

# Grice and Speech-Act Theory

Daniel W. Harris\*

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## Abstract

In the course of developing his theory of meaning, Grice also developed an influential theory of speech acts. The main idea is that to perform a speech act is to act with a communicative intention, and speech acts of different kinds are intended to produce different kinds of responses in addressees. This theory wasn't intended to apply to conventional acts, like pronouncing a couple married or testifying in court, but only to communicative acts, like asserting, requesting, and directing. And, notably, Grice's theory applies to indirect, nonlinguistic, and non-conventional communicative acts, in addition to those performed with linguistic utterances. In this chapter, I spell out this theory in greater detail, trace its origins in Grice's work and later developments by others, and show how it relates to several other schools of thought about speech acts.

## 1 Introduction

In speaking, we do things. Some of these actions are assertions, but others are questions, requests, commands, exclamations, jokes, offerings of permission and forgiveness, rebukes, bets, baptisms, court testimony, weddings, and so on. A theory of speech acts is a theory of what it is to perform acts like these. One way to see the need for such a theory is to recognize that an utterance of the same sentence can constitute the performance of different speech acts. For example, by saying, "You can't park here," a speaker could be making a prediction about their addressee's parking abilities, ordering them to move their car, explaining a local law, or improvising a work of fiction. So, beyond what they've uttered, what makes it the case that they did one of these things rather than another? The main disagreement between theories of speech acts is about how to answer questions like this one.

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One of the most influential theories of speech acts originated in the work of Paul Grice. His organizing idea is *intentionalism*—the view that the nature of at least some speech acts is a matter of the communicative intentions with which one performs them. A communicative intention is an intention to produce a response in one’s addressee, in part by revealing to them the intention to do so. Different kinds of speech acts arise from communicatively intending different kinds of responses. One important feature of this theory is that it does not purport to make sense of all speech acts, but only what Bach and Harnish (1979) dubbed *communicative* acts, such as assertions, requests, or questions—as opposed to *conventional* acts, such as pronouncing a couple married or rendering judgment in a court of law. A second important feature of Grice’s theory is that it applies equally to both direct and indirect communicative acts, and also to communicative acts performed without speaking, using language, or exploiting any conventional means at all.

What follows is broken up into two sections. In §2, I explain Grice’s theory in more detail and show how it emerged from his theory of meaning (§2.1), summarize some of the ways in which later Gricean speech-act theorists have expanded upon it (§2.2), and spell out what I take to be the advantages shared by theories in this tradition (§2.3). In §3, I introduce the main competitors to Grice’s theory, and map out their dialectical interactions.

## 2 Grice’s theory and Gricean Theories

### 2.1 Grice: From Meaning to Speech Acts

Grice did not initially use Austin’s terms, “speech act,” “illocutionary act,” “illocutionary force,” or much of the other terminology that is now standard in speech-act theory.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he framed his theory of speech acts as an aspect of his theory of meaning. Gricean communication begins when someone intends to produce a certain response their addressee (e.g. a certain belief or intention), and pursues this intention by revealing it to their addressee. If the addressee recognizes the intention, then this constitutes one form of communicative success: the addressee understands the communicator, thereby fulfilling the communicator’s secondary goal of revealing their intention. If the right kinds of trust and cooperativity are at work,

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<sup>1</sup>Austin (1962) distinguished illocutionary acts from, on one hand, the mere act of uttering a meaningful sentence (the locutionary act) and, on the other, any acts that one performs by virtue of others’ reactions or other downstream consequences (the perlocutionary act). These aren’t distinct actions, but three levels of abstraction at which to individuate any given speech act. For example, we can describe your utterance as a locutionary act of uttering the English sentence, “I’ll have a beer,” as an illocutionary act of ordering yourself a beer, or as the perlocutionary act of getting the bartender to give you a drink.

then recognizing the communicator's intention to produce a certain response will give the addressee a new reason to have this response. If they do, then this represents a further kind of communicative success: the addressee believes (or intends, etc.) what the communicator intended them to, thereby fulfilling the intention with which the communicator began.

