

*Remark and Reply*

## STANDARDIZATION VS. CONVENTIONALIZATION

In 'Performatives are statements too' (Bach 1975), I argued that simple performative utterances are not as direct as they seem. Directly they are statements, as their indicative form would suggest, to the effect that one is performing an act of the sort named by the performative verb; only indirectly are they performances of an act of that sort. The two acts are interlinked: the statement can be true only if one is doing what one says one is doing, and one can be understood as doing that only on the presumption that one is making a true statement. In practice, however, performatives seem direct, because their form is standardized for performativity. That is, the hearer's inference from the uttered words to the speaker's performative intention is compressed by precedent.<sup>1</sup> Notice that on this "standardized indirection" account, no appeal is made to convention, for with standardization the role of precedent is more limited than it is with convention. Either way, a given form of words has a certain use that goes beyond literal meaning, but with standardization precedent serves not to make that use possible but merely to facilitate that use. The difference is important, as we will see.

Marga Reimer has forcefully challenged the standardized indirection account of performativity, and in its place proposes an ingenious new version of conventionalism. We will take up her objections and examine her proposal, but first we should mark off certain areas of common ground:

1. Performativity is a regularity of use that goes beyond literal meaning – performative verbs do not have "special" meanings when they occur in performative sentences.<sup>2</sup> The word 'promise', for example, does not

<sup>1</sup> Bach and Harnish (1979, chaps. 9 and 10) generalize the standardization thesis to a wide range of other cases besides simple performatives, including hedged and embedded performatives.

<sup>2</sup> The main forms of performative sentence are the first-person, present-tense 'I (hereby) V that S' and 'I (hereby) V (you) to A,' where 'V' is an illocutionary verb, such as 'request,' 'apologize,' 'promise,' and 'beg'. The first-person plural is possible when it is understood that the speaker is speaking for a certain group. There are two other forms, the passive 'You are V-ed to A' and the impersonal 'It is V-ed to A', which occur only with directive verbs, such as 'request', 'order' and 'forbid'.

have a special meaning when used to make a promise (if it did, it would be implausibly ambiguous).

2. The definitions of standardization and of convention, which Reimer borrows from Bach and Harnish (1979), are not in dispute.
3. Performative utterances, whether or not they have literal constative force, are at least truth-valuable. Thus, for example, an utterance of 'I order you to leave' can be true or false whether or not it is used to make a statement.<sup>3</sup> What is in dispute is whether it is so used when used performatively.

Reimer's critique of the standardized indirection account (she calls it the "indirect theory of performatives", or ITP), as well as her version of the conventionalist approach (CTP), rely on the contention that "performative sentences used performatively are not used constatively" (p. 656). ITP claims both that performative utterances are indirect speech acts and that performative sentences are standardized for the performance of such acts. That is, the use of a sentence of the form 'I V that S' is standardized for V-ing that S. Reimer claims that ITP requires that the hearer be in a position to engage in an inference process that takes him from a recognition of the speaker's constative act (of stating that he is V-ing that S) to a recognition of the speaker's non-constative act (of V-ing that S). She argues that the hearer is not in this position, hence that ITP is false.

I will argue that ITP does not require what Reimer says it requires, hence that even if it were true that the hearer is not in a position to make the above inference, her objection would be misdirected. But I will first argue that her contention is not true – the hearer is in a position to make the above inference. The reason is that this inference involves less than Reimer thinks it does. One of ITP's key points, after all, is that where there is standardization, the hearer's inference is compressed by precedent; one does not have to go through all the steps that would be required absent standardization. In particular, standardization eliminates the need to identify the constative force of a performative utterance in order to recognize its performative force. Even so, its performative force is achieved indirectly.

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<sup>3</sup> This is possible because even if the speaker is not performing the illocutionary act of stating that he orders the hearer to leave, he is at least performing the locutionary act of saying that. This distinction makes it unnecessary for Reimer later to consider the suggestion of developing a "richer conception" of constative illocutionary force (or force potential), which involves the idea of expressing a belief (p. 668) – this idea is already built into the notion of a statement. It is possible to say that *p* without stating that *p*, but theorists often overlook this because 'say' is commonly used in the illocutionary sense of 'state' rather than in its locutionary sense (see Bach 1994, pp. 141–144).

