



Re: the rhetoric

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Abstract

We claim that a notion of rhetic acts can fulfil a useful function in speech act theory. Austin's examples of rhetic acts are saying that something is so and so, telling someone to do something, and asking whether something is so or so. Though this certainly sounds as if he is talking about the illocutionary acts of asserting, giving directions, and asking questions, we explain why the acts Austin mentions are not illocutionary after all. In short, illocutionary acts are acts that commit the participants in a conversation to various things. The illocutionary force of an utterance is determined by what it commits the interlocutors to. Our suggestion is that what looks like illocutionary force in the cases mentioned by Austin is really the contributions grammatical moods make to the literal meaning of utterances. We argue that this contribution is not part of what characterizes illocutionary acts as such. The semantic contribution of mood already characterizes those speech acts that Austin uses to exemplify rhetic acts. These rhetic acts are not committing in the way that illocutionary acts essentially are. So there must be a sense in which such rhetic acts are not illocutionary ones. In the final section, we suggest that the varieties of rhetic acts indicated by Austin fit neatly into a standard linguistic theoretical framework of conversational scoreboards.

Keywords Speech acts · Locutionary · Austin · Conversational scoreboard

1 Presenting the problem

1.1 Austin and Searle on rhetic acts

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin distinguishes between three broad classes of kinds of things you do with words: when you speak, typically, your utterance

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can be described both as a locutionary act and as an illocutionary act, and, often, as a perlocutionary one as well. The locutionary act, in its turn, can be described in phonetic, phatic, and rhetic terms, concerning the sounds, the language, and the meaning of what is said, respectively (Austin, 1962, lecture VIII). Specifically, performing a rhetic act is producing sounds *as* signs having a certain meaning in a certain language.

The phonetic act is merely the act of uttering certain noises. The phatic act is the uttering of certain vocables or words, i.e. noises of certain types, belonging to and as belonging to, a certain vocabulary, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar. The rhetic act is the performance of an act of using those vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference. Thus ‘He said “The cat is on the mat”’, reports a phatic act, whereas

‘He said that the cat was on the mat’ reports a rhetic act. A similar contrast is illustrated by the pairs:

‘He said “I shall be there”’, ‘He said he would be there’;

‘He said “Get out”’, ‘He told me to get out’;

‘He said “Is it in Oxford or Cambridge?”’, ‘He asked whether it was in Oxford or Cambridge’.

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[...] the rhetic act is the one we report, in the case of assertions, by saying ‘he said that the cat was on the mat’, ‘He said he would go’, ‘He said I was to go’ (his words were ‘You are to go’).¹ (Austin, 1962, p. 95f.)

Searle is arguably the most influential name in putting speech act theory on a more systematic basis than where Austin left it. He, however, found the notion of locutionary acts ‘very unhelpful’ (Searle, 1968, p. 405). Instead, he followed Hare (1963, Section 2.1), in taking up the Fregean distinction between the propositional content and the force of a sentence, arguing that, when you speak, you perform both a couple of propositional acts and an illocutionary act (Searle, 1968, p. 405). The propositional acts, viz. referring and predicating, together produce the propositional content of the total speech act and the illocutionary act produces its illocutionary force.

So, Searle ditches the notion of locutionary—or, more specifically, rhetic—acts altogether.² According to him there is no principled way of distinguishing between a rhetic locutionary act of saying something with, in Austin’s words, ‘a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference’ (Austin, 1962, p. 95) and the illocutionary act performed in saying this something. Searle concludes that ‘there is no way to abstract a rhetic act in the utterance of a complete sentence which does not abstract an illocutionary act as well, for a rhetic act is always an illocutionary act of one kind or another’ (Searle, 1968, p. 413).

Why is that? It’s because

no sentence is completely force-neutral. Every sentence has some illocutionary force potential, if only of a very broad kind, built into its meaning. For

¹ The parenthetical remark that concludes the quotation is meant by Austin to contrast the rhetic act of saying that someone is to go with the phatic act of saying ‘You are to go’.

² Phonetic and phatic acts are certainly acknowledged by Searle. See Searle (1968), p. 414, and Searle (1969), p. 24 (where he calls them ‘utterance acts’).

example, even the most primitive of the old-fashioned grammatical categories of declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences already contain determinants of illocutionary force. For this reason there is no specification of a locutionary act performed in the utterance of a complete sentence which will not determine the specification of an illocutionary act.

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Since a rhetic act involves the utterance of a sentence with a certain meaning and the sentence invariably as part of its meaning contains some indicator of illocutionary force, no utterance of a sentence with its meaning is completely force-neutral. Every serious literal utterance contains some indicators of force as part of meaning, which is to say that every rhetic act is an illocutionary act. (Searle, 1968, p. 412f.)

In effect, since complete sentences, at the very least, wear their grammatical mood on their sleeves,³ they always indicate *some* illocutionary force, if a very unspecific one, as part of their *literal* meaning, viz. the unspecified assertive force corresponding to the declarative mood, the unspecified directive force corresponding to the imperative mood, or the more specific directive force (the tell-me-whether force) corresponding to the interrogative mood.

Besides, (Searle, 1968, p. 418) remarks, a sentence can be quite specific about the illocutionary force it indicates as part of its literal meaning. And this would mess up the rhetic/illocutionary distinction, since, according to Austin, meaning (including literal meaning) is just what is conveyed by rhetic acts. Utterances of sentences like ‘I assure you that the cat is on the mat’, ‘I don’t want to see that cat again, and that’s an order!’, ‘We have to conclude that the cat is both dead and alive’, will typically be performances of *assuring* one’s addressee that the cat is indeed on the mat, of *ordering* them never to let one see the cat in question again, and of *drawing the conclusion* that a certain cat is both dead and alive. So these so-called ‘explicit performatives’ also present a problem to a principled distinction between rhetic and illocutionary acts.

