CrossMark

Getting the Message and Grasping it: the Give-and-Take of Discourse

Mark Sluys[1]

Abstract Can one fully succeed in performing illocutionary acts addressed to others if they do not understand what one is purportedly saying? Can one, for example, *tell* others something if they do not understand what one supposedly said? It is not uncommon for speech act theorist to claim that one cannot. I, in contrast, will be arguing that it is possible for a speaker to fully succeed in performing interpersonal illocutionary acts even if addressee understanding of what is said is not produced, is *not intended* to be produced and is even *intended not* to be produced.

1 Introducing the Inquiry

Can one say things to others without their understanding *what is said* (purportedly) to them? It is not uncommon for speech act theorist to claim that one cannot. The claim, though, is not that one cannot *utter words* in such circumstances. '*What is said*' in the claim (and hereinafter) refers to the *utterance content*. In *How to Do Things With Words*, John L. Austin called utterance content—content such as promising, asserting, requesting, asking, thanking etc.—'illocutionary acts.' And he called the producing of understanding of such utterance content (in the persons addressed by a speaker) 'uptake' (Austin 1962). So the claim is that one cannot perform *illocutionary acts* unless one produces *uptake* in one's addressees of the utterance content. Some speech act theorists, however, take the producing of uptake to be a necessary condition, not for performing illocutionary acts per se, but only for performing *non-defective* illocutionary acts. I disagree with the production-of-uptake-requirement of both of these views.

✉ Mark Sluys
mark@sluys.se

1   Philosophy of Religion, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

I will be arguing in this study that it is possible for a speaker to fully succeed in performing (interpersonal) illocutionary acts even if addressee-uptake is not produced. I will be arguing for more as well, but before I present that I need to specify the problem in more detail.

1.1 What Is the Problem?

In *How to do things with Words*, Austin expresses the belief that (successful) illocutionary act performance requires the producing of uptake. He is not so clear whether it is illocutionary act performance per se—defective or not—or non-defective ('happy') illocutionary act performance that he has in mind. He appears to say both:

> Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed. … So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of *uptake* (1962, pp. 115-116).

And in *Speech Acts* John Searle agrees that (succeeding in) performing an illocutionary act involves the production of uptake:

> In the case of illocutionary acts, we succeed in doing what we are trying to do [i.e., trying to perform an illocutionary act] by getting our audience to recognize what we are trying to do. But the 'effect' on the hearer is not a belief or a response, it consists simply in the hearer understanding the utterance of the speaker. It is this effect that I am calling the illocutionary effect (1969, p. 47).

Both Austin and Searle agree, then, that (at least 'happy,' successful) illocutionary act performance partially depends on uptake being secured, on producing what Searle calls 'illocutionary effects.'

William Alston, on the other hand, disagrees with Austin and Searle:

> Whether I told you that the dean is coming to dinner or asked you to bring me a towel does not hang on whether you heard or understood me. If you didn't, my communicative purpose has been frustrated. But it doesn't follow that I didn't tell you or ask you (2000, p. 24).

That a communicative purpose has been frustrated does not entail that one's intention to successfully perform an illocutionary act has been frustrated, claims Alston. One of the main ways to communicate is to speak, but speaking is not the same type of action as communicating and we do not always communicate when we speak. Some acts might be an instance of both of these types of actions—speaking and communicating—while other acts might be instances of only one of the types (see also Alston 1994).

Even if Alston does not require the securing of uptake for illocutionary act performance, he does claim that a necessary condition for *interpersonal* illocutionary act performance is that the speaker aims at securing uptake in the person(s) addressed by the speaker (2000, p. 67). So what Alston presents here as a necessary condition of performing an *interpersonal* illocutionary act of a certain type is *not* that one succeed in producing uptake, but that one *intends* to produce that effect by one's utterance. So

Alston limits the requirement to intend to produce uptake in other persons, to other-directed illocutionary acts.

Limiting the requirement in this way is a step in the right direction. We would not want to infer that no illocutionary act could have been performed at all from the fact that no other persons were intended to get uptake. There are self-directed illocutionary acts—one can talk to oneself. Another way of trying to get around such a difficulty is by requiring, not that other persons get uptake, but that anyone who is addressed does. This requirement would not exclude the possibility of illocutionary acts that were only self-directed. This attempt at a solution may not work, though, for there may be illocutionary acts that are neither self-directed nor other-directed. When one is all alone watching the sun set over the Pacific Ocean, can one express one's joy and amazement with, "Oh how beautiful!" without addressing anyone? I think so. Whatever the case may be about that, one can still wonder if the *intention* to secure uptake really is necessary for illocutionary act performances where there *are* addressees. I will be arguing that it is not.

Do these different types of theories have any practical relevance? Yes. A grave consequence of an addressee's failure to get uptake is taken up by Rae Langton:

> Sometimes, though, there is the different phenomenon of illocutionary disable-ment. Sometimes 'no,' when spoken by a woman, does not *count* as the act of refusal. The hearer fails to recognize the utterance as a refusal; uptake is not secured. In saying 'no' she may well intend to refuse. By saying 'no' she intends to prevent sex, but she is far from doing as she intends. Since illocution-ary force depends, in part, on uptake being secured the woman fails to refuse (1993, p. 321).

A woman can do everything right and things can go so wrong because the addressee fails to get uptake. Rae Langton argues that men can disable women for performing the illocutionary act of refusing in certain sexual situations by failing to get uptake. I will be discussing Langton's view on this further on in this study.