## 1. DISCERNING CONSTATIVE FORCE

Reimer finds no intuitive or introspective basis for any constative force in a performative utterance. It is unclear whether she is taking the speaker's or the hearer's point of view, but presumably her point is meant to apply from either perspective. If the user of a performative sentence is making a statement, presumably his intention to be making a statement would be conscious, hence introspectively accessible, but it seems not to be. This suggests that he has no such intention. And if there is a statement for the hearer to recognize and its recognition is necessary for communication of the performative force, then the hearer ought to be conscious of recognizing the constative force. Reimer finds no evidence that he is. Still, she anticipates the objection that forming an intention to do something or achieving recognition of something does not require being aware of so doing – perhaps potential awareness is enough. Also, she considers the possibility that this alleged constative force is not ordinarily noticed because it is communicatively unimportant, but she rightly insists that it ought to be evident upon reflection. It seems not to be.<sup>4</sup> So, she concludes, “performative utterances have no constative force for us to discern” (p. 663).<sup>5</sup>

The trouble here and throughout her discussion is that Reimer makes

<sup>4</sup> Reimer also considers the possibility that the constative force is accessible only unconsciously. Here she takes up an analogy involving the ‘exactly’ and the ‘at least’ uses of numerical predicates. Whereas the ‘at least’ use is the strictly literal use, with the ‘exactly’ use what is communicated is distinct from what is said. However, the latter fact may not be intuitively obvious (in violation of Recanati’s (1989) “availability principle”, which I have challenged in Bach 1994). The trouble with Reimer’s analogy is that it relies on the wrong distinction, between saying and communicating rather than between communicating directly and communicating indirectly.

<sup>5</sup> Reimer even goes so far as to claim that “one cannot use a performative sentence solely to state that one is performing an act of the sort named by the performative verb” (p. 666), but it is clear from how she formulates her positive account later that this claim is meant to apply only to contexts in which the speaker could use the sentence performatively. Also, she sometimes seems to be suggesting that performative sentences would lack constative potential even in the absence of standardization. But appealing to intuition (or “introspection”) to show this is dubious, inasmuch as its deliverances are against the background of the regularization of the performative form. Introspection can tell us little about what we would have thought absent the regularization. In any case, Reimer has no need to make this point, for it conflicts with her later thesis that performative conventions nullify the constative force of performative sentences.

If there were no standardization, what performative sentences would lack is the potential for making true statements – unless one is performing a collateral act of the relevant sort (this is the most that is shown by Reimer’s “Hail Mary” analogy, pp. 673). As for her lying promise scenario (pp. 666), it is supposed to show that the utterance of a performative sentence does not count as a constative even when there is an accompanying act for it to describe, in this case a written promise. However, all this scenario does show is that putting

the hearer's task seem more demanding than it really is. Recognizing an utterance as having constative force does not require classifying it as a statement. Inasmuch as making a statement is just a matter of expressing a belief,<sup>6</sup> the hearer need only recognize that a certain belief is being expressed. Despite this, as we will see shortly, the belief involved in a simple performative utterance has a certain distinctive feature that obscures the utterance's constative force.

The belief literally expressed in the use of a sentence of the form, 'I V that S' is the belief that one is V-ing that S. If one says, 'I order you to leave,' one is expressing the belief that one is ordering the hearer to leave. Where simple performatives are concerned, such a belief does double duty. To see this, first consider the case of a hedged performative, such as 'I must order you to leave', or an embedded performative, such as 'It is necessary for me to order you to leave.' Although each is of a standardized form for ordering, in the process of ordering it is used to make a literal and direct statement. Reimer does not take up complex performatives, but nothing she says about simple performatives suggests that no clearly discernible statement is made in the complex cases (granted, noticing it may take a bit of reflection, undoing the effect of standardization). In both examples, linguistic meaning predicts that the content of the literal and direct statement is this: it is necessary for the speaker to order the hearer to leave. That is the belief the speaker is expressing in making the statement. Notice that in these cases this belief is distinct from the belief associated with the order itself, namely, the belief that the speaker is ordering the hearer to leave. The latter belief is not expressed, but it is implicated in the speaker's intention to be ordering.