To mean something by an utterance, argued Grice, is to do the communicator's part in this process—i.e., to make the utterance with a *communicative intention* (a.k.a. *meaning intention* or *m-intention*). Here is one of Grice's attempts to spell out the structure of this kind of intention (Grice, 1969, 151):<sup>2</sup>

“*U* meant something by uttering *x*” is true iff, for some audience *A*, *U* uttered *x* intending

- (i) *A* to produce a particular response *r*;
- (ii) *A* to think (recognize) that *U* intends (i);
- (iii) *A* to fulfill (i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (ii).

This is an analysis of what Grice called *utterer's (occasion) meaning*, which others have sometimes called *speaker(s) meaning*. But it is also a schematic theory of a range of speech acts, which can be turned into analyses of specific speech acts by filling in different values for the variable *r*. In other words, to mean something by an utterance is, *ipso facto*, to perform a speech act, and which kind of speech act one performs depends on which kind of response one communicatively intends to produce in an addressee (Grice, 1969, 166).

Which kinds of responses are constitutive of which kinds of speech acts? Grice's main case study is the distinction between “indicative-type utterances” (i.e. assertoric acts), whose point is to convey information, and “imperative type utterances” (i.e. directive acts), whose point is to prompt action (1957, 384; 1968, 226; 1969, 165). An indicative-type utterance might be an act of saying, “I passed my driving test,” or a nonverbal act of pantomiming a steering motion together with a look of excitement. What unifies indicative-type utterances, according to Grice, is that they are communicatively intended to produce the belief in (or, perhaps, the belief that the speaker believes) a certain content (e.g. that the speaker passed their driving test) (Grice 1968, 230; 1969, 166). An imperative-type utterance could be the act of saying, “buy me a drink,” or a nonverbal act of looking from the addressee to one's empty glass with a mock-sad expression. What unifies them is that their speakers

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<sup>2</sup>Many variations on this analysis have been defended (Bach, 1987; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Blackburn, 1984; Buchanan, 2018; Davis, 1992, 2003; Grice, 1957, 1969; Harris, 2014; Keiser, 2022; Loar, 1976; Moore, 2018; Neale, 1992; Recanati, 1986; Schiffer, 1972; Scott-Phillips, 2014; Searle, 1969; Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Strawson, 1964; Thomason, 1990).

communicatively intend to prompt their addressee to respond with an action, or perhaps an intention to act (e.g. the action of buying the speaker a drink) (Grice 1968, 230; 1969, 166).

## 2.2 Later Gricean Theories

A great deal of work in the Gricean tradition has involved fleshing out, tweaking, and revising this picture in various ways, while retaining the idea of grounding differences between speech acts in differences between communicative intentions. A few examples: Grice himself suggests that to insult someone is to do something with a communicative intention to offend them (Grice, 1957, 386), Currie (1986) argues that the speech acts involved in fictional storytelling can be understood in terms of communicative intentions to produce states of make-believe, as opposed to belief, and Roberts (2012) argues that asking a question involves communicatively intending for one's addressee(s) to adopt a goal of asserting at least a partial answer.

The most ambitious and systematic attempts to extend Grice's theory of speech acts come from Schiffer (1972) and Bach and Harnish (1979). Each begins from their own tweaks on Grice's analysis of communicative intentions. Schiffer argues that speakers typically communicatively intend not only to produce a certain response in their addressee, but also for their addressees to arrive at this response via a certain kind of inferential pathway. One of his applications of this idea is to offer a finer-grained taxonomy of communicative acts than Grice attempted. For example, *ordering* someone to do something and *advising* them to do it are both directive acts with the same content, but they differ in that a speaker intends their addressee to follow an order because they recognize the speaker's authority, but intends their addressee to follow advice because they recognize that doing so is in the addressee's interest (Schiffer, 1972, 102–103). Similarly, although *reporting* and *assuring* are both assertoric acts, which are intended to get an addressee to believe a proposition, they are intended to offer the addressee different kinds of reasons for their belief—namely, the speaker's observations and the speaker's justifiable certainty, respectively (Schiffer, 1972, 101). In general, Schiffer's idea is that a genus of speech acts can be unified by always being communicatively intended to produce the same kind of response (e.g. action, or belief), whereas different species within this genus can differ with respect to the intended reasons for having this response (see also Harris 2014).