Before we go further it is important to ask: *Who* is supposed to get uptake according to the requirement under investigation? It is not just anyone at all who is supposed to get uptake. Austin and Searle have spoken of *audiences* and Alston and Langton have spoken of *hearers*. But many persons may *hear* or *overhear* a speaker's utterances, while not being persons purportedly required to get uptake. Furthermore, one can speak to just one person in an *audience* and the other persons in the audience, while they may hear what is said, may not be required to get uptake. *Addressees* are spoken of, as well. I believe that it is those persons whom the speaker addresses who are the principal group of persons who are included in the scope of the purported requirement. Even if others person can also fall within the requirement's scope (such as *official witnesses*), I will concentrate on addressees in this study, since they are the principal group concerned and taking other groups into consideration would not affect the results of this study.

If addressees are supposed to get uptake, who is an addressee? It is quite likely that we all have a sufficient idea of what it means to be addressee for the purposes of this study, so I intend to just briefly point out three things I believe to be important to keep in mind. *First*, who it is that is addressed is not just up to the speaker. In, for example, the biblical story of Isaac's blessing of Jacob we have the situation of Isaac *intending* to

speak to, lay his hands on and bless Esau while *unintentionally* doing those things to Jacob (Genesis, chapter 27).[1] *Second*, just because one is clearly entitled to take oneself as being an addressee does not mean that one is one (contrast with Wetterström 1977, pp. 126–127). One could be clearly entitled to think that one is being addressed by a speaker when one is not, as can happen, in certain circumstances, when another person has the same name as one has. *Third*, one may not realize that one is being addressed by a speaker when one is which, again, can happen when another person has the same name as one has (contrast with Wetterström 1977, pp. 20–21).

With the foregoing in mind, the main *problem* that I would like to consider in this study can be formulated as follows.

> Is it possible for a speaker to fully succeed in performing interpersonal illocutionary acts if addressee-uptake (1) is *not* produced; if so, can one do so even if (2) it is *not intended to be* produced; and if so, can one do so even if (3) it is *intended not to be* produced?

1.2 Aims of the Study

I will be arguing in this study that it is possible for a speaker to fully succeed in performing (interpersonal) illocutionary acts even if addressee-uptake (1) is *not* produced, (2) is *not intended to be* produced and (3) is *intended not to be* produced (in contrast to, for example, Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1991; Langton 1993, 2009; Alston 2000).

I do not deny that interpersonal illocutionary acts generally have a communicative role to play and that speakers generally make provision for the securing of uptake in their addressees, but whether uptake is realized depends partially on what addressees do or do not do with what is provided. I argue, in this study, that it is possible for speakers to use linguistic or non-linguistic devices that—in their context of use—indicate non-defectively to others what they are saying *and nonetheless* not be understood by their addressees.

Furthermore, I argue that one does not even have to *intend* for one's addressees to understand. Sometimes speakers justifiably believe that they will not be understood by their audience in spite of the fact that they are providing sufficient indication, in the situation they are in, of what they are saying to those to whom they are speaking. They may speak to their addressees anyways. Perhaps they do so because it is their responsibility to do so whether the persons they address listen or not.

I will argue that it is possible, not only to *not intend to* get uptake, but also to *intend not to* get uptake and still perform a fully successful interpersonal illocutionary act. For example, one may speak while intending not to get uptake in order to bring to someone's attention that one's addressee is not paying (sufficient) attention.

---

[1] It is true that Isaac *did intend* to bless the son whom he had laid his hands on and who he was speaking to, it is just that this was Jacob—not Esau, the son who he intended to address when he performed the blessing by laying his hands on the wrong individual. Isaac's intentions conflicted with each other and his primary intention to speak then and there to Esau failed. Isaac did not know whom he was addressing (nor did he know who was addressing him when Jacob replied to him).

1.3 How I will Proceed

To say that a *necessary* condition for performing (non-defective) interpersonal illocutionary acts is the securing of uptake is to say that it is *impossible* to perform such acts unless uptake is secured. Accordingly, my method for showing that securing uptake is not a *necessary* condition for performing illocutionary acts will be to show that it is *not impossible* to perform (non-defective) illocutionary acts—and even interpersonal ones—without securing uptake and even intending not to. It is quite *possible* to do so and to do so non-defectively.

Alston notes that, while some acts *consist* in the production of effects, illocutionary acts do not. Then he continues:

> But that is not to say that an illocutionary act does not *produce* effects or does not *have* consequences. Just by virtue of being an act it will have consequences. We must distinguish between certain effects of a lower-level act being part of given act *concept*, and a given act's having effects. It is part of the *concept* of the act of *irritating H* that the something the agent did resulted in H's being irritated. Whereas my *reminding H that he had promised to read my paper* can have as a result his being irritated without its being part of the concept of *reminding someone that he promised to read my paper* that the addressee becomes irritated. We should also note that where an act type is defined by some lower-level act having results of a certain sort, for example, frightening someone, a particular token of that type can also *have* further consequences. It may be a further consequence of my frightening you that you have a heart attack (2000, p. 32).

Performing an illocutionary act does not consist, neither partially nor wholly, in one's utterance producing uptake in others. But to say that illocutionary acts are not even partially constituted by producing uptake is not to say that illocutionary acts cannot or do not do so, of course. It is a contingent matter whether or not illocutionary acts produce uptake.

2 Three Main Types of Speech Act: Some Preliminary Distinctions

Speech act theorists, typically, distinguish between three types of speech act: utterance acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. A particular speech act can be, and usually is, a token of more than one type of speech act. Utterance acts are typically taken to be basic in the sense that one cannot perform an illocutionary or a perlocutionary act without performing an utterance act, whereas one can perform an utterance act without performing an illocutionary or a perlocutionary act. The distinction between the three different types of acts is important even in cases where one act is an instance of all three types. It could be the case, for example, that an act that qualifies as an act of all three types qualifies in different ways for the different types, for example, poorly for one and excellently for the others. So in answering whether a speech act is well-performed or not, the answer could be forthcoming that as an illocutionary act (of, for example, asserting propositions) it was a well performed act, but as an a perlocutionary act (of, for example, convincing one's addressee) it was poorly performed.