Now compare the case of the simple performative, 'I order you to leave'. Assume for the moment that ITP is correct. Then the speaker, in literally and directly stating that he is ordering the hearer to leave, is expressing the belief that he is ordering the hearer to leave. However, the intention with which he is ordering the hearer to leave involves the very same belief. For he intends to be ordering the hearer to leave, and,

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a promise in writing does not entail that the utterance itself is not a promise. I agree with her moral intuitions about the case, but it illustrates the wrong point. It shows that in some cases a written document, instead of being the vehicle of a promise, can function as the evidence (in this case misleading) for the fact that a certain oral promise has been made. The situation is quite different with a formal contract, whose terms constitute the (mutual) promise. Its language, which the signatories are presumed to have read, provides the terms of the agreement.

<sup>6</sup> Harnish and I propose a taxonomy of speech acts which individuates particular types of communicative illocutionary acts in terms of the type of attitude expressed, e.g., desire in the case of a request or regret in the case of an apology (Bach and Harnish, 1979, chap. 3).

in general, intending to be doing something involves believing that one is doing it.<sup>7</sup> With simple performatives, the belief expressed in the direct statement is the very same belief as the one implicated in the intention behind the non-constative speech act. In the cases of hedged and embedded performatives, the belief expressed in the direct statement is easy to discern, because it is distinct from the one implicated in the intention to be performing a certain non-constative act.<sup>8</sup> With simple performatives, however, the difference collapses. That explains, I suggest, why their literal constative force is difficult to discern and can even seem nonexistent.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. THE EFFECT OF SHORT-CIRCUITING

The foregoing discussion assumed for the sake of argument that ITP entails that the hearer must identify the direct constative force of a performative utterance. However, this assumption is questionable, given the effect of standardization. Standardization streamlines the inference the hearer must make in order to identify the speech act being performed. Without it, the hearer would have to go through a full-blown inference like the one Reimer gives on p. 658, in which the hearer recognizes that the speaker is making a certain statement (that the speaker is stating that he is ordering the hearer to leave) and infers that the speaker is performing a further act (ordering the hearer to leave). Reimer proceeds to examine a four-step version (due to Harnish) of the hearer's streamlined inference, which includes a step (3) that reads, "It would be contextually inappropriate for S just to be constating that S is ordering [me to leave]". But the reduced inference that includes this step is not streamlined enough.<sup>10</sup> For, if the definition of standardization is any guide (it is given by Reimer on p. 657),

<sup>7</sup> This is true in general, but it is controversial whether this is always so, i.e., whether intending *entails* believing. For discussion and references, see Ludwig 1992.

<sup>8</sup> A similar point applies to other forms of indirect speech acts performed by means of indicative sentences, such as 'I want you to leave' and 'It is time for you to leave'.

<sup>9</sup> Not only is the constative force easily discernible in these other cases, but the performative or other indirect force is easily cancelable, in the way symptomatic of conversational implicatures (Grice 1989, chap. 2) and indirect speech acts generally. One can say, for example, "I must order you to leave – but I won't", and thereby cancel the would-be order. On the other hand, if one said, "I order you to leave – but I do not," one would be contradicting oneself. The fact that simple performative utterances flunk the cancelability test does not show that they are not indirect speech acts. Rather, it is a consequence of the fact noted in the text that the same belief is both expressed by the literal statement and implicated in the intention behind the performative act.

<sup>10</sup> Not only that, step (3) of this abbreviated inference does not even appear in the original, full-blown inference supposedly being abbreviated.

the inference would go, barring any contextual reason to the contrary, straight from step 2 to step 4. That is, the hearer would go from identifying the standard use of the utterance form to the conclusion that it is being used in that way (to order, in this case). There is no reason why the purely constative understanding of the utterance has to be ruled out explicitly, that is, judged contextually inappropriate. The effect of standardization, considered from a processing point of view, is to take the hearer directly from the form of words to the performative force (this also occurs in other cases of standardization, including hedged and embedded performatives). The hearer has no need to recognize, or even consider, that a statement is being made. Indeed, when standardization for performativity is in place, a special reason is required to rule out the *performative* use of the utterance, even though (according to ITP) this is not the direct and literal use.