Bach and Harnish pursue a different taxonomic strategy, based on a different conception of communicative intentions. On this view, a communicative intention (in their terminology, an “r-intention”) is always an intention to reveal to the hearer that the speaker has a certain attitude, in part by revealing this very intention to them. To act with this sort of intention is to *express* the attitude in question (Bach

and Harnish, 1979, 15), and different kinds of communicative acts express different (combinations of) attitudes. Using this basic schema, Bach and Harnish create an elaborate taxonomy, dividing the overall category of communicative illocutionary acts into four categories, each with its own subcategories: constatives (asserting, affirming, predicting, supposing, etc.), directives (requesting, commanding, asking, forbidding, etc.), commissives (promising, guaranteeing, etc.), and acknowledgements (apologizing, congratulating, greeting, thanking, etc.). Here are some examples of applications of Bach and Harnish's theory to particular communicative acts, chosen from a very long list of examples:

- (1) To *assert*  $p$  is to express (i) the belief that  $p$ , and (ii) an intention for the hearer to believe  $p$  (a.k.a. state, declare, claim, avow, maintain, say, submit, etc.) (Bach and Harnish, 1979, 42)
- (2) To *suppose* that  $p$  is to express (i) a belief that it is worth considering the consequences of  $p$ , and (ii) an intention for the addressee to believe that it is worth considering the consequences of  $p$  (a.k.a. hypothesize, postulate, theorize, etc.) (*ibid.*, 44)
- (3) To *request* for addressee to do  $A$  is to express (i) a desire that they do  $A$ , and (ii) an intention that they do  $A$  at least partly on the basis of the speaker's desire (a.k.a. ask, beseech, urge, etc.) (*ibid.*, 47)
- (4) To *promise* to do  $A$  is to express (i) a belief that this utterance obligates the speaker to do  $A$ , (ii) an intention to do  $A$ , (iii) an intention for the addressee to believe that this utterance obligates the speaker to do  $A$ , and (iv) an intention for the addressee to believe that the speaker will do  $A$ .
- (5) To *thank* the addressee for  $x$  is to express one of the following two combinations of mental states:
  - a. (i) gratitude to the addressee for  $x$ , and (ii) the intention that the addressee believe that the speaker is grateful for  $x$ ;
  - b. (i) the intention that this utterance satisfy the social expectation that one express gratitude for being benefitted, and (ii) the intention that the addressee take this utterance as satisfying this expectation.

### 2.3 Features of Gricean Theories

It is worth highlighting several features that Gricean theories share:

First, Gricean theories are not intended as theories of *all* speech acts. Rather, they aim to capture only what Bach and Harnish (1979) call *communicative (illocutionary) acts*—basic acts of communicating with another person, such as assertions, directives, and questions. These stand in contrast to what Bach and Harnish

called *conventional (illocutionary) acts*, such as the act of getting married by saying “I do,” or the act of testifying in court, whose nature and conditions of felicitous performance depend on background social practices, conventions, or institutions. Although this distinction is made most clearly and explicitly by Bach and Harnish, we can also find it more briefly articulated by Grice (Grice, 1989, 19–20), Strawson (1964, 443), and Schiffer (1972, 91).

Second, Gricean theories concern communicative acts in general, and not just those performed with language, or even by means of any conventional devices (Grice, 1986, 85). Grice’s use of the terms *utterer* and *utterance* are apt to mislead on this point, since they ordinarily connote verbal communication.<sup>3</sup> But Grice makes it clear that he is using “utterance” “as a neutral word to apply to any candidate for [non-natural] meaning” (Grice, 1957, 380)—i.e., any action that could be made with a communicative intention. Most of Grice’s original examples of utterer’s meaning involve nonlinguistic and nonconventional “utterances:” drawing a picture (Grice, 1957, 382), throwing a bank note out of a window (384), cutting an employee’s salary by a very small amount (384), and so on. Since any of these actions could be used to give evidence of the “utterer’s” intention to elicit a response from the addressee, they all count as utterances in Grice’s sense.