2.1 Utterance Acts

To perform an utterance act is to utter a sentence. It is possible for speakers to utter a sentence without their meaning anything by the utterance and without trying to affect anyone else. For example, one may utter a sentence to oneself in a foreign language without having any idea what the sentence means in the language. And even if one does know what the sentence means, one's intention in uttering the sentence may be to merely practice pronunciation. In such cases, one intends to perform an utterance act, but not to issue any message nor to affect anyone else by the issuing of any message. Not even the utterance itself needs to be performed with the intention of affecting anyone else (by, for example, getting someone's attention by shouting).

Alston calls utterance acts 'sentential acts,' since it typically is sentences that are uttered in an utterance act. Alston notes, though, that one can use other types of devices in sentential acts than sentences. In speech act theory, utterance acts are usually taken broadly to include not only producing sounds, but also writings, signals etc. Alston calls the *nonlinguistic* devices that one can use in these types of acts 'sentence surrogates.' According to Alston, these devices can be 'any perceptible device that has the kind of communicative role that some sentence in a language might be given, whether any sentence in any language has that role or not.' And, in accordance with this, he continues: '"Utterance" will extend over both any production of a sentence token or of other linguistic tokens as elliptical for a sentence, and any production of a sentence surrogate' (2000, p. 28).

2.2 Illocutionary Acts

Illocutionary acts *are utterance acts in which one issues a message*, the utterance content carried by the utterance. In the performance of our utterance acts, we typically intend that our utterances will carry content. In uttering a sentence one may, for example, state something, promise something, command something, express one's feelings, or remind someone of something.

Different philosophers have classified illocutionary acts in different ways. One prominent scheme of classification is given by Searle (1975, see Alston 2000 for another variant). Searle divided up illocutionary acts into the following five types. In *assertives* speakers commit themselves to the truth of the proposition expressed—which, of course, does not mean that they are honoring the commitment to truth-telling that they take upon themselves in their assertion. So when we make statements, explain things and remind others of something we are performing an illocutionary act of the assertive sort. In *commissives* speakers commit themselves to some future action. Promises, oaths, and vows are all commissives. In *directives* speakers commit themselves to aiming at getting the addressee(s) to taking some future course of action. A directive can be a request a command, a suggestion etc. In *expressives* speaker express their feelings. Expressing one's thankfulness by uttering 'I'm so thankful that you helped me' is an expressive. Congratulating someone is also an expressive. Finally, in *declarations* speakers change reality by saying it is so.

Baptizing a ship by uttering, 'I name this ship "Serenity"' is a declaration, according to Searle, as well as pronouncing a couple married.

Searle has distinguished the *propositional content* (that represents some state of affairs) of an illocutionary act from the illocutionary mode or '*force*' of the illocutionary act and symbolized the form of the whole act like this: F(p). The 'F' symbolizes the force of the illocutionary act and the 'p' symbolizes the propositional content of the illocutionary act (Searle 1969, pp. 31–33; 1991, p. 81). An example of how this works is the following. The illocutionary act reports (1) Kim asserted *that it's going to charge* and (2) Kim warned *that it's going to charge* both report an illocutionary act with the propositional content *that it's going to charge* (modified example from Austin 1962, p. 98). But the first report reports an illocutionary act with the force of an assertion, while the second one reports an illocutionary act with the force of a warning. One can, naturally, also have the same illocutionary force with different propositional content, as when one asserts two different propositions.

Searle's way of symbolizing illocutionary acts is quite useful in analyzing them and has been widely followed in the literature on illocutionary acts. One of the virtues of displaying the structure of illocutionary acts as Searle does is that it allows one to distinguish between illocutionary negation and propositional negation in a very clear fashion. There is a clear difference, for example, between saying that one is *not* promising to do something (not-F(p)) and promising *not* to do it (F(not-p)). Another virtue of the F(p) structure is that one can use it to point out that it is not only the illocutionary force that can be left implicit in one's utterance of a sentence (It's going to charge!), but also the propositional content (I am warning you!). Austin focused on implicit illocutionary forces, but we frequently leave the propositional content implicit when we speak. The utterance context can make clear what is left implicit in the expressions that we utter.

Searle's classification is a good starting point for thinking about illocutionary acts. Still I do not think that he has adequately taken into account the difference between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Illocutionary acts do not (even partially) *consist* in one's utterance producing effects—even if illocutionary acts *have* effects such as the production of uptake—whereas perlocutionary acts do *consist* in such effects. Or so I will be arguing.

2.3 Perlocutionary Acts

Perlocutionary acts *are utterance acts* that bring about some *natural* effect in an audience. Note that 'audience' is to be interpreted broadly just as 'speech' and 'utterance' have been interpreted in speech act theory. So, while the word 'audience' is related to the word 'audible,' it applies even to persons who are in a position to perceive one's utterance in other ways than through sounds. Utterance acts that have an audience typically do produce natural effects in the audience and it is generally one's intention that they do so. Utterances can produce effects either directly through the perceivable qualities of the utterance act or indirectly by virtue of the content that the utterance act carries (i.e., by illocutionary acts serving as the natural-effect-producing acts).

Here is a passage from Alston with examples where utterance acts are serving as natural-effect-producing acts affecting others:

> I might frighten you by speaking loudly, regardless of what I am saying. Or the mere sound of the words, or some of the associations they arouse in the hearer, may produce effects, whatever the illocutionary act, if any, that is being performed (2000, pp. 31-32).

Alston makes it clear in this passage that these particular natural-effect-producing acts are not producing their effects *indirectly* through what is said (that is, the illocutionary act). Rather, in these cases, the utterance acts produce their effects *directly* by what is uttered (that is, the utterance act).

