

Between Expressives and Representatives

Abstract

After an account of argumentativity, the ‘central properties of expressives’ (Potts: 2007a) are used as a set of tests, through which three of Searle’s illocutionary acts are run, in order to investigate for each of these whether they share any of the expressive properties. In the conclusion, the results of this investigation are used to discuss the role of emotion regarding argumentativity.

1. Introduction

Searle concluded that ‘there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language’ (1976: 22), leading him to identify five basic illocutionary acts: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations (ibid.: 12).¹

Among these speech acts, expressives take up an exceptional place in that they have no ‘direction of fit’². Foolen agrees that ‘the expressive function in the strict sense [means] the direct expression of emotion through language’ (1997: 16). In the present paper, we will compare three of Searle’s speech acts (directives, commissives and declarations) to expressives, in order to show how linguistic acts such as ordering someone to do something, promising to do something and declaring something to be the case, are closely related to direct expressions of emotion.

2. Argumentativity

Why should we want to undertake such an investigation? To answer this question, we need to discuss some theoretical issues first.

The notion of language as a means of *doing* things is accepted more widely than ever. The emphasis in linguistics has shifted more and more from the semantic to the post-semantic functions of language, i.e. from how language helps us to describe to how it enables us to act. Comparative communicational and co-operational experiments with children and chimpanzees has led Tomasello to dub ‘requesting, informing and sharing’ as ‘the three most basic of human communicative motives’ (2008: 87). Both Searle’s and Tomasello’s classification look upon language as a sort of ‘tool-box’ (a metaphor coined by Wittgenstein (1956: 11)), with different tools that enable speakers to perform different acts, of which exchanging information is merely one.

¹ These can be used separately or in combination. For example, ‘It’s freezing in here!’ can be a representative, an expressive and a directive (‘Close the window!’) at the same time.

² An illocutionary point is partly determined by whether it aims ‘to get the words (...) to match the world [or] to get the world to match the words’ (Searle, 1976: 3). This is the ‘direction of fit’ of a speech act. For example, representatives (‘It is raining’) have a words-to-world fit, directives (‘Bring your umbrella’) a world-to-words fit.

Why do these ‘tools’ function in the first place? Tomasello points to the ‘cooperative principle of human communication’ (2008: 98), the natural willingness in humans to cooperate. Humans are hyper-cooperative in that they find ‘mutually shared solutions to coordination problems’ (Verhagen, 2008: 307) through the creation of conventions. Extending Wittgenstein’s metaphor, we could say that our instinct to cooperate is what has shaped the tools in our box, making them fit for our purposes.

If language is fundamentally an instrument of cooperation, it is therefore not so much subjective as *intersubjective* in nature. The emergence and transformation of language in (ontogenetic and phylogenetic) history are inherently shaped by speakers’ desires to cooperate and manipulate, i.e. to *influence* the hearer. Verhagen (following Anscombe and Ducrot (1989)) calls this the ‘argumentative character’ (2008: 313) of language. In this view, language is fundamentally a means of using inferences to direct others towards certain conclusions. Therefore, ‘the meaning of [a] word is its contribution to the argumentative value of utterances in which it occurs’ (ibid.: 314).

Consider the following example given by Verhagen (ibid.):

- (1) There are seats in this room.
 - a. But they are uncomfortable.
 - b. #And moreover, they are uncomfortable.

The contrastive conjunction in (1a) works well. The connective conjunction in (1b), however, does not. This suggests that the notion of comfort was somehow already present in (1), making it an *argument* for entering the room. Although (1) looks like a pure representative, apparently it entails an argumentative orientation.

How is this possible? We will work towards an answer to this question in the remainder of this paper, considering the desire to influence others through language to be a basic human *emotion*, and the argumentative character of language as the *expression* of this emotion.³

3. Two realms

A little more contextualization is in order first. Potts makes a distinction between what he calls ‘the descriptive⁴ and the expressive realm’ (2007a: 167). He identifies six properties of expressive content that set it apart from descriptive content. Due to its significance for the present paper, Potts’ list can best be given in its entirety here:

³ See Foolen (1997) for a brief discussion on (the differences between) cognition and emotion.