Third, Grice’s theory came packaged with a nuanced account of the relationship between utterer’s meaning (and so, communicative acts) and utterance-type meaning (including the linguistic meaning of words and sentences). You acquire the meaning of a linguistic expression by acquiring a “procedure in your repertoire” (roughly, a disposition) to utter it when you have a certain kind of communicative intention, and to interpret others as doing the same (Grice, 1968).<sup>4</sup> In order to account for the compositionality of linguistic meaning, sentence meanings must be grounded in “resultant procedures,” which are themselves the product of more basic procedures to use words and syntactic arrangements with communicative intentions that have certain abstract properties (Grice, 1968, 235). In particular, Grice factored out the features of sentences that indicate what kind of speech act is being performed (e.g. what we would now call sentential mood or clause-type), and argued that their semantic import is grounded in our shared procedures to associate these features with communicative intentions to produce certain kinds of mental attitudes in addressees. For example, natural-language users have procedures to utter imperative and declarative sentences when we communicatively intend to prompt

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<sup>3</sup>The term “speech act” can be misleading in the same way—and has indeed misled at least some into thinking that speech-act theory is only about verbal communication (e.g. Holler 2025). But Austin (1962, 120–121) as well as Grice make it clear that speech acts, in their senses, can be nonverbal and even nonlinguistic.

<sup>4</sup>Harris (2014, ch.4) defends this kind of account over the convention-based theories of Lewis (1969; 1975) and Schiffer (1972; 1993).

intentions and beliefs, respectively (Grice, 1968, 230).

Fourth, the procedures that ground sentence meanings are *defeasible* in ways that allow us to perform and interpret nonliteral and indirect speech acts. Grice's work on this topic has exerted an enormous influence, mainly via his theory of conversational implicature (Grice, 1975, 1978), but it is ultimately Grice's intentionalist theory of meaning that makes his account of indirect and nonliteral communicative acts possible. An indirect communicative act involves uttering a sentence whose conventional meaning does not match what the speaker communicatively intends. For example, suppose that, in a crowded elevator, Sue says to Ann, "you're very close." This could be either an indirect request to move away or an indirect act of flirting. Neither of these communicative acts is conventionally associated with the uttered sentence, but, depending on the circumstances, Sue may be able to reveal either of the relevant intentions to Ann. This is possible because the psychological process of recognizing an intention is a form of abductive reasoning—we infer others' intentions as the best explanation of their actions—and abductive reasoning is non-monotonic, in the sense that the conclusion of any such reasoning can be defeated by more evidence (Neale ?; Buchanan and Schiller 2022). Normally, the sentence that one chooses to utter provides strong evidence of one's intentions, but even this evidence can be defeated. On Grice's view, indirect communication happens when a speaker produces linguistic evidence of their intentions which they intend to be defeated, in part by the assumption that the speaker is cooperatively pursuing the conversation's goal. In the above example, the statement that Ann very close to Sue is not, on its own, relevant to any easily inferred conversational goal, and so threatens to be uncooperative if not supplemented by some further communicative aim. Ann's other background information might lead her to infer that this further communicative aim may be to get her to move, or to flirt with her. By understanding interpretation in terms of action explanation more generally, Grice thus offers a principled explanation for the possibility of indirect and nonliteral communication.