Here are some examples from Searle in which illocutionary acts serve as the natural-effect-producing acts affecting others:

> To these three notions I now wish to add Austin's notion of the *perlocutionary act*. Correlated with the notion of illocutionary act is the notion of the consequences or *effects* such acts have on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs, etc. of hearers. For example, by arguing I may *persuade or convince someone*, by warning him I may *scare* or *alarm* him, by making a request I may *get him to do something,* by informing him I may *convince him (enlighten, edify, inspire him, get him to realize)*. The italicized expressions above denote perlocutionary acts (1969, p. 25).

Illocutionary *acts* typically have the types of *effects* Searle notes (perlocutionary effects). But note that it is not the *effects* of the utterance acts, whether the utterances acts are also illocutionary acts or not, that are perlocutionary *acts*—it is *the acts themselves*, when they have natural effects on other persons, that are perlocutionary acts. If an act is not only an utterance act, but also a perlocutionary one, it is not that the utterance act *causes* the perlocutionary act. Rather one performs an utterance act that may or may not affect other persons, but if it does, then the utterance act is a perlocutionary act. This is comparable to: If the act of shooting a gun is an act of killing, then it is not that the shooting causes the killing. Rather one shoots someone who may or may not die as a result, but if the person does die as a result, then the shooting is a killing. And if the shooting does not cause the death of the person who is shot, then the shooting is not a killing.

We generally do intend *interpersonal* speech acts to have some type of natural effect on others: We typically have *perlocutionary intentions* in performing *utterance acts* and *illocutionary act*s. It is not uncommon for one and the same act to be an instance of all three types of speech act (i.e., utterance, illocutionary and perlocutionary types). Persons often believe something that we assertively utter or to do something that we ask. But, of course, our desires and intentions are not always realized. Maybe the other persons, or some of them, are not attentive to what is said because they are thinking of other things at the time. Or maybe they do not even hear what the speaker uttered. People do sometimes say things with no hope of being understood or believed etc., or so I am arguing. In general, we care very much whether we are understood or not. Still, at certain times and in certain situations, people do not care whether they affect others

or not by what they say. People may be performing the duties of their job and realize that no one may be paying attention to them, but not care about that on a particular occasion. And even if people are listening to them (so that perlocutionary effects of illocutionary acts are being produced on the listeners), the listeners might not understand what illocutionary acts are being performed (so that no uptake is being produced).

I said in the last section that for a speaker to remind someone is an illocutionary act, but things are not so simple. Alston points out that there is an illocutionary-perlocutionary ambiguity in reporting that a speaker reminded someone of something:

> Another interesting case is *remind*. If I say something which reminds you that *p*, you may say 'He reminded me that *p*', regardless of whether I had issued the utterance as a reminder that *p*. But this is just an illocutionary-perlocutionary ambiguity in 'remind'. Here what you say is that as a *result* of hearing what I said you were reminded that *p*, that is, the fact that *p*, previously known to you, was recalled to your attention. Your report specifies a nonconventional effect of my utterance and so counts as a perlocutionary report. It doesn't follow from this that I reminded you that *p* in an illocutionary sense of that verb, in which it could have been true that I did that regardless of what effects my utterance had on you (2000, p. 129).

I draw two main points from this citations of Alston for the purposes of this study. One should keep in mind not only (1) that to say that a speaker reminded others of something can be meant in either an illocutionary sense or a perlocutionary sense, but also (2) that one can perform an illocutionary act of reminding others of something—as well as other illocutionary acts, Alston claims—regardless of whether or not one's utterance has any effects on the persons addressed. The second point is the main focus of this study and is, of course, controversial. Searle claims, instead, that to succeed in performing *illocutionary* acts it is necessary to secure uptake, which is an *effect* of one's utterance, and he, therefore, calls the securing of uptake 'illocutionary effects.' I, in contrast, take the securing of uptake to be a perlocutionary effect.

3 The Role of Indicating Devices

Let's turn our attention now to how indicating devices are used. It is important not to lose sight of the role of the indicating devices in speaking of the role of speakers in using them and of the hearers in understanding them.

3.1 Linguistic Indicating Devices

Words have a meaning as part of a larger life of use than that of any particular occasion of use. Linguistic meaning has a fundamental communicative role to play in that we can make ourselves understandable by using an appropriate public language. In order to speak in a way that is intelligible for their addressees, speakers typically use a public language that they *share* with their addressees. The language, together with sufficient contextual support, is fitting for such a use in virtue of both its *meaning* and its being a language that is *shared*.

Standard uses of shared and public languages are the *default position* that speech and interpretation typically start from in our discourse situations. There are, of course, exceptions to this. Private or special codes are sometimes used. And sometimes we reckon with interpreters that translate for addressees who do *not share* the language being used by the speaker. Addressees might not always be in the best position to understand what was spoken to them on their own for other reason as well, and they, therefore, frequently rely on others in order to gain understanding of what was said to them.

Whether addressees rely on help from others or not, it cannot be properly claimed that the expressions of the language being used by a speaker are being used for another use than a standard illocutionary use of the expressions unless the speaker or the context of utterance provides sufficient grounds for doing so. If nothing indicates anything other than that the speaker is making a standard illocutionary use of the sentence—neither anything the speaker does nor anything in the context—the assumption should be that the speaker *is* making a standard illocutionary use of the expressions. No special reasons or grounds needs to be provided for a standard interpretation of the utterance, if the expressions used are *univocal*. If a linguistic expression is *multivocal,* however, there will be more than one possible literal use of the expression available for use. Then one may need to take into consideration several alternative uses, depending on such matters as how common the different uses of an expression are, what would be an appropriate use in the context etc.

