EMBEDDED PERFORMATIVES

CHUNGMIN LEE

Seoul National University
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English has two classes of modal deference expressions which may be superordinate to performative verbs: one asks permission from the addressee to perform the act; the other expresses the speaker’s frame of mind in performing the illocutionary act. These occur with performative verbs in certain restricted ways because of their associated senses and presuppositions, but they have no illocutionary force of their own. Thus an utterance cannot constitute an intended illocutionary act if there is a conflict in the speaker’s pragmatic presupposition between the addressee-authority and the speaker-authority.*

Verbs representing the illocutionary force of a sentence are sometimes embedded in modal constructions whose function is auxiliary to the central illocutionary act. Examples are:

(1) a. May I SUGGEST that you run for the presidency this time?
    b. Let me POINT OUT that John made a mistake in not attending the meeting.

(2) a. I must WARN you that, unless you leave the country immediately, you will lose your travel grant.
    b. I regret that I must INFORM you that you are DISMISSED.

An important factor in determining different sentential types of the same illocutionary force is the deference condition in speech acts. In verbal interaction, people mobilize direct or indirect, implicit or explicit expressions which show different degrees and shades of deference to or consideration of the other party. A request is made indirectly by asking about the addressee’s willingness—or inferentially, by describing a situation which calls for some action. In this way, the speaker tries to avoid a possible impression of imposition or confrontation in an otherwise happy situation of communication. This paper is an attempt to answer certain questions raised by Gordon & Lakoff 1971 regarding such ‘embedded performatives’.

1. Modal constructions such as May I ... and Let me ... are frequently used in asking permission from an addressee who is supposed to have the relevant authority. Thus 3 must have an underlying representation similar to 4:

(3) May I leave?
(4) I REQUEST you to TELL me whether you PERMIT me to leave or not ...

The response must be either Yes or No. The basic force of the sentence with the non-performative verb leave is that of asking permission. On the other hand, when the same construction is used with an embedded performative verb, the situation

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changes: the central force of the utterance is expressed by the embedded performatives, as in 1a, and the modal auxiliary May I ... simply functions as a sign of deference. Thus a response to this type of utterance is most likely to be directly concerned with the embedded performatives: the response to May I congratulate you on your victory is likely to be Thank you rather than Yes or No. Even if the answer to 1a is No, it rejects the already suggested propositional content (e.g., it means 'I won't run for the presidency') rather than refusing permission to suggest. Even in reporting utterance 1a, one would say He suggested that ..., He pointed out that ..., but not He asked for Permission to suggest (or point out) ... Therefore, while the embedded suggest has illocutionary force, the structure of I ask you to tell me whether you permit me does not have such force, and obligatorily undergoes transformations giving the output May I.

What is important here is that, even though this May I does not have illocutionary force, the speaker is supposed to have all the pragmatic presuppositions relevant to the illocutionary act of asking for permission, including the addressee's authority to permit. This modal construction shows deference precisely by denying the option of permission to the addressee. If this construction is followed by an embedded performative which pragmatically presupposes the authority of the speaker himself, a conflict arises in the speaker's pragmatic presupposition between the addressee-authority and the speaker-authority; consequently the utterance cannot constitute the intended illocutionary act. E.g.,

(5) a. May I convict you of robbery? (not a conviction)
   b. May I accuse you of treating Mother badly? (not an accusation)
   c. May I sentence you to death? (not a sentence)

Examples of performatives assuming the agent-authority are verdictives (in the usage of Austin 1962) such as acquit, convict, find etc. (mostly judicial), or exhortatives such as sentence, accuse, pronounce (man and wife), excommunicate, adjourn etc. (institutional). These are not compatible with May I ... or Let me ... An illocutionary act with no explicit performative verb, e.g. an umpire's You're out, would not be used with May I (cf. May I declare you that you are out? or May I call you out? vs. May I tell you that I love you?), since the umpire's declarative act assumes the speaker's authority. In the case of accusation, the accuser is presumed to have at least moral authority. Thus a son might say to his father:

(6) I accuse you of treating Mother badly (cf. 5b).