Of course, Searle would not deny that a given utterance of, say, ‘The cat is on the mat’ can, in its context, be an act of answering a question as to the whereabouts of the cat. Or it can be an implicit urging the addressee to remove the cat from the Persian rug where it’s sitting, before it’s done something awful on it. Or it can be a case of an illusionist’s announcing to their Las Vegas audience the outcome of a glamorous conjuring trick involving the uncanny transference of a tiger from its cage onto the mat. An utterance of this sentence could conceivably have any kind of fancy illocutionary force, depending heavily on the context.

However, it will in any and all of these cases, in virtue of its literal meaning, still be a kind of statement or assertion: to understand its literal meaning is to understand it as presenting its propositional content (that a certain cat is on a certain mat) *with* assertive illocutionary force.

In its actual circumstances, it is apt to be some more specific kind of ‘assertive’—such as an answer or an affirmation etc. Or it is an ‘indirect speech act’.

³ Anyway, this seems to be true of English and the handful of other languages that we, the authors, are more or less poorly acquainted with.

Evidently, Searle's notion of indirect speech acts (Searle, 1979b) presupposes that when an utterance of the sentence 'The cat is on the mat' performs some non-assertive kind of illocutionary act—such as urging someone to remove the cat from the carpet (or put it down there and see to it that it stays put), expressing an utter horror at learning what the cat is at, or seeking confirmation that the cat is still there—, it does so indirectly, via directly performing an assertive illocutionary act.

Searle's conclusion is that this shows that Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts is confused, and that there is no principled distinction between the rhetic locutionary act and the illocutionary.

1.2 Thou and others on rhetic acts

However, we think that Searle is mistaken and that there is room and need for a concept of 'rhetic acts', of at least the kinds mentioned by Austin (1962) above: saying that something is a certain way, telling someone to do something, and asking someone whether it is one way or the other. These are the only kinds of rhetic acts that Austin mentions, but this list may not be exhaustive. Indeed, we think it obvious that yes-no-questions and other so called wh-questions, i.e. *asking what/when/where/which/who/why/how*, should be added, and there may well be others,⁴

Of course, many philosophers, from the 1970s on, have disputed Searle's argument—see e.g. Thau (1972), Bird (1981), Hornsby (1988), and Recanati (2013)—, or otherwise defended or advocated some distinction between rhetic and illocutionary acts—to the above-mentioned we can add Bach and Harnish (1979), Strawson (1973), Alston (2000), Witek (2015), and Moltmann (2017).

We concur generally with the objections we have seen to Searle's argument against the concept of rhetic acts, but we think we have something to say about how to do things with rhetic acts.

The respective notions of a rhetic act that the above-mentioned authors sketch or develop are quite diverse. Some of them (like Thau's and Alston's) we have some issues with, though for very different reasons. Some of them (like Strawson's and Recanati's) we feel more comfortable with. Some of them (like Moltmann's) are developed for a sufficiently different purpose from ours for them to be different without being in conflict with our notion of a rhetic act.

Presumably, like ours, their accounts of the rhetic are intended as explications (in a Carnapian sense) of Austin's inexact and intuitively introduced notion. Their distinct concepts of rhetic acts are intended to be more exactly defined or characterized while they still capture and preserve enough of the central aspects of Austin's idea to merit the name of 'rhetic'.

The purpose of introducing these explicated concepts need not always be exegetical at all. Thus, in Moltmann (2017) we have an example of an author developing a notion of rhetic acts geared to a specific speech act theoretical need. Moltmann identifies a use for a rhetic level of analysis in formal semantics, viz. to account better for certain aspects of the semantics of (direct) quotation.

⁴ A possible candidate might be the optative *wishing-that* as in 'Oh, that I had wings like a dove' (KJV Ps. 55:6). And we don't want to exclude the possibility that there may be language specific rhetic acts.

Her explication is motivated by the theoretical fruitfulness of the resulting concept and also by empirical observations of English and German noun phrases that seem to target (products of) rhetic acts in just her sense.⁵

Moltmann's notion of rhetic acts is not the same as ours. (For instance, we don't know that someone's asking whether it was in Oxford or in Cambridge or someone's telling me to leave would count as rhetic acts in her sense.) But, as far as we can tell, there are no glaring incompatibilities between the notion of rhetic acts needed for the general formal semantics she develops and what we shall have to say about 'rhetic acts' in our, less formally constrained, sense.

Thau (1972), on the other hand, *is* concerned with defending Austin's concept of rhetic acts from Searle's (1968, p. 414) objections to it. Being one of the first and perhaps best known explications of rhetic acts, we will consider it in a little more detail and then contrast it to our own notion.

In effect, Thau holds that illocutionary *force* pertains to *rhetic* acts (as he understands rhetic acts) rather than to illocutionary ones. According to Thau, successfully performing a rhetic act *is* performing an act with some given illocutionary *force*. This is not yet performing an illocutionary *act*, though, since (at least some kinds of) illocutionary acts may misfire due to reasons beyond the speaker's control, and then the rhetic act (with its illocutionary *force*) may be performed even though the attempted illocutionary *act* is not successfully realized. And so rhetic acts must be something apart from illocutionary ones. (Thau, 1972, p. 181f.)

As Thau explicates the notion of a rhetic act, you perform a rhetic act if and only if What You Say Is What You Mean, i.e. iff your subjective speaker meaning (i.e., what you meant to be saying) coincides with the utterance meaning of what you say (as determined compositionally from the lexical meanings of the words you use together with contextual clues constraining the reasonable interpretation of the utterance)—iff, as Thau puts it, the sentence you utter, in the context of utterance, 'appropriately manifests' what you subjectively meant by it (Thau, 1972, p. 181) i.e., iff your words (in context) makes what you mean by them clear.

