

Conventional speech act formulae: from corpus findings to formalization

Ann Copestake and Marina Terkourafi
Computer Laboratory, University of Cambridge¹

1 Introduction

This paper concerns the representation of formulae which conventionally encode particular illocutionary forces. The idea of a formula may be intuitively illustrated with reference to well-known examples in English. In context, both (1) and (2) can be interpreted as requests to close a window but (2) is intuitively more conventional/ formulaic than (1).

- (1) It's cold in here.
- (2) Could you close the window?

Our aim is to provide an account of illocutionary force which allows the conventionalized formulae to be regarded as interpretive shortcuts (as first described by Morgan 1978). That is, we assume that the use of a formula in a given context guides the hearer to a particular interpretation, but that that interpretation could potentially have been reached by full inference about the speaker's desires and so on. Nevertheless, the use of a conventional formula by a speaker can be assumed to make an intended illocutionary force clearer to the hearer, perhaps disambiguating intentions. Under this assumption, the conventional illocutionary force of utterances is represented separately from the compositional semantics. The conventional illocutionary force does not replace part of the compositional interpretation, as it might on an idiom theory of speech acts, but rather adds to it, thus licensing dual responses (cf. Clark 1979, Clark and Schunk 1980).

2 The data

Our work is based on a corpus of over 2,000 spontaneous exchanges in Cypriot Greek (Terkourafi 2001). Conversations between native speakers were tape-recorded in various settings and later transcribed. This enabled several physical or otherwise extra-linguistic attributes of the situation, such as the gender, age, social class of interlocutors, the relationship between them, and the setting of the exchange to be independently noted, and subsequently serve to reduce actual contexts of occurrence to schematic or otherwise 'minimal' contexts, consisting of the values of a limited set of contextual parameters (e.g., men, aged 31-50, of middle class, addressing women, aged 31-50, of middle class, for the first time, in a relationship of new customer to salesperson in a shop) but with all other specificities removed.

During the analysis, utterances realizing offers or requests were selected and classified as such depending on the addressee's uptake (Austin 1962). When uptake was unavailable or otherwise insufficient, desirability to speaker/hearer assessed based on the utterance's propositional content was used as a complementary criterion (see Terkourafi 2001: 33-36, 39-44). Definitions of offers and requests commonly appeal to the dimensions of speaker vs. hearer agency, or hearer vs. speaker benefit respectively. However, neither of these is unproblematic. In many contexts, an activity involves several agents cooperating to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome. For instance, a transaction in a shop can be viewed as a buying event, in which case the customer is the agent, or as a selling event, in which case the agent is the shopkeeper. Taking hearer uptake as the primary criterion for the offer/request distinction, with desirability to speaker/hearer as a secondary one was possible given the nature of the data, and guards against potential analyst bias to associate particular constructions with particular speech acts. On this view, (3) is an offer (to fetch a blanket), despite the fact that the agent of the action actually mentioned is the hearer; we return to such examples in 3.1 below.

- (3) [At home; Speaker: female, aged over 51, working class; Addressee: female, aged over 51, middle class; Relationship: friends]

thelis na scepastis?
want.2sg SUBJ cover.pass.2sg?²

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‘Do you want to cover up?’

The analysis of the linguistic means used to perform offers or requests in each such minimal context showed that different minimal contexts correlated positively with different verbal formulae. In other words, out of a set of semantically equivalent expressions conveying the same illocutionary force, particular formulae preferentially realize offers or requests. This is not the same as a particular pragmatic strategy being preferred, since each pragmatic strategy can be realized by several linguistic expressions (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987). That is, the association between verbal formula and illocutionary force turned out to be a conventional one, such that it could not be predicted by a general rationality principle as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978/1987: 76).³ Moreover, extra-linguistic features—speaker’s and hearer’s gender, age and social class, the relationship between them, the setting of the exchange, and the sequential placement of the utterance in the discourse—affect the distribution of formulae.

This survey is probably the most extensive one carried out to date for any language where the full context of natural interactions was directly observed (as opposed to studies on previously collected corpus data or experiments with artificial tasks). Most of the formulae observed are grounded in particular lexemes, especially inflected verbs rendered with a particular accent and intonation, but grammatical constructions such as imperative or 1st person sg. subjunctive verb forms may also receive a formulaic interpretation. The main criterion for identifying a formula is frequency in a ‘minimal’ context as outlined above (i.e. a set of co-occurring extra-linguistic features), but evidence of lexicalization, including a fixed word order, phonological reduction and a characteristic intonation contour, is also taken into consideration.⁴

We illustrate the notion of a speech act formula with reference to five such formulae that emerged from the data analysis: *echete NP?* (have.2pl NP?), *eʃi NP?* (have.3sg NP?), *tha ithela VP* (FUT want.past.1sg VP), *thelo VP* (want.1sg VP), and *thelis NP/VP?* (want.2sg NP/VP?). In the data, the first four almost always realize requests, while the last one almost always realizes offers. Use of the first formula is exemplified in (4).

