of the spectrum are loose, defeasible, weak, and not associated with defined sanctions, we need not assume that competent speakers can articulate these expectations just in virtue of knowing what the relevant speech act is. Likewise, rules falling at this end of the spectrum will inevitably trigger scholarly dispute, since evidence for their existence (e.g. speakers’ dispositions to sanction violations) are bound to be harder to detect, and easier to challenge.

On this view, illocutions are governed by loose normative expectations that are not easily reducible to a finite checklist of well-defined, strict rules. This model naturally lends itself to accommodate a more ecumenic, pluralistic approach to speech act theory, which regards dissenting theories as compatible attempts to highlight the various, multi-faceted normative constraints regulating different illocutions in different contexts. As such, this approach offers an ideal groundwork for developing a unified theory of illocutionary normativity, one able to overcome territorial divisions concerning which illocutionary rules govern each illocution.

³⁸ A similar assumption is also present in Grice (1989: 26–27, 371), who mentions that expectations of conformity to Quality are stronger than expectations of conformity to Quantity (especially the second maxim of Quantity). Presumably, the strength of a normative constraint will also be affected by whether the speaker has *mitigated* or *reinforced* the illocution with modifiers. Sbisà has written extensively on how these modifiers work, and how they modulate force and normative obligations (Bazzanella, Caffi, and Sbisà 1991; Sbisà 2001a; 2014; Labinaz and Sbisà 2014).

This model also offers a plausible genealogical story as to how illocutionary rules acquire the normative force that they have. Presumably, illocutionary norms can move along the spectrum as time passes. Some expectations (like sincerity rules) slowly sediment into stricter requirements, moving upward in the hierarchy. They become associated with clearer sanctions, crystallising into genuine, stricter rules³⁹. Less important expectations (like rules against redundant advising) are less likely to undergo this process, remaining at the bottom of the hierarchy. None of these norms, however, simply happens to regulate the relevant illocution in virtue of some mysterious, Platonic relation of metaphysical necessity, as some proponents of the Checklist View seem to assume.

5. An open project

This chapter has offered some programmatic suggestions for developing a unified framework for classifying, studying, and conceptualising illocutionary rules. It has shown that Sbisà's seminal work provides a fertile ground for bringing together under a single flag different lines of research on illocutionary normativity. It has argued that the notions of illocutionary goals and illocutionary obligations can enrich Sbisà's model. Finally, it has developed an approach for deriving cooperative rules, delineating a way to model illocutionary normativity that avoids dubious appeals to relations of metaphysical necessity between illocutions and their norms. The project begun by Sbisà is ambitious; inevitably, many questions still remain open. This chapter has just attempted to make a further step in the same direction, laying down some groundwork for future research into foundational questions in speech act theory.

³⁹ Research on the development of linguistic rules usually makes assumptions along these lines, suggesting that loose expectations slowly transition into stricter rules and conventions. How this transition is explained varies widely from theory to theory (see, e.g., Young 1993; Millikan 2005; Steels 2011; Centola and Baronchelli 2015; Witek 2015). Not all rules undergo this process – for instance, some are the result of an institutional *fiat* (like laws against perjury or for marriage). We may also wonder whether the weakest and loosest of these requirements really deserve to be called 'rules', or are best described as mere 'expectations' or 'constraints' (Sbisà 2001b, e.g., denies the status of rule to the Cooperative Principle). I doubt that a straight answer can be given. For our purposes, all that matters is that these expectations all exercise some degree of normative guidance on illocutionary performances, and as such they fall under our domain of investigation.

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