Contextual indications help to determine the content of a speaker's utterances in other types of situations also. Where there are sufficient contextual indications, speakers can often express what they want to say with just one word. Suppose, for example, that someone performs the illocutionary act of asking me (while sitting on the beach) if I would like to take a swim by uttering 'Do you want to take a swim?' to me. Suppose also that the speaker is leaving it to the *non-linguistic* context to make sufficiently clear such things as the general time period and place that is relevant to the question and that I do the same in my reply to the question. If I answer the question by simply uttering 'No' and thereby say that I do not want to take a swim, then my utterance in that context is *elliptical* for the utterance 'No, I do not want to take a swim.' The context even makes it clear that both 'you' (in the question) and 'I' (in my answer) are used to refer to me. Of course, these indexicals could have been used to refer to other persons—without change in linguistic meaning—if they had been used by and addressed to other persons.

Sometimes speakers make mistakes and misspeak. For example, one could call Joel 'Joe' because one did not hear the 'l' in his name when he introduced himself. Even if one does not subsequently correct the mistake, it is possible in certain contexts to successfully refer to Joel with the name 'Joe' anyways. If one has enough of a cognitive grip on Joel in the context of utterance, one could be successful in referring to Joel with 'Joe' and in making that evident to one's addressee. If Joel is the only person in the room and I, looking at Joel, utter 'Joe, you and I are the only ones here in time again, so we will need to wait for the others as usual,' then I could successfully refer to Joel with 'Joe' even though I failed to use the right name. The same thing can happen if I, thinking Joel is coach of the soccer team, assertively utter, 'The coach and I try to be punctual and we wish you would too' to the others when they arrive. Then, if it is

sufficiently clear in the context that it is Joel that I am speaking about, I could have successfully referred to him even though Joel is not the coach. The reference in both cases was sufficiently clear in the context of utterance to make up for the using a wrong name or description (see Donnellan 1966 concerning reference and definite descriptions).

3.2 Non-linguistic Indicating Devices

Let's consider traffic regulations and how they function in order to try to get clearer on the role that indicating devices have in speaking to others. Both linguistic devices such as signs with text and non-linguistic devices such as turning signals are used to transmit information about what we can expect and about what others can expect of us in traffic. Let's focus here on the non-linguistic devices and ask the following question. If one shipped a car to a place where people knew nothing about how we use the turning signals on a car, could one signal a turn *to them* by merely assuming the meaningfulness of such an action in our society? One could maybe signal a turn in that context—even if not to them—since one understands how to use signals in that way. It is just that there may not be other persons around *to whom* one can signal a turn—when one signals. Even in our society, where one can sometimes drive for long periods of time without meeting or seeing anyone, one may signal a turn quite often without signaling to anyone (not even oneself).

One can signal to others with turning signals in our society because there is an established practice for signaling in that way. Turning signals cannot indicate anything *to a person* unless that person is capable of seeing the connection between the signal and what it signifies. If there were no such person, but there could be a person for whom it would be such an indication*, then it would be* an indication for that person, if the counterfactual state of affairs were actualized.

But is it the case that a signal is only a signal for those who *actually* have learned to see the connection between the signal and what it signifies? Traffic signals do not work in that way in the societies that I am acquainted with: the force of the traffic laws does not give way to a motorist that claims not to have learned the relevant traffic signals prior to taking a drive in an area where the traffic laws are in force. Furthermore, even if one has learned to decipher traffic signals, it does not do much good in trying to get off the hook for a traffic accident if one says that one did not see that the driver in front of one had signaled a turn—when it is clear that the driver had done so—because one was not paying attention to traffic (but rather one's cell phone). Whether a driver signals a turn to the other drivers that happen to be on the road is not dependent on whether the other drivers on the road realize that that has been done. A signal to turn can have been performed whether or not the other drivers grasp that fact (get uptake) or not. A driver driving behind a driver who signals a turn does not get themselves off the hook in a court of law just by assertively uttering, 'I did not see the signaling' or 'I did not know what turning signals meant back then.'

It is common to speak of giving and taking warnings. A driver can *give* a warning by signaling a turn, but this does not guarantee that the warning will be *taken as such*. Accidents happen and sometimes it is for just this reason: that a warning given to someone was not grasped as such by the person it was directed to.

3.3 Understanding the Signs

One can ponder some texts, recordings of speeches etc. for quite some time. Why is that? Sometimes it is because one is trying to understand the content of the words inscribed or uttered, that is, *what is said* in uttering them; and sometimes one is trying to *deepen* one's understanding of the content. I do not know how often we fully grasp what is said and how long it can take to do so in hard-to-understand types of cases. But frequently we realize that we only partially understand what is said, that we may not have understood all of the most important things that the utterer was trying to convey—important content that was made such as the assertions, commands, promises etc.—and that it may take some time to do so.

We also know that people can disagree about the proper interpretation of texts, speeches etc. addressed to them. But, if addressees of illocutionary acts necessarily understand what was said to each of them, how could that be? Why would not all the persons addressed by a speaker's illocutionary act agree with each other? Perhaps one can reply to this by saying that all those who do not (fully) understand have not really had (all) those things said to them—no uptake, no illocutionary act, nothing said. One might be able to reply by saying that—I, anyways, do not doubt that one can—but many of the persons one was attempting to reply to might not understand what one was attempting to say to them. They might ask, 'Could one really mean that one's purported reply is not really a reply (in its entirety) if it is not (fully) understood by one's addressees?' with good reason.

4 A Well-Performed Act Is Not Necessarily Well-Received

In this section I will be arguing for the following three claims by taking up two different types of cases (cases where one does not get one's addressees' attention (sufficiently) and cases where one is grossly misunderstood). (1) Being a well-performed illocutionary act is not necessarily being a well-understood one—or one that produces any uptake at all. (2) A well-performed illocutionary act does not entail that the speaker *intended* it to produce (sufficient) uptake. Finally, (3) a well-performed illocutionary act can be executed *intending not* to secure (sufficient) uptake.