- (4) [In a pub; Speaker: male, aged 31-50, middle-class; Addressee: female, aged 18-30, working-class; Relationship: new customer to salesperson]

echete: p^hinats?
have.2pl peanuts?
‘Do you have some peanuts?’

When uttered as an opening request by middle-class customers who walk into a shop for the first time addressing a service-provider, as in (4), *echete NP?* typically realizes a request. This is its most frequent interpretation in the data, accounting for 6 out of its total 9 occurrences in the corpus. Moreover, *echete NP?* is the most frequent verb form used by middle-class first-time customers addressing salespersons to perform opening requests: it is used 15% of the time in this context, with other verb forms following at 12% of the time or less.

The second formula, *eʃi NP?*, is similarly preferentially associated with opening requests by first-time customers addressing salespersons, only this time the customers are working-class, as in (5).

- (5) [In the open-air market; Speaker: female, aged 31-50, working-class; Addressee: male, aged 31-50, working-class; Relationship: new customer to salesperson]

eʃi mikres pu na min exun schedia pano? aspro
have.3sg small-pl. that SUBJ NEG have patterns on? white
‘Are there any small plain ones? In white.’

Again, this is the most frequent interpretation of *eʃi NP?* in the data, accounting for 20 out of its total 23 occurrences. *eʃi NP?* is also the most frequent verb form in opening requests from working-class first-time customers to salespersons, being used 14.8% of the time.

Contrary to the ‘commercial transaction’ setting in which the first two formulae were used, the following two formulae prevail in formal discussions on the radio and television, as in (6) and (7).

² Transcription conventions: SUBJ=subjunctive particle; FUT= future particle; NEG=negative particle; pass=passive; ?=rising intonation; (.)=brief pause; .hh=audible inhaling; (())=transcriber comment.

³ See Terkourafi (2002: 184-192) for a proposal of how to account for this relationship from a diachronic, macro-level perspective.

⁴ Terkourafi 2005 discusses this evidence in more detail.

- (6) [On TV; Speaker: female, aged over 51, middle-class; Addressee: male, aged 31-50, middle-class; Relationship: interviewee to interviewer]

tha ithela na prostheseo kati edho omos
 FUT want.past.1sg SUBJ add.1sg something here though
 'I would like to add something here though.'

- (7) [On TV; Speaker: male, 31-50, middle-class; Addressee: male, aged 31-50, middle-class; Relationship: interviewer to interviewee]

thelo na mbume sto thema ton piravlon
 want.1sg SUBJ go into-the subject of-the missiles
 'I want us to come to the question of the missiles.'

In these formal settings, *tha iθela VP* is typically used to perform requests by interviewees addressing interviewers. This is its most frequent interpretation in the data, accounting for 24 out of its 26 total occurrences. *tha ithela VP* is also the most frequent verb form realizing requests from interviewees to interviewers being used 18.2% of the time, with other verb forms following at 12.7% of the time or less. *thelo VP*, on the other hand, is typical in requests by interviewers addressing interviewees. This is its single most frequent interpretation in the data, accounting for 16 out of a total 37 occurrences, the remaining 21 occurrences being distributed among several other interpretations. *thelo VP* is also the most frequent verb form used by interviewers in requests addressed to interviewees, being used 22% of the time, with other verb forms following at 17.8% of the time or less.

The final formula, *thelis NP/VP?*, is independently preferred in a wide range of informal contexts to realize offers. Moreover, its interpretation as a commissive is the most frequent one, accounting for 103 of a total 112 occurrences in the corpus as a whole. For this formula there is direct evidence of lexicalization, for instance, the reduced phonology indicated in (8). In addition, *thelis NP/VP?* occurs utterance-initially in over 90% of instances in the corpus, the only items that can precede it being address terms, or the conjunction *lipon* ('so'):

- (8) [In a shoe-shop; Speaker: female, aged 18-30, working-class; Addressee: female, aged 18-30, middle class; Relationship: acquaintances]

'lis kafe? (.) indalos in' o kafes su?
 want.2sg coffee? How is the coffee your?
 'Do you want coffee? How do you take your coffee?'

In addition to frequency relative to a context and evidence of lexicalization, a standard argument for treating some English request forms as conventional, namely the different distribution of *please* with examples such as (1) and (2), also holds for the Cypriot Greek corresponding forms *parakalo* (formal 'please') and *ligho* (lit. 'a little', functioning as informal 'please'; cf. Sifianou 1992: 168). Whereas these are acceptable with conventional speech act formulae like the ones discussed above (9), they do not sound natural, and thus are not found, with non-conventional requests such as (10):

- (9) [On the radio; Speaker: male, 31-50, middle-class; Addressee: male, aged over 50, middle-class; Relationship: interviewer to interviewee]

... *tha ithela na mas pite tora na erthume ligho .hh eh sta tu iku mas*
 ... FUT want.past.1sg SUBJ us tell.2pl now SUBJ come.1pl a little er to-the.pl of-the.sg house our
 ... 'I'd like you to tell us now, to come if you don't mind to our internal affairs.'