But making clear what you mean in saying something includes making clear what illocutionary act you mean to perform in saying what you say. And, as Thau explicates the notion of illocutionary *force*, an utterance has a given illocutionary force, iff the speaker makes it clear to their audience that they mean to perform a corresponding illocutionary *act*. So-making it clear, in uttering something, what you mean by uttering it, *is* saying something with an illocutionary force, according to Thau (1972).

Often this will suffice for performing the corresponding illocutionary act, but sometimes the felicity conditions for a specific kind of illocutionary act go beyond this, and in those cases (if you accept Thau's explications of the relevant concepts) it would be possible to perform a rhetic act (with its illocutionary force) and still fail to perform the corresponding illocutionary act.⁶

⁵ The level of semantic description she identifies here undoubtedly deserves the label 'rhetic': it targets a force-neutral semantically interpretable level of language 'below' the level of illocutionary speech acts; what else would you call it?

⁶ Thau's only examples are of the kind that Austin (1962) uses to illustrate his early conception of a *performative*: 'I name this ship the *Joseph Stalin*' and 'I appoint you Justice of the Supreme Court'. Uttering these sentences, it can be quite clear that you mean what you say as the naming of a certain ship

We will not follow Thau in this. We hope to show that there are good reasons to count saying-that, telling-to, and asking-whether as rhetic acts in contradistinction to illocutionary ones.

1.3 Illustrations of rhetic acts without illocutionary acts

Suppose someone, in the course of a typical, standard, everyday conversation, says ‘He’ll be there’. And suppose that it’s clear to all interlocutors what person, place, and time the speaker refers to: Professor Plum, in the library, at tea time. Obviously then, the speaker has said that Professor Plum will be in the library at tea time. This is evidently more than merely putting forward the proposition that Prof. Plum will be in the library at tea time; but it does *not* always amount to an assertion that the professor will be there then.

It may well be that you cannot warn someone that he will be there, predict that he will, or promise to see to it that he is, without simultaneously asserting that he will be there. But, in saying that Prof. Plum will be in the library at tea time, you *can* guess that he will be there at that time, express a hope that he will, or agree to assume for the sake of argument that he will be there, all without thereby in any way asserting that he will be there. In so doing, you will still be saying that Prof. Plum will be in the library at tea time—but without asserting it. So saying-that, in the relevant sense, can’t be a matter of performing an act with the illocutionary force of any kind of assertion.

Examples to the same effect can be construed with acts of telling-to and asking-whether. ‘Win \$100,000 to Help You Live Your Dreams’, a lottery ad tells you; but it would be wrong to hold that the advertiser is thereby issuing you any kind of directive that you win their lottery. They are not giving you the advice that you win, ordering you to win, proposing that you win, nor performing any act with a directive force. For it’s not the case that you don’t comply with the ad, unless you do win. But in *some* sense what they were telling you in the ad still was to win \$100,000.

Old style Chinese novels (such as *Three Kingdoms*, *The Journey to the West*, and *Water Margins*) end each chapter with a cliffhanger and a question: ‘Will Jiang Wei kill Wei Yan? Read on!’. The ‘Read on!’ certainly is a bona fide directive; but the preceding question neither has a directive force asking you to inform the author about the fate of Wei Yan, nor is it an expression of the author’s attitude of wondering whether Jiang Wei will kill Wei Yan or not. Still in *some* sense the author asks whether Jiang Wei will kill Wei Yan.

Footnote 6 continued

or the appointment of a certain person to the office, without actually succeeding in naming it or appointing them, due to conditions beyond the speaker’s control: the speaker may not be entitled to name the ship, the addressee may not have been approved by Congress, etc. (Thau, 1972, p. 178). Our own position is that Austin was misguided in giving up this early conception of performatives, and that the theoretical apparatus of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts does not suffice for an account of speech acts such as these. In this we follow the—as understandably as regrettably—obscure work of Wetterström (1977), where a precise account of what makes performatives in this sense something else than utterances with a special illocutionary force is argued for in considerable detail.

Prima facie, then, there is a level of speech acts above that of producing sentences grammatically acceptable in a given language and below that of performing a full-fledged illocutionary act. And, prima facie, speech acts on that level can be intuitively reported in English using locutions such as ‘She says that she loves me’, ‘He told me to phone him later’, and ‘They asked whether happiness is a warm puppy’. So, prima facie, there are speech acts with just the characteristics that Austin attributes to ‘rhetic’ acts.

To be sure, there are several ways to deal with examples like this in the literature. But they generally seem to have this in common that they consider utterances such as these to have some illocutionary force even though they are not used to perform any specific illocutionary act ‘normally’ or conventionally associated with that force.

Thau’s distinction between rhetic acts (the acts having illocutionary force) and illocutionary acts is one early example of this. The notion of force cancellation (see e.g. Recanati, 2016; Hanks, 2016) is another.

However, we find these accounts problematic for reasons that have everything to do with the phenomenon that Hare (1970) analyses in terms of what he calls a ‘neustic’. This is an aspect of utterances that is essential to speech act theory and that relates very differently to illocutionary and rhetic acts.

In what follows, we argue that an utterance can’t have any illocutionary force at all without such a neustic—or, as we will put it, unless the speaker ‘engages the utterance in serious speech’. And therefore, only engaged utterances can be instances of illocutionary acts. However, we also argue that the force of an illocutionary act is constrained in part by the semantic content of the rhetic act, including whether it is an instance of saying-that, telling-to, or asking-whether.

2 Developing the distinction

2.1 Further elucidation of the rhetic/illocutionary distinction

Let’s look again at the only kinds of rhetic acts mentioned by Austin. They are saying-that, telling-to, and asking-whether. The correspondence of these three to the grammatical moods of English is pretty obvious and, we think, not at all coincidental: uttering a declarative sentence is saying that something is so and so; uttering an imperative sentence is telling someone to do something; uttering an interrogative sentence is asking about something.