The aim of this explicit performative of accusation is to make the father feel at least morally guilty, though it does not impose legal jeopardy.

2. We can see that deference expression and imposition do not go together very happily. Another class of verbs which resist being embedded in deference constructions like May I ... or Let me ... comprises order-type imperatives such as order, command, permit, forbid, tell etc.; e.g.,

(7) a. May I order you to leave? (not an order)
   b. May I tell you to raise your hand? (not telling)
   c. May I permit you to join the party? (not a permission)

3. We have seen two main classes of modal deference expressions used with performative verbs: one asks permission from the addressee (addressee-oriented); the other expresses the speaker's frame of mind (urge, necessity, favor) in performing the act concerned (speaker-oriented). The speaker's own internal feeling is not something to ask the addressee about; hence constructions of the latter type use a

c'. Would you permit me to permit you to join the party?¹ (not a permission)

These are impossible performative usages, because the speaker assumes the hearer to have the option of permitting, which conflicts with the speaker's own authority to order. Consider the relationship between the following:

(8) a. You may not leave.
   b. You must stay.
   c. I order you to stay.

These examples show why the performative verb permit must be included in the category of order-type imperatives in terms of authority, and why Leech's 1970 subcategorization of authority into AUT 1 for permission verbs and AUT 2 for obligation verbs is simply unmotivated. Authority is a single entity. It is not the case that one needs a weaker authority for giving permission and a stronger authority for imposing obligation. On the other hand, suggestion-type imperatives like suggest, warn, advise, propose etc. do not have the pragmatic presupposition of agent-authority; thus they can be used with the deference constructions. The performative which presuppose agent-authority can be called AUTHORITATIVE. Now let us turn to another class of verbs which resist May I ... or Let me ... constructions. Consider the following examples:

(9) a. May I promise to marry you? (not a promise)
   b. May I bet a nickel that you won't find the book? (not a bet)
   c. May I swear that she won't come? (not an oath)

This class of verbs belongs to Austin's commissives, which 'commit the speaker to a certain course of action'. Since they express the speaker's definite internal commitment (self-imposition), it is reasonable that the illocutionary agent (the speaker) would not be likely to allow for the addressee's option of permission. Normally, the agent assumes the addressee's interest or involvement in the agent's commissive act. In a non-performative sense, the above verbs can be used with May I ... :

(10) a. May I promise Mary to marry her?
   b. May I bet £100 that you won't find the book? (asking about the amount, or asking whether the addressee is going to accept the bet)

But behabitives such as congratulate and apologize, which are for inherently deferential acts, go well with the deference constructions.

¹ If one takes the interpretive position of observing the surface distribution of the subject of may, as in Jenkins 1972, one cannot significantly generalize or relate the impossibility of 7e and 7c. In May I please ... please is possible because the speaker is requesting the addressee to permit the speaker to do something, as in 'Would you please permit me to ...'. Even in this sense, Heffernan 1972 is not correct in treating the act of granting permission as a assertion type of illocution.
declarative sentential pattern, with the speaker as subject as in 2a–b. Even though auxiliary constructions which derive from higher predicates, above the performative predicate, have no illocutionary force as such, they can occur with performative verbs in certain restricted ways, because of their associated senses and pragmatic presuppositions. No explicit formalization of these conceptually describable facts is proposed here; but whatever formalism may ultimately prove adequate, it must incorporate a formal constraint to the effect stated above. In the speaker’s pragmatic presuppositional structure, there is a non-symmetry constraint on authority: [AU (x, y) and AU (y, x)] is impossible.

REFERENCES

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2 In the pragmatic structure, which governs the higher predicates above the performative predicate, there must be a predicate similar to prefer (x, y); this is related to the fossilization of May 1... constructions etc., which are superordinate to performative predicates.