4.1 Getting People's Attention

Is it possible to be fully successful in performing an interpersonal illocutionary act even if one does *not intend to* produce uptake in the persons addressed or even *intends not to* do so? Sometimes one does not intend to produce uptake in one's addressees, because one does not intend to get one's addressees to pay sufficient attention to get it. And sometimes one intends for them not to get uptake in order to show that one's addressees do not pay sufficient attention to what is being said to them.

Consider Fred and his boss, Maria, who are frequent fliers of a well-known airline. They have taken countless flights together on the airline when doing consulting work for their company. They have heard several of the same flight attendants, time and time again, go through the safety information prior to takeoff and, when they are fully attentive to the presentation, they have had no problems understanding the information

provided. In fact, after twenty years of flying with the airline, they understand it so well that they could just as well give the presentation themselves.

Fred knows that pre-flight safety information was given, as usual, to all the passengers on his most recent flight with the airline, but he did not take it in because he was reading a magazine at the time. Could Fred properly say, in a flight survey given after the flight, that the flight attendant had informed him with the pre-flight safety information on the flight or not? Or what if Fred was attentive part of the time, but his thoughts wandered off several times so that he took in only half of what was said. Should he then answer that he was informed of only half of the information or all of it? And if Maria is fully attentive to the presentation of the pre-flight safety information and understands it all, should Fred say that, while he was informed of only half of the information, his boss was informed of it all? Or say that on Fred's very first flight with the airline, when he did not have so much experience flying, that he misses (through lack of sufficient attention) things that are important for interpreting the parts he does take in and that this lead to misunderstandings on his part. Should Fred say to Maria, when Maria points out to him (what she takes with good reason to be) his misunderstandings of the information, that the supposed misunderstanding are not really misunderstandings, but wholly appropriate interpretations of the flight information—given what was said to him?

Let's take things from the flight attendant's side instead. And let's go back to the first scenario where Fred takes his most recent flight, but does not get uptake of what the flight attendant is saying because he is attending to his magazine instead of what the flight attendant is saying. Now let's add that the flight attendant had seen Fred take off his hearing aid and begin to read a magazine just before the safety information was given to the passengers. In such a situation, the flight attendant may not have intended to secure uptake in Fred, but, nonetheless, have intended to inform him (in order to carry out her obligation to provide the information to him).

But could the flight intendant have the intention not to get uptake—that is not only *not intend to*, but *intend not to* secure uptake—and still have informed Fred? Consider a situation where things are just as described above when the flight attendant did not intend to secure uptake, but with the following additions. The flight attendant has just been reprimanded by a supervisor for not properly informing passengers of the pre-flight information because of bad survey results. The flight attendant assertively utters to the supervisor in response, 'Okay, you watch one of my presentations and then take a survey afterwards. See if the survey gives a correct picture of my performance.' The supervisor agrees to do this and when the flight attendant begins the pre-flight presentation the attendant sees Fred take off his hearing aid and begin reading in the magazine. The flight attendant sees this and then *hopes and intends* that Fred will not get uptake of what is said in the safety presentation given to the passengers and, furthermore, that he will respond that he was not told the information in the survey he takes afterwards. The attendant hopes to show the airline supervisor that, while there was no problem with the quality of the safety presentation, its reception by certain individuals was poor. The flight attendant's intentions would be frustrated, if things did not work out as she hoped.

In all of the above scenarios, no defect had been noted in the flight attendants illocutionary act performances—they were well-performed—and still, Fred failed to get uptake (while other passengers, like Maria, succeeded in understanding the

presentation). In some of the scenarios, the flight attendant did *not intend to* secure uptake and even *intended not to* do so. But if all this could happen, then it must be possible and it must be false that interpersonal illocutionary act performance can only be carried out successfully if addressee-uptake is secured. Not convinced? Let's continue.

4.2 Unspeakable Acts—Not Taking *No* for an Answer

Langton is well-known for her analyses of the what she calls the 'silencing' of women in sexual contexts (1993; 2009). These types of cases show in a very strong manner that these are not just theoretical issues, but that what we claim about speech has important practical consequences.

The word 'No' seems to be especially suited for making refusals, but there are people who refuse to take *No* for an answer. Langton claims that one can silence a person's *No* in more than one way. One can (1) make sure that the person never gets a chance to utter any words, (2) let the person talk but refuse to accept the refusal that the person made or (3) let the person utter words but hinder the person from being understood as making a refusal (see, for example, Langton 2009, p. 48). It is the last possibility that Langton focuses on when she speaks of illocutionary disablement, applying it to rape cases. Some men, in some sexual situations, will not take *No* for an answer from women and even women who frantically utter 'No,' the men take to be consenting. Men have defended themselves by uttering such things as, 'Coming from her, I took it as consent.' And a judge has been reported to have said in response to a victim, 'it is not just a question of saying "No"' (Langton 2009, p. 58). Langton considers such statements as possibly a way of saying that if a woman is not understood as refusing by a rapist, she is not refusing. Since uptake is required for an illocutionary act to be successful, and uptake is not gotten, the refusal is not successful, according to Langton. Note, though, that Langton is *not* claiming that victims have consented to sex just because they are not understood as refusing.

That one need not mean *No* when one utters 'No' is not something that one needs to disagree with in order to disagree with the view that uptake is necessary for illocutionary act performance. One can think of contexts in which one does not mean *No* when one utters 'No,' as when one is practicing pronunciation or have agreed with someone on the use of a private code. But these ways of using the word 'No' are not the default uses that we start with when speaking with each other. Rather, standard uses of language that use the publicly shared uses of terms are to be taken as the default uses. We should understand a speaker's 'No' in the standard way if there is not sufficient indication given that it should be interpreted otherwise. Furthermore, it does not follow from the fact that utterance acts are not always an illocutionary act, or the illocutionary act that one supposes it to be, that uptake is necessary for illocutionary act performance.