⁴ We will be using the terms ‘descriptive’ (Potts) and ‘representative’ (Searle) interchangeably.

Central properties of expressives (ibid.:166-167)

1. *Independence*: Expressive content contributes a dimension of meaning that is separate from the regular descriptive content.
2. *Nondisplaceability*: Expressives predicate something of the utterance situation.
3. *Perspective dependence*: Expressive content is evaluated from a particular perspective.
4. *Descriptive ineffability*: Speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive terms.
5. *Immediacy*: Expressives achieve their intended act simply by being uttered.
6. *Repeatability*: If a speaker repeatedly uses an expressive item, the effect is generally one of strengthening the emotive content.

Adopting Searle's terminology again, we see that Potts sets the expressive illocutionary act wholly apart from the representative one, giving Searle's classification two far ends. With this dichotomy before us, it seems all the more puzzling that (1), a representative, expresses the speaker's desire to enter the room with the hearer. We will formulate a solution to this problem in the conclusion.

4. Investigation

In this section we will determine for directives, commissives and declarations to what degree they share any of the six central properties of expressives. (Obviously, representatives are not taken up in our analysis: the six properties are precisely what sets expressives apart from representatives, and thus we can already conclude that none of these properties pertain to representatives. This is why (1) is so baffling in the first place.)

4.1 Independence

4.1.1 Directives

Searle writes about directives that 'they are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something', and that 'the direction of fit is world-to-words' (1976: 11). A directive may be 'modest' ('Could you be quiet?') or 'fierce' ('Shut up!').

Do directives too 'contribute a dimension of meaning that is separate from the regular descriptive content', as Potts writes about expressives? Imagine two builders, such as in Wittgenstein's famous example (1956: §2). Builder A says to builder B:

- (2) Give me the pillar on that block.

Potts writes that ‘the expressive and descriptive meaning (...) should not be combined into a single unit of meaning’ (2007a: 168). The same goes for the directive and descriptive meaning of (2). Following Potts’ example, we can state that ‘we are closer to the meaning of [(2) with (3)] than we are with a simple conjunction of a descriptive meaning with an expressive one’ (ibid.):

- (3) a. Descriptive: On the block lies a pillar.
- b. Directive: A wants B to give him the pillar.

Furthermore, B may comply and hand A the pillar, yet answer that it was not lying on a block but on the ground, thereby agreeing with one part of the meaning of (2), but disagreeing with another. Thus, it seems that directives and expressives do indeed share the independency property.

4.1.2 Commissives

For Searle, the point of commissives ‘is to commit the speaker (...) to some future course of action’ (1976: 12). Commissives are actually very much like directives, in that the latter are used to get others to do something and the former to get ourselves to do something. Consequently, the direction of fit of commissives is world-to-words as well. Here is an example of a commissive:

- (4) I promise to clean the closet in the hall.

Here too we have to make a distinction between two types of meaning in (4), which gives us (5):

- (5) a. Descriptive: There is a closet in the hall.
- b. Commissive: The speaker promises to clean this closet.

The hearer can deny (5a), but not (5b) (Potts, 2007a: 181), which shows that (4) entails a sort of meaning that is independent of the descriptive content.

4.1.3 Declarations

‘Declarations’ are performative, in that [their] ‘successful performance guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world’ (Searle 1976: 13). For example, using Austin’s proto-performative, when the right speaker in the right situation utters the words ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’ (1962: 5), the fact is constituted that the ship is named so. This alone proves that declarations, like expressives, do indeed contribute a sort of meaning independent from the descriptive realm. An example is given in (6):

- (6) a. Queen Elizabeth is majestic
- b. and so is this ship,
- c. therefore I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth.

The hearer may agree or disagree with (6ab), but neither of the two situations would change the fact that, after (6c) has been uttered under the right circumstances, the ship would thenceforth be named Queen Elizabeth. A discussion about the truth of (6ab) would not necessarily be a nonsensical affair, whereas in the case of (6c) it would be, since the whole notion of *descriptive* truth is out of the question here. In other words, the declarative content of (6) operates independently of the surrounding descriptive content.