### 3 Competing Theories

#### 3.1 Conventionalism

The most influential competitor to Grice's view is conventionalism, according to which performing a speech act is always a matter of acting in accordance a convention (Austin, 1962; Lepore and Stone, 2015; Searle, 1965, 1969; Searle and Vanderveken, 1985; Stojnić, 2021). In Austin's (1962) original version of this view, his focus was on broadly social conventions, and he motivated this idea by almost exclusively focusing on acts whose existence is owed to the roles they play within social institutions, such as getting married, christening a ship, or willing property (Austin,

1962, 5). Griceans typically agree that these are conventional acts, since the nature of the acts themselves, and not merely the linguistic means of performing them, is grounded in social convention: one can get married only relative to the jurisdiction of some social group, and different societies vary with respect to whether marriage exists, who can get married, how many people one can be married to, and the specific rights and obligations that come with being married. By contrast, although different social groups have different conventional means of performing communicative acts like asserting, requesting, or asking questions, the acts themselves appear to be cultural universals, and the question of whose jurisdiction they are performed relative to does not arise (I can ask questions, but not get married, across international borders). Griceans have therefore typically objected that Austin's account wrongly lumps together communicative and conventional acts (Grice 1989, 19–20; Strawson 1964, 443; Bach and Harnish 1979, 122–127; Scanlon 1998, 297; Harris 2019, 57–58).

Searle (1965; 1969) developed an influential conventionalist theory that incorporates ideas from both Austin and Grice. Like Grice, Searle takes the performance of an illocutionary act to be partially grounded in the speaker's communicative intention, but he adds several conventionalist requirements. First, he argues, by means of a thought experiment (1969, 44–45), that communicative intentions must include an intention for one's addressee to reach an interpretation by means of the conventional meaning of the uttered sentence (1969, 60 for Grice's reply, see Grice 1969, 160–164). Second, Searle adds a number of other necessary conditions for performing an illocutionary act, and argues that these "constitutive rules" are themselves "institutional facts"—i.e., matters of convention. However, Griceans can argue that most of these rules are already entailed by their view, since they are implicit in communicative intentions (e.g. Searle's rule that the content of a request be about a possible future action of the addressee (Searle, 1969, 66)) or they jointly follow from the nature of communicative intentions together with Grice's (1975) cooperative principle (e.g., Searle's rule that a promised act must be something that the addressee prefers (ibid., 58)). Third, Searle includes the condition that "the semantic rules of the dialect spoken by [the speaker] and [addressee] are such that [the sentence] is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if [Searle's other constitutive rules] obtain" (Searle, 1969, 61). This makes Searle's theory a strict form of *linguistic* conventionalism. The obvious problem is that this condition is incompatible with the existence of indirect, nonliteral and otherwise non-conventional communicative acts. Indeed, we can see Grice (1957) making an early version of this point, in what may have been an allusive objection to Austin,<sup>5</sup> when he argues that "some

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<sup>5</sup>In keeping with the prevailing (non-)citation practices of postwar Oxford, Grice and Austin don't explicitly mention each other in setting out their competing views. But their theories developed in

things which can mean<sub>NN</sub> something...are not conventional in any ordinary sense (e.g., certain gestures)” (Grice, 1957, 379), and proceeds to rely mainly on examples of non-linguistic and non-conventional communication in setting out his own view.

The most ambitious conventionalist response to this argument is due to Lepore and Stone (2010; 2015), who argue that every instance of apparently non-conventional communication is either conventional after all (see also Stojnić 2021); or else not really communication, but merely the speaker intentionally prompting the addressee to engage in an open-ended, imaginative thought process with no particular communicative goal. They defend this view by pointing out that communicative intentions require the speaker to intend their addressee to recognize that they intend to produce one particular effect, to the exclusion of various similar alternatives—a requirement that is impossible for speakers to satisfy when issuing indirect and non-literal utterances, such as Romeo’s metaphor, “Juliet is the sun.” This is a serious, and, as yet, unsolved problem for intentionalists. Grice was aware of the problem (Grice, 1989, 39–40), but perhaps not of the threat it posed. Buchanan (2010) points out that the problem is just as serious when it comes to literal and direct communication, and attempts a broadly Gricean solution. And Camp (2006) points out that even when the content of a metaphorical utterance is hazy, we still have the clear intuition that there is a distinction (if not a sharp one) between successful and unsuccessful communication (Romeo did *not* mean that Juliet is enormous, distant, and filled with gas)—a point which recommends optimism about a solution, without telling us how it would go.