Langton claims that to *be* a refusal one's utterance must be *taken as* a refusal by the person one is refusing. And she claims, furthermore, that women's role in society could disable them for securing the *uptake* required to perform certain illocutionary acts, and, therefore, disable them for performing those acts. It is maintained that in our society (in at least some domains) women might not be able to say *No* to certain sexual advances, since the persons that they are trying to speak to fail to take their utterances as refusals of the sexual advances. This goes against the position that I defend in which refusals do

not need to be *taken as* refusals by their addressees to *be* refusals addressed to them. If I am right, our illocutionary acts are not at the mercy of how they are *taken* by others.

To support her position that whether or not we can perform certain illocutionary acts depends upon the role we occupy, Langton invites those she is addressing to imagine the following situation.

> Imagine this: the actor is acting a scene in which there is supposed to be a fire…. It is his role to imitate as persuasively as he can a man who is trying to warn others of a fire. 'Fire!' he screams. And perhaps he adds, at the behest of the author, 'I mean it! Look at the smoke!' etc. And now a real fire breaks out, and the actor tries vainly to warn the real audience. 'Fire!' he screams, 'I mean it! Look at the smoke!' etc. (1993, p. 316 which is a citation of Davidson 1984, p. 264).

The audience does not take themselves to have been warned in this example because the audience takes the actor to be acting when issuing the utterance. A problem with this example is that just as practicing to make a speech is not to make the speech, acting like one is warning is not warning in any straightforward sense. As Alston points out in the following passage.

> If I say 'Has my wife gotten back home?' in a play, the audience could not understand that utterance except by using its understanding of what would be said by someone who literally and seriously asked whether his wife had returned home. In the play one is *imitating* that more basic use of the sentence or, as one might say, *pretending* to be making that use but not really doing so. The function of 'Has my wife returned home?' in the play depends on the audience's being prepared, by a 'Stilling suspension of disbelief', to take me as asking my addressee whether my wife has returned home, while realizing that I, the actor, am not *really* doing that (2000, p. 185).

When is a person *really* performing an illocutionary act? As I pointed out above, my position is that we need to take standard uses of illocutionary act indicators as default positions. That means that only if there are sufficient grounds to depart from the standard uses could we be justified in taking a speaker to being doing something else with the illocutionary act indicators. Reality is always the context in which acting takes place and acting is parasitic on reality—one acts like one is really doing something, when one is not. If a play is announced, started etc., then we have grounds to believe that the actors are acting. But we could get new grounds that changed that conviction. If a fire breaks out and we see it, smell the smoke and the fire alarm goes off and, then, an actor screams out that there is a real fire, then there are very good grounds for believing that the actor is not acting at that time and is really performing an illocutionary act—not just acting as though doing so.

Langton's use of Donald Davidson's view (as cited above) risks disabling, *not only some* putative illocutionary acts, but, as the argument is set up, *any* of them. One of the main points of Davidson's argument is that, *whatever* type of indications we seek to use to indicate what we are saying, the indications we use could be used for mere acting. However much we try to strengthen the language, however intense we utter, 'I *really* mean it,' what is uttered can be used by a person just playing a part in which the person does *not really* mean it, when they utter 'I really mean it.' But the problem with seeking

to disable others' illocutionary acts by such means—perhaps by assertively uttering in a court of law, 'She did not really mean *No* when she said 'No''—is that such a strategy can be used by others on one's own illocutionary acts whatever one utters.

Langton strengthens her argument when she proceeds to compare the acting situation to really marrying, really divorcing and really voting. In some lands persons of the same gender cannot marry each other by uttering the words 'I do' whereas persons of different genders than one another can do so. Wives cannot divorce their husbands (in an Islamic land) by uttering the words 'mutallaqa, mutallaqa, mutallaqa' (literally, 'divorced, divorced, divorce') whereas their husbands can divorce their wives in this way. And persons of certain ethnic backgrounds have been kept from voting while persons of different ethnic backgrounds, but of the same land, were permitted to do so.

I think that these examples are accurate depictions of how things are or have been. Not only that, but the examples concerning voting, marriage and divorce are the same types of examples which Austin was fond of using when discussing different types of illocutionary acts. These are good arguments, but I do not think that one should be convinced by them to accept her thesis that uptake is necessary for illocutionary act performance. Other considerations lead me to reject that.

Langton describes contexts in which only certain types of persons can perform certain types of illocutionary acts. Other persons cannot do so (even if they can try to do so). No matter what words these other persons utter, they cannot perform certain types of illocutionary acts in certain contexts. This is the case even if the acts that they perform seem to be in themselves qualitatively indistinguishable from acts that *are* successful performances of the types of illocutionary acts in question. The difference is that these latter acts are performed by persons with a different status that allows them to perform illocutionary acts with such a status in such contexts. Langton is very careful to point out that the persons in these examples have not *disobediently* voted, married or divorced. It is very important for her case that she does so, because there are very many things one has no authority to do, which one can do all the same. In many countries one cannot (one is not authorized to) drive a car on the public roads if one is only 10 years old. Are we to conclude from this that no one has done it? No, for one can *disobey* the law. Similarly, it is possible to disobediently vote, marry or divorce someone (e.g., against one's parents' wishes). But to do this one must actually perform the act and in the cases presented above it is claimed that one has not done so.