Austin’s examples of rhetic acts really seem to us to be acts of meaning something by a sentence with a certain grammatical mood. Such moods are arguably not merely relevant to describing the phatic act; we would say that grammatical mood contributes to the literal meaning, the ‘sense’ of the utterance.

It’s pretty clear that a rhetic act is not just the enunciation of some moodless propositional content (such as can be expressed by a that-clause), since that content wouldn’t differentiate between e.g. saying that it was in Oxford or in Cambridge, on the one hand, and asking whether it was in Oxford or in Cambridge, on the other.

We think theorists generally agree with us here, whether or not they accept rhetic acts as a separate speech act theoretical category. Searle, e.g., holds that what Austin

calls ‘rhetic acts’ should really be analysed as the utterance of sentences with not only a propositional content but also with an illocutionary force.

We, on our part, wouldn’t want to say that the grammatical moods correspond to illocutionary forces (not even the most general ones), but we really have no objection to describing the different rhetic acts, e.g., as the putting forward propositions in different ways.⁷

What then is the difference between the rhetic acts of saying-that, telling-to, or asking-whether and illocutionary acts such as asserting something, giving someone directions, and asking someone a question?—or, for that matter, between the three rhetic acts mentioned and the illocutionary acts of guessing, suggesting, predicting, advising, asking a favour, urging, interrogating, questioning, and asking permission?

The difference may be easily overlooked, if your paradigmatic illocutionary acts are assertoric, directive, and interrogative acts *in a generic sense*. These would all have rhetic counterparts of sorts in saying that, telling to, and asking whether, respectively. But the more specific illocutionary acts don’t. Predicting and reporting may both be species of assertoric acts, but there is no distinguishing them at the rhetic level.⁸

In performing the rhetic act of saying that you will be there at three sharp you may perform the illocutionary act of promising, or declaring your intention, or predicting, or estimating the time of your arrival, or answering a question, or one or more of an indefinite number of other acts. Let us grant that all of these are species of the general kind of assertoric illocutionary acts. Which *specific* kind of assertoric illocutionary act you perform in performing the rhetic act depends on the function or role of the utterance in a particular ongoing discourse. Perhaps one can’t even make a mere assertion in the sense of performing an illocutionary act that’s just an assertoric act in general, without being any one of the more specific kinds of assertoric act. Likewise, it would seem that you can’t perform a ‘directive’ act (in Searle’s (1979a) sense) that just has a directive force in general without having some more specific kind of directive force, i.e. one that is neither a request nor an order nor a piece of advice but just in no particular way tells someone to do something.

The rhetic act that goes with any performance of such specific illocutionary acts, on the contrary, typically *doesn’t* discriminate between all of these functions or roles that determine the illocutionary force of the utterance. In uttering ‘I will be there at three sharp’, you will never have performed a more specific rhetic act than saying that you will be a certain place at three o’clock sharp a certain day, regardless of whether your utterance has the force of a promise or of a prediction or whatever. In uttering ‘Get out’, you will never have performed a more specific rhetic act than telling a certain person to get out of a certain place, regardless of whether your utterance has the force of an order, an advice, or a warning etc.

⁷ Though some ways of performing some rhetic acts may lack both grammatical mood and propositional content—like saying hi by saying ‘Hiya!’ or saying sorry by saying ‘Sorry...’.

⁸ This might suggest that the mentioned rhetic acts (saying-that, telling-to, and asking-whether) simply are the most general kinds of one category of illocutionary acts each (assertoric, directive, and interrogative). Some reason to think otherwise is suggested by the examples given above (Prof. Plum; Win \$100,000; Chinese cliffhangers ...) illustrating the distinction between rhetic and illocutionary acts.

True, you can of course say things like ‘I promise that I’ll be there’ and ‘I beg you to get out of there’,⁹ and that will constrain the possible illocutionary force of the utterance to that of a promise and a begging someone to do something, respectively. But the rhetic acts performed by uttering those sentences are not acts of *making a promise* and of *begging someone* to get out; they are not even acts of *asserting* that you are promising or begging; they are acts of *saying that* you promise and *saying that* you beg them to get out, and the illocutionary acts performed are those of promising to be there and begging them to leave.

Possibly, in the case of the promise, you also assert that you will be there. But then again, that does not depend on any use of an ‘explicit performative’. For even if the wording of your promise were just ‘I’ll be there’, it is perfectly possible that you perform both the act of promising and the illocutionary act of asserting that you will be there. Though in this case the rhetic act you perform is that of saying that you will be there, rather than that of saying that you promise to be there.

2.2 The neustic

It takes something more than saying so to make it so. In saying that p you won’t be drawing the conclusion that p , or promising to p , or put p forward for consideration, or warning someone that p etc., unless what you say plays the specific role of a conclusion, or promise, or warning etc. in the current discourse (a conversation or a monologue or whatever). Again, in telling someone to p you won’t be ordering them to p , or warning them to p , or advising them to p , or allowing them to p etc., unless what you say plays the specific role of an order or warning or advise etc. in the current discourse.

And this is where Hare’s concept of *neustic* comes into play. Or at least something rather similar to that concept.

Hare (1970) distinguishes between (i) the phrastic of an utterance (corresponding to its propositional content), (ii) the tropic of the utterance (i.e. the sign of its grammatical mood), and (iii) the neustic of the utterance. The neustic is said to be a ‘sign of subscription’, that a sentence has by default, and that shows that the speaker actually subscribes or commits themselves to the illocutionary speech act conventionally performed by uttering sentences with a certain tropic operating on a certain phrastic. (Hare, 1970, p. 21f.)