### 3.2 Expressionism and Functionalism

Many researchers have reacted to Grice’s theory with skepticism about the apparent psychological demands it places on communicators. Could it really be true that every time you communicate—even when chatting with a friend, or ordering a coffee—you must *intend* your addressee to *recognize* that you *intend* for them to *believe* (or intend, etc.) something? This is a fourth-order metarepresentation—a mental state with a degree of sophistication that participants in laboratory tasks have struggled to entertain (Wilson et al., 2023), and that some have argued are impossible for cognitively loaded and some neuroatypical adults (Tager-Flusberg, 2000), children (Moore, 2017a), and animal communicators, including (presumably) our own evolutionary predecessors (Armstrong, 2021; Geurts, 2019; Moore, 2017b).

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parallel and in dialogue, from before the Second World War until Austin’s death in 1960, during which Grice and Austin were colleagues and collaborators. Like Grice, Austin seems to have framed his argument with Grice in mind (see §3.3 for a possible example). For some historical details, see Grice (1986, 49), (Chapman, 2005, 63), Harris and Unnsteinsson (2018), and Rowe (2023, 409, 473n47).

This sort of skepticism has motivated several theories of speech acts. One example is what I will call *expressionism*, which is the view that performing a speech act is a matter of expressing a state of mind, and that different speech acts express different states. On this definition, Bach and Harnish's theory, summarized above, is a version of expressionism, paired with a Gricean theory of what expression is. However, many expressionists, motivated in part by skepticism about the psychological demands of communicative intentions, have sought to give psychologically less demanding theories of what it is to express a mental state, rooted either in causal or epistemic relations between an utterance and the state that it expresses (Bar-On, 1995, 2013a,b; Davis, 2003; Green, 2007; Pagin, 2011).

A second, sometimes related view, is functionalism, which retains Grice's idea that the nature of a speech act is rooted in its aim to alter the addressee's state of mind, but which spells out what it is for a speech act to have an aim in terms of the proper function of the utterance-type, rather than the speaker's intention (Armstrong, 2021; Millikan, 1998; Skyrms, 2010; Zollman, 2011). For example, it is the proper function of the sentence, "buy me a drink" to prompt the addressee to buy the speaker a drink. It has this proper function by virtue of the proper functions of the words and syntactic structure that make up the sentence, which in turn have their proper functions because of a history of successful similar uses by the speaker and other members of their speech community.

Both expressionists and functionalists have struggled to give non-Gricean explanations of novel signal-meaning pairings, as in indirect, nonliteral, and other unconventional communication. Some of these theorists have therefore argued that their theories explain most ordinary, undemanding communication, but that we sometimes go Gricean on special occasions, when more demanding mechanisms are needed, such as when we communicate indirectly or in highly context-sensitive ways (Millikan 1984, 167; 1995, 187; Bar-On 2013b; Armstrong 2021, 31, n14). One worry about this view is that it relies on the false premise that sophisticated context-sensitivity and indirect communication are rare (Harris, 2025).

How, then, should Griceans respond to skepticism about psychological demands? They have a couple of options. One is to hold that the intentionalism is best construed as a rational reconstruction of one or more less demanding psychological processes (e.g. Soames 2008, 461). This risks reducing intentionalism to a theory of how things could have worked, rather than how they do (Carston, 2017; Dänzer, 2021). A second reply is to change or reinterpret the Gricean theory to make it less psychologically demanding (Moore, 2018; Sperber and Wilson, 2002). A third reply is to admit that humans communicate by means of a variety of mechanisms, some of which can be understood as degraded versions of Gricean communication that we use in non-ideal conditions. On this view, the way of communicating set out by Grice is special, in that it enables much of what is particularly powerful and

efficient about human communication, and the farther an alternative mechanism deviates from the Gricean one, the more of its advantages we lose (Harris, 2025). On this view, Gricean theories don't tell us about the essence of all communicative acts, but rather tell us about a mechanism for performing and interpreting them that is particularly powerful, and that may explain the existence of some valuable design features of natural language.

### 3.3 Normative Theories

Some theories understand speech acts in irreducibly normative terms.