So the type of cases Langton is interested are cases such as my not being able to marry a couple even though I perform the same procedures that if a minister had performed them would be a case of successfully marrying the couple. I cannot—so long as I do not have the proper authority, as the minister does—marry the couple. Still, it is important to keep in mind that a quite ordinary response to a person's hearing that the act of marrying a couple is a speech act is puzzlement. Surely, more is required than speaking to get married. We do not want to risk allowing speech to swallow up other types of action required for marrying so that only speech is required to marry someone. Now if there is more involved in marrying a couple than speaking, then if one is not successful in marrying a couple one cannot conclude from that alone that one has not spoken or not spoken properly. The supposed lack or defect could be one of not meeting certain conditions that are not conditions for speaking in itself, but of marrying people through—among other things—speaking (compare to Alston 2000, p. 91).

Of course one can admit what I have said above and still emphasize that other factors affect what we actually say by changing the practice. So 'No' typically means *No,* but

when uttered by a woman in response to a sexual advance that is not the meaning of the expression. How might one change the rules of the practice in this way? According to Langton, pornography might play this role if people give it the authority in their lives to set the standards for what is to count as the performance of an illocutionary act in sexual situations (e.g., for what, if anything, is to be taken as refusal). Langton does not claim that pornography actually has this authority, but rather that it is a conceptual possibility that it could have it. And that if it did, it could disable women's attempts of refusal in certain situations by changing the rules of the practice. Could this really happen?

It may be the case that certain makers of pornographic magazines do get some local recognition (authority de facto), but ought they to get such recognition (authority de jure)? Although persons who cannot take *No* for an answer in sexual situations can claim recognition, and even be taken as legitimate by some in certain contexts (such as when those involved in the making of pornographic literature agree on their own private code in which 'No' is not taken as a refusal in sexual situations *in the context of* that literature), they do not have the authority to set the *public standards* of what is to count as performing an illocutionary act of refusal in sexual situations. The burden of proof is on anyone who wishes to deny that a literal interpretation of 'No' is the default position one must start from. In order to argue that a different interpretation is preferable one would need to point out something in the linguistic or non-linguistic context which indicates why another interpretation is preferable to a standard interpretation in that context. If there is nothing in the situation to indicate a non-standard use and the woman who utters 'No' did not do anything that indicated that she was performing anything other than the normal illocutionary use of her utterance of 'No' one has no grounds to conclude that she that she was not making a refusal. And even if there were some indications for a non-standard use, they would have to be stronger than the indications for the standard use in order to be *sufficient to override* it as the proper interpretation. 'What interpretation is overall best?' is the question that needs to be asked. This will rule out utterly inappropriate interpretations; linguistic meaning sets constraints on what is appropriate and is a *basic* ground for the proper use of one's discretionary capacities.

Langton has not shown that women are disabled from being able to perform certain illocutionary acts as a result of the failure of others to get uptake in certain sexual situations. A speaker can provide what is in fact *sufficient indication for* addressees to come to an understanding of what the speaker is saying to them without it being the case that they do in fact come to such an understanding. After all, just because a speaker provides sufficient indication for addressees it does not follow that the addressees use what is provided (sufficiently). If in certain sexual situations a woman's illocutionary act is not recognized for *what it is* by others, what it is does not depend upon such recognition. It is true that a person's utterance of 'No' may not be counted for what it really is. But this is similar to when what people know is not counted as knowledge by others. This can have many reasons, but no doubt it is sometimes because we are unresponsive to others and to what they have accomplished.

5 Conclusion

I conclude that it is possible for a speaker to fully succeed in performing (interpersonal) illocutionary acts even if addressee-uptake is *not* produced, it is *not intended to be*

produced and it is *intended not to be* produced. Too much attention in the past has been focused on the effects or the intended effects of one's utterances on those addressed by them.

That addressees have *grounds for* arriving at a certain understanding of the content of what is uttered to them does not entail that they will arrive at that understanding, nor that they will not do so. It is a contingent matter whether or not uptake is secured in the person who one addresses with one's utterances. The grounds the addressees are provided with put them in a position to, and give them the opportunity to understand the content of the speaker's utterances. There are many grounds available to addressees that could be used for support in coming to a certain understanding that are never actually used.

Actually arriving at a proper understanding is, naturally, more than the *possibility* of arriving at it, but *the possibility to do so is presupposed* every time one secures understanding of what is being said. People would never actually grasp what is said to them if nothing was ever said to them. So what speakers do in speaking to others is they provide a *basis* for coming to a certain understanding, a basis that can be used if it be necessary to do so, if one ought to do so or should one want to do so. Although there may be a lot of potential for producing uptake, the potential may never be actualized if there is no felt need to grasp what is said.

References

Alston, W. P. (1994). Illocutionary acts and linguistic meaning. In S. L. Tsohatzidis (Ed.), *Foundations of speech act theory: Philosophical and linguistic perspectives* (pp. 29–49). New York: Routledge.

Alston, W. P. (2000). *Illocutionary acts and sentence meaning*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davidson, D. (1984). *Inquires into truth and interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Donnellan, K. (1966). Reference and definite descriptions. *Philosophical Review, 75*, 281–304.

Langton, R. (1993). Speech acts and unspeakable acts. *Philosophy and public affairs*, 22, 293-330; reprinted in her *Sexual solipsism: Philosophical essays on pornography and objectification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 25–87.

Langton, R. (2009). *Sexual solipsism: Philosophical essays on pornography and objectification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1975). A taxonomy of illocutionary acts. In *K. Günderson (ed.), Language, mind, and knowledge, (Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science, Vol. VII)* (pp. 344–369). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Searle, J. R. (1991). Response: Meaning, intentionality, and speech acts. In E. Lepore & R. Van Gulick (Eds.), *John Searle and his critics* (pp. 79–102). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wetterström, T. (1977). *Intention and communication: An essay in the phenomenology of language*. Lund: Doxa.