As presented in Hare (1970), the presence of a neustic would mean the following. In the case of an utterance with a declarative tropic, it would mean that the speaker really asserts what they say. In the case of an utterance with an imperative tropic, it would mean that they really mean the addressee to do what they tell them to. And in the case of an utterance with an interrogative tropic, it would mean that they really mean the addressee to choose between the alternative answers to a question.

On this model any particular utterance of a complete sentence has a certain propositional content expressed with a certain illocutionary force: ‘Jack hits the road’, ‘Has Jack hit the road?’, and ‘Hit the road, Jack!’, all have the same phrastic (viz. ‘Jack’s

⁹ I.e., what Austin (1962) calls ‘explicit performatives’.

hitting the road’ or ‘that Jack hits the road’) but differ in their tropic, i.e. the illocutionary force that uttering a sentence with a given grammatical mood conventionally would have—*if* subscribed to (i.e. in the presence of a neustic).

Typically, when a speaker says that someone called ‘Jack’ has hit the road, they assert or inform etc. their addressee about Jack; when they ask whether Jack has hit the road, they are asking someone a question about him; when they tell Jack to hit the road, they are ordering him away. But though this is so in all typical cases, it is not *always* so. Indeed, in this particular case, by far the most utterances of the sentence ‘Hit the road, Jack!’ have *not* been instances of people ordering someone called ‘Jack’ to hit the road—they were just singing the lyrics to a tune. In Hare’s terms, the Raelettes’ (and other singers’) utterances of the sentences *lack a neustic*. And therefore they do not put anyone called Jack under any kind of obligation to hit the road, do not subscribe to any interest on their part of Jack’s hitting the road, do not commit themselves to want Jack to hit the road, need not take any responsibility for the appropriateness of Jack’s hitting the road, or whatever commitments or responsibilities you subscribe to when ordering people about.

2.3 From neustics to engaged utterances

There are details to the theory Hare sketches here that we don’t agree with.

The distinction we would like to make between rhetic and illocutionary acts implies that illocutionary force (in *our*—and perhaps Austin’s) sense only pertains to utterances ‘with a neustic’. So, we can’t keep the phrastic/tropic analysis quite as is. A rhetic act expresses a propositional (or similar) content, but it also has a rhetic ‘force’ or ‘mood’ or ‘way of expressing a proposition’ that, we think, should be kept distinct from the force of the illocutionary act.

Further, in Hare’s scheme, uttering a sentence along with a neustic pertaining to it, would amount to performing an illocutionary act of asserting something, directing someone to a course of action, or asking someone a question (according as the tropic has it). We are not convinced that it necessarily will. Even when you perform an illocutionary act in performing a rhetic one, the declarative, imperative, or interrogative mood of the sentence need not correspond to an assertive, directive, or interrogative illocutionary force of the speech act.¹⁰

Lastly, Hare seems to think of a neustic, i.e. an ‘expressed or understood’ sign of subscription (Hare, 1970, p. 21) as literally a *part* of the sentence uttered when performing an illocutionary act. Hare’s phrastics are equivalent to Searle’s propositional content indicating devices; his tropics to Searle’s illocutionary force indicating devices; and, with the neustic, he adds, as it were, a subscription indicating device to the utterance. Hare’s neustic is like an expressed or understood addition of an ‘and I mean it’, to what you just said.

The general idea behind the notion of neustics is sound, but the job that neustics are supposed to do are not done by what is said. In most situations, it is a social, conventional *fact about* the speech situation that speakers subscribe to what they say,

¹⁰ Again, compare the examples given for the theoretical need of a notion of rhetic acts: Prof. Plum, Win \$100,000, and the Chinese Cliffhanger.

that they commit themselves to things by saying what they say, that what they say comes with certain responsibilities. In some situations, it will be a fact about the speech act that they don't subscribe to it, don't commit themselves, and are not loaded with any responsibilities. But no part of what they say will in its own right create this fact. There will always be possible situations where adding 'and I mean it' to what you've just said won't mean that you mean it.¹¹

Essentially, Hare's way of speaking about sentences having or lacking a neustic is a way of modelling whether or not the speaker is to be taken as committed one way or another to what they say. We find it less misleading to express this same phenomenon in terms of a speaker's being *engaged in serious speech* (or not engaged in serious speech).

A speaker may perhaps to a certain extent opt out of serious speech for the occasion; but, in general, we think, whether a given speaker at a given occasion will be engaged in serious speech is less a matter of the speaker's choice or intentions than of the character of the current speech situation as a whole. It is certainly not something that is determined on a per sentence basis.

The question is probably 'Is this utterance taking place in a serious speech situation?' or 'Is there anything in this situation impeding its status as a serious speech situation?' rather than 'Is the speaker in the right mind set for their utterance to be a serious speech act?' A speaker may e.g. not be serious about what they say in a serious speech situation. But people would most likely consider that a breach against the conventions guiding linguistic communication, and the speaker in such a case may fairly be held responsible both for what they actually said and for the breach of convention.

2.4 Unengaged utterances and rhetic acts

Now, let's return to the distinction between rhetic and illocutionary acts.

We hold that being engaged in serious speech is a necessary condition for performing any illocutionary act but not for performing a rhetic act.

Let us say that an utterance is *engaged* if it is made in a serious speech situation and that it is *unengaged* if it is not made in a serious speech situation.

What kind of speech act is performed by an unengaged utterance?

There's certainly more to it than its mere propositional content. For even an unengaged utterance of the sentence 'The cat is on the mat' has a different sense than an unengaged utterance of 'Is the cat on the mat?' or 'Be on the mat, cat!' or 'O, that the cat were on the mat!'

Both Searle and Hare would say that utterances of those four sentences would have the same propositional content/phrastic but different illocutionary force /tropics.