One is Williamson's (1996; 2000) view that assertion is constitutively governed by a knowledge norm: "One must: assert  $p$  only if one knows that  $p$ ." Of course, Grice could agree that assertions are governed by a norm of this kind—perhaps a strengthening his maxim of quality, which enjoins speakers not to say things that are false, or for which they lack adequate evidence (Grice, 1989, 27). But, for Williamson, the applicability of the knowledge norm is what *makes* a speech act an assertion; this is why it is a *constitutive* norm. By contrast, what makes a speech act an assertion, for Grice, is that it is communicatively intended to produce a belief in someone; the maxim of quality is just an application of the much more general cooperative principle to the specific category of acts performed with this intention, within conversations where interlocutors have a shared goal of information exchange. Several authors have proposed deriving the knowledge norm in this way (e.g. Sosa 2009), and others have argued that the relationship between assertion and knowledge is too special to be derived from the cooperative principle (Benton, 2016). A further worry about Williamson-style views is that little work has been done to show how they apply to non-assertoric speech acts (McGlynn, 2014, 82).

A second kind of normative theory tries to understand speech acts directly in terms of the commitments, entitlements, or other normative statuses that speakers undertake or assign to others in performing them (Brandom, 1983, 1994; Geurts, 2019; Kukla and Lance, 2009). Again, Grice would agree that our speech acts normally result in commitments of various kinds, but would argue that they follow from speakers' communicative intentions together with independent normative premises, such as the cooperative principle.

Brandom's (1994) main objection to Gricean theories flows from a much broader objection to the idea that we can understand speech acts or linguistic meaning in more basic psychological terms. Following Sellars (1954; 1956; 1969), he argues that neither speech acts nor intentional mental states (e.g., beliefs and intentions) are explanatorily more basic than the other, and both must be explained in tandem, in terms of even more basic, normative concepts. This represents perhaps the deepest and most theoretically ambitious form of disagreement with Gricean theories,

but it also appears to depend on rejecting or dramatically reinterpreting almost all work on communication in psychology and linguistics, and many details remain to be worked out (see Rosen (1997) for a lucid assessment).

Geurts (2019), by contrast, motivates his commitment-theoretic view via an attack on Gricean views in particular, arguing that they don't fit with our best accounts of how the human capacity for mindreading evolved in our proto-human ancestors, and how it develops in human children. Geurts' view seems to be that our capacity to undertake and respond to commitments is more evolutionarily and developmentally basic than our capacity for mindreading, although he says little about how the former capacity works, or how we keep track of our commitments without mindreading. Harris (2019) argues (*inter alia*) that Geurts' model is unexplanatory unless we layer much of the Gricean apparatus on top of it.

A final kind of argument for normative theories focuses on particular speech acts. A particularly promising candidate for a normative treatment is, well, *promising*, whose point is to place oneself under what ethicists call a "promissory obligation" to the addressee.<sup>6</sup> Some theories of promissory obligation are compatible with Gricean theories, in that they ground it in the addressee's expectation about, or trust in, the speaker's future behavior, which the speaker has intentionally engendered, perhaps in the Gricean way (e.g. Scanlon 1990; Norcross 2011). Notably, Scanlon (1998, 296ff) defends this view with a thought experiment in which a promise is made and accepted between members of two social groups with no previous contact, and who therefore could not have shared conventions or norms; this is, in effect, an argument that promising is a communicative act, rather than a conventional one. Another option is to understand promises as intended to prompt the addressee to engage in a joint decision with the speaker about what they will do (de Kenessey, 2020). However, some have denied that promissory obligation can be reduced to psychological states of the speaker and addressee, arguing that it arises from *sui generis* normative powers, or depends on background social practices or institutions (e.g. Hart 1955; Rawls 1999, 97; Raz 1977; Owen 2006). Austin makes an early argument of this kind in a passage that it is tempting to read as an allusive objection to Grice: he asks what makes a speech act serious (as opposed to a joke or a fictional performance), and considers the explanation that speaking is "(merely) the outward and visible sign...of an inward and spiritual act" (e.g., of the speaker's intention). Austin objects that this view is "a let-out" to someone who goes through the motions of promising without the right intentions, "the bigamist with an excuse for his 'I do' and the welsher with a defence for his 'I bet.' Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*" (Austin, 1962, 9–10).

