Speech Acts

LING-053 Semantics 1
UCSC
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• What is a speech act? Simplifying the picture a little, we'll identify speech acts with illocutionary acts.

• An **illocutionary act** is **doing** something by means of **saying** something.

(1) Open the window!

• The illocutionary act in (1) is **giving an order**.

(2) Is Mary home?

• The illocutionary act in (2) is **questioning**.
• A sentence can contain linguistic expressions or intonation that indicate the illocutionary force of a sentence.

(3) I promise that I will be there at 5.

(4) I order you to be there at 5.

• Verbs such as promise and order are called performatives: they allow the speaker to do the action the verb names by using the verb “in a certain way”. 
• Compare (3) and (4) to the following two sentences:

(5) I believe that it will be a sunny day tomorrow.

(6) I hope that it will be sunny tomorrow.

(7) I force you to be there on time.

• Verbs that have been thought to be performatives are **nominate, bet**, among others.
The Performative Hypothesis

• It was noted (Austin 1962) that performatives only seem to have their performative force in the present tense and with first person singular subjects:

(8) I promised that I would be there at 5.

(9) She ordered him to be there at 5.

• Performatives lose their performative force if embedded:

(10) John is betting that I promise to be there at 5.
• **Performative hypothesis:**
  Overtly or covertly, every sentence is contained in a sentence whose main predicate is a performative with a first person singular subject.

(11)  
  a. **Overt:** I promise that I’ll be there at 5.  
  b. **Covert:** I’ll be there at 5.  

(12)  
  *I say to you that* I promised I would be there at 5.

• In this analysis, (11-b) is ambiguous, its different readings depending on which underlying performative embeds the sentence.
The performative hypothesis is a hypothesis about the syntax of these sentences.

Some linguistic expressions occurred in main clauses with a certain illocutionary force and a certain kind of subject and in subordinate clauses introduced by a certain type of verb referring to an illocutionary force, with some agreement conditions between the subject of the main clause and the subject of the embedded clause.

Example: the idiom be damned if, with emphatic negation meaning

(13) I'll be damned if I'll vote for that man.

(14) #You’ll be damned if you’ll vote for that man.

(15) #Will I be damned if I’ll vote for that man?
• **be damned if** can only occur in an embedded clause embedded under a verb of stating:

(16) John says that he’ll be damned if he’ll vote for that man.

(17) #John fears that he’ll be damned if . . .

(18) # John says that I’ll be damned if . . .

• So, we can have the following condition for **be damned if**:

(19) The idiom **be damned if** with its emphatic negation meaning, can occur only **embedded under a verb of stating**, and the subject of the idiom must be **identical** in reference to that of the embedding verb.
(20) #Will I be damned if I’ll vote for that man?

(21) #I ask you whether I’ll be damned if I’ll vote for that man.