But what *is* an illocutionary force (or tropic)?

¹¹ We have this point from Thomas Wetterström, who elaborated it in some detail in several places. See e.g. Wetterström (1986, pp. 75–78) (the footnote!).

It is common for speech act theorists to hold that the difference between distinct kinds of illocutionary acts (utterances with different illocutionary force) can be analysed in terms of what different kind of commitments the speaker makes in uttering something.¹²

We endorse an analysis of illocutionary force of this general kind. Such differences in commitment are at the very least an important and central part of what constitutes the differences between distinct kinds of illocutionary acts like asserting, assuming, concluding, guessing, ordering, requesting, advising, asking permission etc.

What illocutionary force an utterance is taken to have is to be analysed in terms of what the speaker—and, possibly, the addressee—are committed to in virtue of that utterance being made and reacted to in its given context.

What the interlocutors will be committed to generally relates intimately to the semantic content of the utterance. As the case may be, a speaker by making an utterance will be committed e.g. to regard what they said as for all practical purposes undeniably true or to assume the truth of what they said for the sake of argument or to regard what they said as probably true in the light of evidence already presented in the current discourse. Or, again as they case may be, they will be committed e.g. to their having the authority to decide that the addressee is to do what they are told to or to wanting the addressee to do what they told them to or to believing that the addressees would benefit from doing what they told them to—etc.

However, an *unengaged* utterance just is an utterance made in a speech situation where the speaker is *not* held responsible for what they say, i.e. where they do *not* by uttering a certain sentence commit themselves to any of the above things.

Still, as we have seen, there is a difference between the meaning of unengaged utterances with different grammatical moods—even when they have the same propositional content. That difference in meaning, then, can't be due to a difference in illocutionary force.¹³

Uttering sentences that differ in that respect will, in our parlance, amount to performing different kinds of rhetic acts. And one way to report what kind of rhetic act is performed is to say, with Austin, that someone said that or told someone to, or asked whether—and letting these expressions, in this context, denote rhetic rather than illocutionary acts.

2.5 Illustrations of the distinction between rhetic and illocutionary acts

Our point, then, is that you need to be engaged in serious speech to be committed to anything by saying anything, and thus to perform an illocutionary act—or, equivalently, your utterance has to be an instance of serious speech for it to have an illocutionary force. On the other hand, to perform a *rhetic* act it is *not* necessary to be engaged in serious speech.

¹² Veteran speech act theorist William P. Alston provides a good example of this with Alston (2000), where a speaker's taking responsibility for things being as said (or as implied or presupposed by what is said) is the central concept for a systematic account of illocutionary acts and sentence meaning.

¹³ Though it might well be described as a difference in illocutionary force potential, as in Witek (2015), p. 20, or as a difference in the way the proposition is 'expressed'.

An example might be your saying ‘Jack is such a moron!!!!’ over and over again venting some steam alone at home, because you’re currently *so* fed up with Jack—then you take a deep breath, go on with your day, and that’s the end of it. Such a course of action is quite non-committing, since there is no reasonable addressee. However, it is still true that you *said* that Jack is a moron, only you are not to be *held responsible* for asserting that he is.

Similarly, singing along to a song or reciting a poem may but need not commit you to the semantic content of the lyrics (or to anything else). But the words still have meaning; and it’s a meaning that go beyond mere propositional meaning. There is a sense (the rhetic one) in which ‘What shall we do with the drunken sailor?’ is a question, even though it is not put to anyone.

And, of course, stage acting relieves you from being personally committed to believing what you say, wanting what you tell other actors or the audience to do, or wondering what you ask on stage. Sir Laurence Olivier in his *Hamlet* film is not committed to wanting either Jean Simmons or Ophelia to get herself to a nunnery or to wondering whether to be or not to be, though literally he does tell Ophelia to get there and literally he does ask whether to be or not.

Now, stage acting is presumably a quite complicated phenomenon, but still it’s clear that Laurence Olivier is not to be taken as having contemplated suicide, even though he *does* ask (in the rhetic sense) whether ’tis nobler to suffer the outrages of fortune or to put an end to one’s life.

We think a case can be made for the view that the fictional character Hamlet, on the other hand, does ask himself (not only in the rhetic but also in the illocutionary sense) whether he should take his life or not. We shall briefly return to this in the next section of this paper.

So, even when you are not engaged in serious speech, even when you are *not* committed to any degree of belief (not even the zero degree) in what you say or to having (or lacking) any degree of evidence for the truth of what you say, your utterance may still be an act of saying that something is so and so—though *not* of actually asserting that it is.

Even when you are *not* committed to any degree of wanting someone to do what you tell them to do or to having any reason for them to do it, your utterance may still be an act of telling someone (or, indeed, no one in particular) to do this or that—though *not* of actually inducing anyone to do anything.

Even when you are *not* committed to wondering whether something is the case or of wanting to be told or to know whether it is or to believing or doubting that someone can tell you or knows the answer, you may still be asking whether something is so or not—though *not* of actually putting that question to anyone.

In this respect these speech acts contrast with most others. Most other speech acts bring some commitment or other along with them.

Though you *can* (in the right circumstances) say that something is so and so, without committing yourself to its being so and so, you *cannot* e.g. draw the conclusion that it is so and so, without committing yourself to its being so and so. Also you cannot assume for the sake of argument that something is so and so, without committing yourself to treating that proposition as if it were true in that line of argument. And

you cannot question the truth of a statement, without committing yourself to having reasons to doubt its truth.

Though you can tell (in the relevant sense) people to do this or that, without committing yourself to wanting anyone to do this or that (e.g. alone at home looking at some feature film on the telly, you can exasperatedly say things like ‘Don’t go into that room!’), without wanting either the actor or the character in the film to avoid the room), you *cannot* order anyone to do this or that, without committing yourself to their having duty to do it. And you cannot advise someone to do this or that, without committing yourself to the advisability of the addressee’s doing it. And you cannot warn anyone against doing something, without committing yourself to the inadvisability of the addressee’s doing it.