It is only in a footnote (note 6) that Reimer considers the possibility that the hearer does not have to rule out any exclusively constative force. If this is so, then, she argues, it would take the indirection out of the standardization – the order would not be indirect, contrary to what ITP says it is, in which case ITP “falls apart”. For if the hearer doesn’t have to recognize a constative force, “it becomes doubtful that such an utterance would have a constative force”. A possible reply here is to claim that performative utterances, once standardized, are no longer indirect but are instead direct (though nonliteral).<sup>11</sup> This is a tempting line – standardized nonliterality is a genuine phenomenon (Bach 1987, pp. 79–85, and 1994) – but not in this case. For the short-circuited inference involved in understanding simple performative utterances is not relevantly different in structure from that needed for understanding hedged and embedded performatives and other standardized indirect speech acts.<sup>12</sup> The details vary from case to case, but the form is essentially the same. In each case, the hearer can reason directly, thanks to standardization, from the utterance to the indirect force, but the direct statement (in indicative cases) is always recoverable. What makes this fact difficult to discern in the case of simple performatives is, as we saw in the previous section, that the same belief is both expressed in the making of the literal

<sup>11</sup> These are the two main ways in which what a speaker means can go beyond what he says. With indirection, he says and means one thing and means something else as well; with nonliterality, he says one thing and means something else instead (for detailed discussion see Bach and Harnish 1979, chap. 4).

<sup>12</sup> See Bach and Harnish 1979, 209–219 and 192–198, The notion of short-circuited inference was introduced in Bach 1975, and Jerry Morgan (1978) independently suggested the notion of short-circuited implicature. For further discussion see Bach, to appear.

statement and implicated in the intention behind the act being performed indirectly.<sup>13</sup>

Reimer is correct that omitting the intermediate inference step involving the recognition of the direct speech act eliminates a characteristic feature of indirect speech acts. However, it is precisely the absence of this step that distinguishes cases of standardized indirection. If her conclusion about performatives were correct, it would generalize to other sorts of standardized indirect speech acts and rule out their possibility altogether. Ordinary utterances of sentences like 'Why don't you leave?', 'I want you to leave', and 'I think you had better leave now' would count not as indirect requests but as direct but nonliteral requests. Yet they are indirect, even though they are standardized. So Reimer's conclusion rules out too much.

Why these other examples are indirect is connected to the difference between standardization and conventionalization (see the definition Reimer gives on p. 669). Conventionalization entails that an utterance of a certain form of words would not have the force it has but for the existence of a general mutual belief that it counts as such. Standardization entails no such thing. It merely "shortcircuits the steps of [the required] inference pattern, both as intended by the speaker and as carried through by the audience" (Bach 1975, p. 235), and thereby simplifies the cognitive processes that are required on the part of each. It does not eliminate any information that is available to those processes but merely eliminates the need to access certain of that information. Even though the inference is "compressed by precedent", the success of the performative utterance would be "vitiating if any of the steps of the [original, uncompressed] inference were blocked" (*ibid.*)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The hearer's situation mirrors the speaker's. The speaker, even though he does not explicitly intend to be stating that he is performing an act of the sort named by the performative verb, cannot avoid expressing the belief that is constitutive of that statement. If he utters, "I order you to leave", he cannot but expect to be taken to be expressing the belief that he is ordering the hearer to leave; he cannot fulfill the presumption that he is speaking truly unless he is ordering the hearer to leave.

<sup>14</sup> This is one reason why Harnish and I characterized the "Speech Act Schema," our general model of the elements of an audience's intended inference to a speaker's communicative intention, as providing a "natural way of organizing the abundance of information available" to the hearer. We do not claim that people must "go through the SAS explicitly, consciously proceeding from one step to the next" (Bach and Harnish 1979, p. 93). In later work, I developed a conception of default reasoning which relies on a distinction between realizing an inference and merely instantiating it (Bach 1984). An inference can be instantiated even if it is not fully realized, in the sense that some intermediate steps do not explicitly occur, provided the person's reasoning is sensitive to considerations relevant to the falsity of those steps. The idea is that they would be explicitly taken into account if there was reason to call them into question.