4.2 *Nondisplaceability*

4.2.1 Directives

Expressive meaning, according to Cruse (as cited by Potts), ‘is valid only for the utterer, at the time and place of the utterance’ (1986: 272). We would expect this to be the case for directives as well, since no speaker is ever capable of wanting something in any other time than the present. However, a subtle distinction is to be made with the use of some examples:

- (7) Could you pass me the salt?
- (8) It would be nice if you could pass me the salt.
- (9) Pass me the salt!

Potts writes about expressives that they ‘cannot be used to report on past events, attitudes, or emotions, nor can they express mere possibilities’ (2007a: 169). In terms of literal meaning, these characteristics count only for (9), as (7) and (8) do, as it were, refer to a possible world in which it would be nice if the hearer were able to pass the salt etc. However, in terms of illocutionary force, both (7) and (8) basically *mean* (9). In uttering a directive, be it ‘modest’ or ‘fierce’, the meaning of the utterance is always ‘S wants H to do X’, and this pragmatic part of a directive’s meaning is, indeed, ‘valid only for the utterer, at the time and place of the utterance’.

4.2.2 Commissives

Taking up examples (4) and (5) again, we see how the same line of thought applies to commissives. Even though the speaker may clean the closet tomorrow or even ten years after uttering (4), the *act* of commission itself (represented in

5b) is restricted to the time and place of the utterance. Therefore, (5b) ‘predicates something of the utterance situation’ (Potts, 2007a: 166) and is not displaceable.

4.2.3 Declarations

We have already seen that descriptive truth plays no role in the case of declarations. Since declarations are used to bring about facts, ‘the direction of fit is both words-to-world and world-to-words’ (Searle, 1976: 15). Declarations are not descriptive or propositional, but simply only *declarative*. Due to these characteristics, they cannot be displaced without losing their meaning. Returning to example (6), we see how (6c) would lose its meaning when uttered by a person lying in bed at night, whereas (6ab) would not.

4.3 *Perspective dependence*

4.3.1 Directives

Potts writes about expressives that ‘the perspective is the speaker’s, but [that] there can be deviations if conditions are right’ (2007a: 166). For example, in (10) the expressive interjection ‘bastard’ can be evaluated from the perspective of the uncle, and not that of the speaker:

(10) My uncle said they ought to fire that bastard Trump.

How do directives behave in this respect? Can directives, like expressives, have ‘another salient entity’ (ibid.) apart from the speaker as their source of desire? Let us look at some examples:

(11) John said it would be nice if you could reply to his email.

(12) Reply to John’s email!

In (11), we are dealing with an indirect speech act, namely a directive in the form of a representative. However, the ‘sincerity condition of desire’⁵ (Searle 1976: 11) clearly lies not with the speaker but with John. Conversely, in (12) the desire lies with the speaker and not with John. Therefore, the continuation in (13) is perfectly possible, whereas with (14) it leads us right into the realm of nonsense:

(13) John said it would be nice if you could reply to his email. (But I don’t care whether you will or not.)

(14) Reply to John’s email! (#But I don’t care whether you will or not.)

⁵ The ‘sincerity condition’ of an illocutionary act is the psychological state it expresses (Searle, 1976: 4). For example, representatives express ‘belief’, directives express ‘desire’ and commissives express ‘intention’.

So, as for perspective, we can conclude that directives and expressives behave in much the same way, as deviations of perspective are possible with both types of illocutionary acts. Whereas with directives in the form of an indicative or interrogative the perspective may deviate, this is not the case for imperatives, which are always entirely perspective dependent.

4.3.2 Commissives

Consider the following examples and their continuations:

- (15) I said I will go to the opera tonight. (But I will not go.)
- (16) I will go to the opera tonight. (#But I will not go.)

The continuation is not absurd for (15), but it is for (16), because the former is a representative and the latter a commissive. (15) cannot possibly be a commissive (even though the perspective of the matrix clause and the complement clause are both the speaker's), because for an utterance to be a commissive, the perspective has to be that of the speaker at the time of the utterance. We conclude, then, that commissives are more rigid than directives, and that deviations of perspective are entirely impossible in their case.