Though you can ask (in the relevant sense) whether something is so or so, without committing yourself to wondering which way it is, you cannot ask someone a question whether it is so or so, without committing yourself to listen to their answer. And you cannot conduct an interview without committing yourself to some degree of interest in the answers.

2.6 Rhetic acts constrain illocutionary acts

This suggests one function that the concept of a rhetic act fulfils in a theory of speech acts. The content of what you say needs to include a mood for you to be able to perform an illocutionary act in saying it.

Whenever you engage in serious speech, i.e. whenever you partake in a serious speech situation, and only then, what you say will commit you to things. An illocutionary act will be performed only in performing a locutionary act in a serious speech situation. Why does that locutionary act need to be a rhetic one?

Obviously, your locutionary act, i.e. what you say, helps constrain (together with contextual clues in the speech situation) what illocutionary act you perform in saying it. But the locutionary act does so in virtue of *both* its propositional (truth-conditional, referential) content *and* its mood. But to the extent that mood plays a role in constraining the interpretation of locutionary acts as performances of specific illocutionary acts, to that extent rhetic acts are needed. For the locutionary act of uttering a sentence as having a certain meaning-cum-mood in a certain language just *is* a rhetic act.

Illocutionary acts will regularly commit you to having certain mental attitudes towards some content. Performing an illocutionary act regularly commits you to believe something, or to want something, or to be wondering something. These attitudes come in varying flavours: sometimes you commit yourself to a high degree of conviction in your belief, sometimes to a much lower; sometimes to a high degree of preference to your desire, sometimes to a lower; sometimes to a high degree of frustration in not getting your curiosity stilled, sometimes to a much lower.

Now, what attitudes you commit yourself to (in a given serious speech situation) form an important part of the identity criteria for what illocutionary act you perform in performing the locutionary one. Asserting commits you to believing what you

assert; requesting commits you to wanting what you request; asking a genuine question commits you to wondering what the answer is to it.¹⁴

How does one tell, from the locutionary act, what illocutionary act is also therein performed? Granted that illocutionary acts are at least partly identified by what attitudes they commit the speaker to, the speaker's locutionary act needs to constrain (together with contextual clues in the speech situation) both what kind of attitude the speaker is committed to and what the object or content of that attitude is. i.e., the locutionary act needs to constrain both (i) whether the speaker commits themselves to believing something, or to wanting something, or to wondering something, or to intending something and (ii) what they believe, or want, or wonder, or intend.

We want to propose the obvious. The propositional (truth-conditional, referential) content of a sentence uttered will be a major constraint (together with contextual clues) on the object/content of attitude(s) the speaker commits themselves to by uttering that sentence in the context of a serious speech situation. But the mood of the sentence will likewise be a major constraint (again together with contextual clues) on what *kind* of attitude the speaker commits themselves to take towards that content.¹⁵ And, again, uttering a sentence as having a certain mood *is* performing a rhetic act.

2.7 Unengaged vs disengaged utterances

There is however a complication. It is somewhat tangential to the purpose of this paper (and important enough really to merit a paper of its own).

The complication is this. Even when you *are* engaged in serious discourse, an individual utterance—or, more generally, parts of what you say—may still be ‘disengaged’, as it were, rather than ‘unengaged’. i.e., one way or another addressees are supposed to understand that the speaker is not to be taken to be committed in the ‘ordinary’ way to the semantic content of (some of) what he explicitly says. This happens for instance in irony, rhetorical questions, and metaphor—as well as in certain cases of implicature.

These, we would say, are not examples of unengaged utterances. For the speaker is still (correctly) understood as performing an illocutionary act. The speaker is still to be understood as deliberately communicating, to an addressee, a certain message that they commit themselves to. It is just that this message does not correspond to what they explicitly say.

So, what is explicitly said is (we will say) ‘disengaged’, even though it is said in a context where the speaker *is* engaged in serious speech.

And it is the fact that the speaker is engaged in serious speech that will make the listener assume that the speaker means (and wants to be understood as meaning)

¹⁴ What kind of illocutionary act you are performing will also depend on factors other than the exact nature and extent of attitudes you make a commitment to. e.g., you can't draw a conclusion, unless the content of your utterance relates to things said earlier in the current discourse, so such relations will be essential to the illocutionary act of drawing a conclusion. And you can't give someone an order without having the relevant authority over them, so such social facts will be essential to the illocutionary acts.

¹⁵ By and large, we guess, declarative rhetic acts signal cognitive attitudes, imperative rhetic acts signal conative attitudes, normative rhetic acts signal affective attitudes, and interrogative rhetic acts signal indecision as to what attitude to take up.

something else than what they explicitly say, if it would be unreasonable to assume that they would commit themselves to what they explicitly say.

For instance, when Leibniz says that the monads have no windows, he is not to be taken as asserting that they lack the architectural feature of fenestration (though that would be true!), even though he *does say* that they lack it. But since he writes this in a context that makes it clear that he is engaged in serious discourse, there must be something else that he means to communicate his commitment to.

The semantic content of his illocutionary act (that monads do not interact), to which he will and should be held committed, is not the semantic content of his rhetic act (that monads are windowless), to which he is obviously not committed.

Both unengaged and disengaged utterances (together with the force of embedded sentences) are phenomena that Hanks (2016) and Recanati (2016) have discussed under the heading of ‘force cancellation’. They account for these phenomena by treating the illocutionary force (conceived as something very much like Harean tropics) as being cancelled in certain contexts. We think that those cases are essentially different, and that no illocutionary force is really cancelled in any of these cases.