## 3. THE TROUBLE WITH CONVENTIONS

A conventionalist account of performatives is logically stronger than the standardization approach, for it says that an utterance of a performative sentence has its performative force *only because* of the mutual belief constituting the convention (standardization merely facilitates performativity). I do not think it necessary to adopt a conventionalist approach, but I do admire the ingenuity of Reimer's version of it. Her idea is that the conventions necessary for the performativity of utterances of performative sentences have the effect of undoing their grammatically based constative force and supplanting it with a force of the sort named by the performative verb. In her view, although performative sentences do have constative force potential in some contexts, "the existence of certain illocutionary conventions – in English<sup>15</sup> – prevents speakers from using performative sentences, *in certain contexts*, to make statements" (p. 671; my italics). Moreover, "given the supposition that illocutionary conventions of the sort in question are operative, . . . the [relevant] mutual belief makes possible the communication of non-constative acts by means of the utterances of performative sentences" (p. 670).

Now how are these conventions supposed to work? In general, a convention involves a community mutual belief that an act of one sort performed in a certain context counts as the performance of an act of another sort (it counts as such only because of the mutual belief). But in what context, according to Reimer's conventions, does the utterance of a performative sentence count as the performance of an act of the type named by the performative verb? Evidently, it is "a context where a purely constative reading would be inappropriate" (p. 669). But if that is the required context, then the speaker and the hearer, in order to recognize that the convention applies (otherwise communication of the performative force could not take place), would both have to infer that the context is such that a purely constative reading is inappropriate. This sounds suspiciously like the very inference Reimer had ruled out when she claimed that there is no constative force even to be discerned. So her conventionalist account is vulnerable to the very objection which, as was argued earlier, the standardization account avoids.

I do not reject performative conventions altogether. Performativity is a matter of convention when, in an institutional setting, uttering a performative sentence plays a certain official role. In these cases, there is a specific

<sup>15</sup> Since performativity is not peculiar to English, analogous conventions must prevail in other linguistic communities. If such conventions prevail everywhere, performativity would prove to be a remarkable sort of linguistic universal.



institutional context with respect to which a specific form of words is designated, and often required, for the performance of an act of a certain sort. Examples include the forms of words used for adjourning a meeting, sentencing a convicted criminal, or christening a ship. These are not like cases of standardization, because the speaker's aim is not to communicate but to affect institutional states of affairs (see Bach and Harnish 1979, ch. 6). Ordinary performative utterances, on the other hand, are not bound to particular institutional contexts. Like most speech acts, they are acts of communication and, as such, they succeed not by conformity to convention but by recognition of intention.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Standardization is a widespread phenomenon that includes hedged performatives, embedded performatives, and other forms of sentences regularly used to perform indirect speech acts. Theorists have appealed to either ambiguity or conventionalization to explain this phenomenon, but both options seem gratuitous: ambiguity claims tend to multiply senses beyond necessity, and appealing to convention smacks of ad-hockery.<sup>16</sup> The standardization account strikes a middle ground between these alternatives, and as a general approach it is not in dispute here. The issue here is its application to simple performatives: does their performativity require special explanation or is it but one instance of a more general phenomenon? Simple performatives are distinguished by the fact that the speaker is saying that he is doing the very thing he is thereby doing. This makes them special in one respect: the same belief is both expressed by the constative act and implicated in the performative intention. Even so, their performativity requires no special explanation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Bach and Harnish 1979, ch. 9. One problem for the generalized conventionality thesis is due to the open-ended variety of linguistic forms standardly used for the indirect performance of certain speech acts. This thesis would have to posit conventions that apply to just those linguistic forms whose utterance counts as the performance of an act of the relevant sort, e.g., to 'Where do you think you're going?' (or 'What do you think you're doing?' or 'Who do you think you are?') as opposed to 'When do you think you're going?'.

<sup>17</sup> For this reason Harnish and I argued that Searle's question, "How can there be a class of sentences whose meaning is such that we can perform the action named by the verb just by literally saying we are performing it?" (1989, p. 538) is the wrong question to ask. It arbitrarily rules out the null hypothesis that performativity requires no special explanation (Bach and Harnish 1992, p. 97).

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*Department of Philosophy*  
*San Francisco State University*  
*San Francisco, CA 94132*  
*U.S.A.*