4.3.3 Declarations

When uttered by a superior, (17) means something much more serious to the hearer than when uttered by the toilet lady. Furthermore, even if somebody said (18) about the CEO, this would not have nearly as much gravity as when the CEO himself would utter (19):

- (17) Your position is terminated.
 - (18) He declares your position is terminated.
 - (19) I declare your position is terminated.
- (Searle, 1976: 14)

Declarations, therefore, behave similarly to commissives, in that they do not allow for any deviations of perspective.

4.4 *Descriptive ineffability*

4.4.1 Directives

In the case of directives, this property can be dealt with quite briefly. 'Expressive content', Potts writes, 'is not propositional [and] is distinct from the meanings we typically assign to sentences' (2007a: 177). Therefore, 'a demand for a paraphrase

of [an expressive] is nonsensical' (ibid.: 178). This is not the case for directives, since we have already seen with examples (7) to (9) how the same directive speech act can be formulated in different ways. A speaker may perfectly paraphrase (9) as (7) or (8), without the *act* losing any of its directive point. Here we have a property of expressives not shared by directives.

4.4.2 Commissives

The same goes for the class of commissives. (20)-(22) mean the same thing and have roughly equal commissive force:

- (20) I will clean my room.
- (21) I promise to clean my room.
- (22) I am planning to clean my room.

4.4.3 Declarations

Since the uttering of a declaration itself means the creation of a fact, paraphrasing the declaration will not achieve the same effect. For example, if the priest at a wedding would utter (23) instead of the declarative 'I hereby pronounce you husband and wife', this would most likely not count as an official declaration of marriage:

- (23) #Due to nature of my authority, just by saying that I pronounce you husband and wife, I can perform the act of marrying you, which I hereby do.

4.5 *Immediacy*

4.5.1 Directives

Looking back to 4.2.1, we recall that the illocutionary point of a directive, no matter what surface it has, is always relevant only for the utterer in the here-and-now. Uttering a directive *is* the act of directing somebody. So, even though the speaker in (25) does not want the hearer to give her back the book immediately, the illocutionary force of the utterance still has the same immediate power as (24):

- (24) Give me back my book!
- (25) Give me back my book tonight!

4.5.2 Commissives

We have already observed in 4.3.2 how, for an utterance to be a commissive, the perspective has to be that of the speaker at the time of the utterance. From this we can infer that the immediacy property counts for commissives as well.

4.5.3 Declarations

Potts relates how ‘expressive content is performative in this sense: quite generally, the act of uttering an expressive *is* the emotive performance’ (2007a: 180). For a declaration to work it needs to be uttered by the right speaker at the right time, and if these requirements are satisfied, an utterance becomes a declaration by being uttered and therein has immediate validity.

4.6 Repeatability

4.6.1 Directives

‘For expressives’, Potts writes, ‘the basic observation is that repetition leads to strengthening rather than redundancy’ (2007a: 182) of emotive content. This is why (27) has a stronger emotional undertone than (26):

(26) Damn, I left my keys in the car.

(27) Damn, I left my damn keys in the damn car.

(Potts: *ibid.*)

Potts addresses a question by Geurts, about whether ‘repeatability is (...) really the purview of expressives alone’ (2007b: 257). This question seems justified, because for directives repeatability seems to work as well. Consider the following examples:

(28) Run, Forrest, run!

(29) Go, it’s the police! Go! Go! Go!

(30) I want ice cream too! Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!

In all three cases, the repetition of the imperative verb enhances the directive force.

4.6.2 Commissives

Commissives show the same behavior with regards to repetition, as shown in (31). There is, however, a delicate difference. We can effortlessly imagine a situation where a speaker would add (31b) to (31a) to emphasize the sincerity of his intention, but it is important to note that the commissive *act itself* was already established simply by uttering (31a):

(31) a. I swear I will be a better person.

b. I swear to God! I swear!

Nonetheless, (31b) clearly functions as an extra affirmation of the intention encoded in the commissive point of (31a), enhancing its meaning, precisely as repetition does with directives and expressives.

4.6.3 Declarations

A declaration needs to be uttered only once in order to be a declaration. Therefore, the repeatability property cannot be a requirement for this class of illocutionary acts. For example, in order to perform the marriage, the priest has to say ‘I hereby pronounce you man and wife’ only once, and even if he would say it twice, the newlyweds would not therefore be married twice.