Our position on this question can be sketched as follows. Embedded sentences have rhetic moods but no illocutionary force (qua embedded). Unengaged utterances are not used to perform any illocutionary act at all (and so won’t have illocutionary force in our sense—though if the utterance is a rhetic, it will have a rhetic mood). Disengaged utterances are not used to perform the illocutionary acts that they might (or would) be used to perform, had those utterances been engaged, but they are used to perform an indirect or implicated or otherwise implicit illocutionary act, and that act will have an illocutionary force. But any details really are the subject of another paper.

3 Representing the rhetic

We have argued that there is a role for a notion of rhetic acts in speech act theory. A rhetic act is performed when your utterance is not just a matter of neutrally putting forward a proposition, but of putting it forward with what we might call a ‘rhetic mood’—as, e.g., a saying-that, a telling-to, or an asking-whether.¹⁶

We just used the neologism ‘rhetic mood’ to distinguish it from technical uses in linguistics and grammar. All our examples of rhetic acts have made use of complete sentences in English, but we mean the concept of rhetic mood to apply as well to utterances of strings of words that don’t constitute complete grammatically well-formed sentences in any language, as long as it is understandable in context that they fulfil the same kind of role that a complete sentence-cum-mood can fulfil.

As a matter of fact many locutionary acts actually performed in speech or writing are not utterances of complete grammatically well-formed sentences. Such utterances must still count as rhetic acts, even if their rhetic mood sometimes will be known only by contextual clues.

¹⁶ As we have admitted, in a comprehensive theory, one may have to acknowledge other moods beside these three.

An example would be the list of groceries made famous by Elizabeth Anscombe in § 32 of *Intention* (Anscombe, 1963, p. 56). The items on the list of the man out shopping have an imperative rhetic mood: they all implicitly tell him ‘Buy me’. The items on the list of the detective recording what the man is shopping have a declarative rhetic mood: they all implicitly say ‘He bought this’.

We also just made reference to the role that rhetic acts can fulfil (whether phatically realized as complete sentences or not). In the last section we sketched the role that rhetic acts play in constraining the possible interpretations of what illocutionary act is performed in and by performing a locutionary act in a serious speech situation.

Now, we want to briefly suggest that some variant of the family of formal semantics known as conversational scoreboards is a promising general way of representing the meaning-cum-mood of rhetic acts by formal means. This suggestion is not in any way original. Rather, we suggest it precisely because so much recent work on integrating speech act theoretical concepts into the formal framework of conversational scoreboards has already been done.¹⁷

The general idea behind conversational scoreboards is that when people engage in serious speech—i.e., when the speech situation is such that it commits the participants to various things as the discourse proceeds—, then we have to keep and continuously update a record of what has happened in the discourse so far and what we ourselves and the other participants in the discourse are committed to. This will include keeping a record of the ‘common ground’, i.e. propositions the truth of which is to be taken for granted in the current conversation. It will include keeping a record of questions that are to be resolved, i.e. a set of ‘questions under discussion’. And it will include keeping a record of what the interlocutors have agreed should be done and by whom, i.e. what is put upon each one’s ‘to-do list’.¹⁸

A rhetic act of saying-that (a rhetic declarative) is an utterance whose literal semantic content concerns the common ground. A rhetic act of telling-to (a rhetic imperative) is an utterance whose literal semantic content concerns a to-do list. A rhetic act of asking-whether (a rhetic interrogative) is an utterance whose literal semantic content concerns the questions under discussions.

A saying-that is a candidate for inclusion in the common ground. A telling-to is a candidate for addition to someone’s to-do list. An asking-whether is a candidate for a question to be resolved.

So, performing a rhetic act can be thought of as a conventional means of *presenting* a specific way to update a certain conversational record (the common ground, the question set, or a to-do list).

Performing a rhetic act in a serious speech situation, will be understood as *advocating* updating that record in that specific way.

Performing an illocutionary act consists in updating the relevant record in a way compatible with what is advocated by performing the rhetic act. Though this will often include more specific updates than the bare minimum demanded by the rhetic mood, in the way that e.g. specific assertoric acts, such as insisting on a point or making a

¹⁷ See e.g. Murray and Starr (2018), Roberts (2018) in Fogal (2018). The notion of a conversational scoreboard was first introduced in Lewis (1979).

¹⁸ See, for the common ground, the questions under discussion, and the to-do list respectively Stalnaker (2002), Ginzburg (2012, ch. 4), and Portner (2004).

guess, include more specific ways of being committed to the content of what you say than just plain believing it.

Performing the rhetic act is compatible with remaining neutral as to whether to update the relevant record in the explicitly formulated way.

Performing an illocutionary act, on the other hand, means accepting certain responsibilities that go with updating a certain conversational record in a certain way. In non-fictional discourse the common ground is supposed to match facts; the propositions in the common ground set are accepted as true. The questions under discussions are questions the discourse participants agree to try and resolve. The items on a to-do list are things that someone is expected by the participants to tick off.

Incidentally, and to round off the discussion, the above paragraph suggests a way to handle fictional discourse.

The common ground is just a set of propositions that we keep in mind for a purpose. In talking about the actual world the purpose is to keep track of what discourse participants agree that they know about the actual world. In talking about a fictional world, just the same kind of structure is used to keep track of what discourse participants agree to make-believe that they know.

4 Concluding comment

In conclusion: How well the above captures the distinction Austin actually intended—and to what extent his idea was a very precise one—is an exegetical question to which we do not have a satisfactory answer. However, we are confident that we have provided a reasonable and theoretically fruitful explication of the concept of a rhetic act, and of the demarcation between the locutionary and the illocutionary. In this paper we have used the explication to indicate interesting connections between types of speech acts, engagement in serious discourse, and scoreboard semantics.

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