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<sup>6</sup>For an overview of philosophical work on promising, see Habib (2018).

### 3.4 Common Ground, Context, and Conversational Score

Much recent work on speech acts has used formal models of conversations of *conversational score* (1979), which is a running record of all of the shared background information that might be relevant to how the participants in a conversation design and interpret speech acts. Speech acts, in turn, are modeled as proposals to change (or “update”) the score. These models specialize in explaining how speech acts influence the future of the conversation.

The original and most influential model of this kind Stalnaker’s (1970; 1978; 2014) theory of common ground. Stalnaker takes common ground to be the set of propositions that each participant accepts (i.e. treats it as true) for the purpose of the conversation, each accepts that the others accept, and so on. To assert a proposition is to propose adding it to the common ground. Insofar as a speaker succeeds at doing so, they make the asserted proposition eligible to serve as background information for a variety of semantic and pragmatic purposes later in the conversation—e.g. to be presupposed, to play a role in calculating the contents of context-sensitive expressions, to license anaphora, and so on.

Others have generalized this approach by positing more components of conversational score as the targets of other speech acts (Gazdar, 1981). Roberts (2012) models the act of asking a question as a proposal to add it to the *question stack*, whose topmost member, the *question under discussion* (QUD) represents the conversation’s immediate inquisitive goal, and, together with common ground, determines which downstream speech acts are relevant and which kinds of focal prosody are felicitous. Portner (2004; 2007; 2018) models directives and permissions as proposals to update the *to-do list*, which models interlocutors’ extra-conversational preferences or plans, and which influences the meanings of subsequent claims about obligation and permission (see also Charlow 2014; Starr 2020; Harris 2021; Roberts 2023).

Most purveyors of these models tell us little about what they are models of (Rubio-Fernandez and Harris, 2026). They can be interpreted in a variety of ways, to be made consistent with a number of the theories of speech acts that we’ve discussed. For example, Stojnić says that the discourse context “is a running record of *linguistic* information that is contributed by discourse-internal, linguistic cues” and that it, “in turn, fully determines the interpretation by fixing the content expressed by the discourse” (10). This is the most full-throated statement of a conventionalist take on conversational score, according to which it is wholly under the control of, and only available to conventional linguistic processes. Meanwhile, normative theorists think of the score as a running record of interlocutors’ commitments, entitlements, and other normative statuses (Brandom, 1994; Geurts, 2019; Kukla and Lance, 2009; Nickel, 2013).

The most widespread interpretation, which is made explicit by Stalnaker and Roberts (2012, 6), is to treat conversational score as a model of interlocutors' mental states. This makes Stalnaker's theory of assertion a close relative of Grice's: both understand speech acts in terms of their aim of changing psychological states. One point of divergence is that Stalnaker takes the relevant psychological states to be distributed between speaker and addressee, whereas Grice focuses on the addressee (see Harris 2017; 2020 and Simons 2025 for objections to this Stalnakerian tweak). A second possible point of divergence concerns Stalnaker's claim that an assertion is a "proposal" to add to the common ground. On a Gricean reading, to propose to do something is just to (communicatively) intend to do it—a construal that Stalnaker and other scoreboard theorists have sometimes seemed to accept (e.g. Stalnaker 2018, 385; Roberts 2012, 3). But Stalnaker has also sometimes rejected this interpretation (without offering an alternative), on the ground that we sometimes make proposals (including assertions) that we expect to be rejected (Stalnaker, 1978, 87).

## 4 Conclusions

Grice's approach to speech acts was among the first, along with Austin's, and it is still alive and well, with many contemporary defenders and significant advantages over rival theories. That said, there is much to be done to determine whether Gricean theories can do justice to the psychological, normative, and communicative facts about how speech acts work.

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