5. Conclusion

Table 1 gives an overview of the results of our investigation. The properties shared by expressives and the illocutionary act have been indicated with a check mark, and for those that are not shared the box is marked X:

Searle's classification of illocutionary acts

Potts' six properties of expressives	Expressives	Directives	Commissives	Declarations	Representatives
1. Independence	√	√	√	√	X
2. Non-displaceability	√	√	√	√	X
3. Perspective dependence	√	√	√	√	X
4. Descriptive ineffability	√	X	X	√	X
5. Immediacy	√	√	√	√	X
6. Repeatability	√	√	√	X	X

Table 1

From this overview, it immediately becomes clear that directives, commissives and declarations have much more in common with expressives than with representatives: of the 18 boxes, only three have been marked X.

How does this answer our question in section 2, as to how Verhagen's seemingly purely representative example, repeated here as (32), can express an emotion?

(32) There are seats in this room.

Our answer consist of five steps. Firstly, we can say that, in line with the theory of argumentativity, the sincerity condition (see footnote 5) for most of our everyday uses of language is fundamentally *desire*: whenever a person uses language, even when they are simply stating that something is the case, the psychological state that is thereby expressed is the desire to influence others. Secondly, as desire is an emotion (see footnote 3), we can infer from the first step that language regularly concerns the expression of emotion. Thirdly, looking at the results in Table 1, recalling that expressives allow for the direct expression of emotion through language, and bearing the previous two steps in mind, we now understand why directives, commissives and declarations on the one hand and expressives on the other are so much alike: they are all driven mainly by the sincerity condition of desire. Fourthly, it is important to repeat here that although there are basically only five things we can do with language, we ‘often (...) do more than one of these in one and the same utterance’ (Searle, 1976: 23). The number of possible combinations with the five basic illocutionary acts are quite numerous. Added to that, Table 1 shows that four out of the five basic illocutionary acts are deeply expressive in nature. Therefore, *we can conclude that the vast majority of the possible combinations of basic illocutionary acts are expressive in nature* too. This explains why descriptive language is hardly ever *purely* descriptive. The act of informing somebody about something regularly involves other acts as well. Whenever this is the case, the descriptive content gets ‘caught up’ in the expressive power of the other act(s) involved, due to the expressive properties shared by the majority of illocutionary acts.⁶

Our final step, then, is to determine which combination of acts lies underneath (32)’s surface. Why would the hearer interpret it as more than a simple representative in the first place? Here we will briefly turn to Relevance Theory.⁷ Sperber and Wilson’s ‘principle of relevance’ states that ‘every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance’ (1995: 158). Saying something to somebody inherently implies that the act of saying it is relevant – an idea that links up nicely to Tomasello’s notion of the ‘cooperative principle’ (cf. *supra*). Now, let us imagine a situation where two people are standing in the doorway of a room and one of them utters (32). Why would the other person assume the utterance to be relevant?

⁶ There are, however, utterances that do seem ‘purely’ descriptive. Think of ‘The earth revolves around the sun’, ‘Water is H₂O’ or ‘2+2=4’. It is hard to imagine situations in which such representatives would have any argumentative orientation.

⁷ Verhagen contrasts some of his own ideas with RT (2008: 312), identifying more with Levinson.

First of all, the noun 'seats' implies comfort (being seated, sitting down, resting). (32) can thus be paraphrased as (33):

(33) There is comfort in this room.

The hearer assumes that the speaker hints at the comfort in the room for a reason, i.e. that it is the expression of a desire *to react to this comfort*. Since comfort is universally regarded as something beneficial for all people, the hearer will assume that the speaker's desire is more specifically to *make use of the comfort*, and interpret (32) as (34):

- (34) a. Representative: There are seats in this room.
b. Implication: There is comfort in this room.
c. Expressive: We must use this comfort.
d. Directive: Come into the room with me.

In sum, (34a) leads to (34b), (34ab) leads to (34c) and (34abc), ultimately, leads to (34d), giving the whole of (34) its argumentative orientation.

We have shown, then, how a simple descriptive utterance can be used and interpreted as an argument by going through a number of pragmatic mechanisms at work on the intersubjective level of language, and why emotion plays a crucial role in this respect.

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