- (10) [At a meeting of the philatelic society; Speaker A: female, aged over 51, middle class; Speaker B: male, aged over 51, middle class; Relationship: old colleagues]

A: *e niko? echo edho ta eksodha tis italias (.)*
 B: *ne*
 A: hey Nick? have.1sg here the expenses of-the Italy

B: yes

A: 'Hey Nick? I have the expenses from Italy with me.'

B: 'Yes.'

(where A's turn was interpreted by B as a request to reimburse the expenses)

3 The specification of formulae in HPSG

The verbal formulae considered above all correspond to inflected forms (with certain subcategorization) rather than lexemes. Thus what must be represented in an HPSG account is a conventional association between an illocutionary force specification and a sign which has normal syntax and semantics, a particular accent (important since interrogativity in Modern Greek is signaled prosodically), and possibly reduced phonology.⁵ For instance, the sign involved in the *echete NP?* formula could be generated from the lexeme for *echo* ('to have') by applying the lexical rules for 2nd person plural and for rising intonation. The exact specification of the syntax of the signs is not important here, since there is nothing unusual about them. What we do have to consider is the specification of the context features and the status of the stipulation that relates this to the rest of the sign, which we outline briefly here.

The simplest option is to treat the formulae as analogous to lexical entries (or idioms) in that a) each formula is a conventional association between phonology, synsem and context and b) all formulae are listed. Information specified about the formulae may further include their intonational contour, as this is a potential indicator of function (Rodriguez and Schlangen 2004) and situational context (Wichmann 2004). One possible hypothesis in this respect is that interrogatives conventionalized for a requestive function will be realized without the final rise of genuine questions. This agrees with accounts that associate falling vs. rising intonation on declaratives with speaker vs. addressee commitment respectively (Gunlogson 2003). Experimental results suggest the plausibility of this hypothesis (Nickerson and Chu-Carroll 1999).

3.1 Conventional illocutionary force and compositional semantics

We assume a C-ILLOC feature in CONTEXT used to represent conventional illocutionary force. This will only be specified in utterances where a formula is used. We remain neutral about whether there is any representation of inferred speaker intentions in the sign.⁶ We can thus distinguish three possibilities for utterances: (a) no conventional illocutionary force, speaker intentions must be derived by the hearer (via inference) from compositional semantics; (b) conventionalized illocutionary force, C-ILLOC, instantiated along with compositional semantics, hearer assumes speaker intentions are given by C-ILLOC (possibly defeasibly); (c) C-ILLOC is instantiated, no (useful) compositional semantics. The focus of this paper is on the second class of utterance but we also comment briefly on the other two classes.

On our account, C-ILLOC is only instantiated if a formula is involved. It is not present for (11), for instance, even though the compositional semantics directly indicates that a request is being made, because this is not a use of a conventional formula.

(11) [Discussion in parliament; source: http://www.parliament.cy/parliamentgr/010/010_01_02.HTM]

Zito ke parakalo na ghini anavathmisi tu kendru

Ask.1sg and entreat.1sg SUBJ be-done upgrading of-the centre.

'I ask and petition that the centre be upgraded.'

The inference from this to the speaker's intentions is presumably simpler than it is in (1) or (10), since the intention follows directly from the verb semantics, but the difference is not one that need be explicitly encoded.

⁵ We will not consider examples of formulae with non-standard syntax and semantics in this paper, but see Terkourafi (forthcoming) for a preliminary analysis.

⁶ A feature structure could be used to represent such intentions, even if the formalism is not well-suited to computing them, so it would be possible to assume some external component, analogous to the way morphophonology is indicated in Pollard and Sag (1994).

C-ILLOC is similarly not instantiated for (12) and (13) but in these cases, rather than directly indicating illocutionary force, compositional semantics provides the input to a process of inference about speaker intentions, yielding their interpretations as a request and as an offer respectively:

- (12) [At home; Speaker A: female, aged over 51, working class; Speaker B: female, aged 31-50, middle class; Relationship: mother to daughter]

A: *zina to moron pai pochi*

B: *ne*

A: Zina the baby go.3sg from-there

B: yes

A: 'Zina, the baby is going to the other room.'

B: 'Yes.'

- (13) [In an office; Speaker A: female, aged 31-50, middle class; Speaker B: male, aged 31-50, middle class; Relationship: employee to employer]

A: *irthen efimeridha kirie* ((first name))

B: *'ndaksi mbravo eghe mja mathca* ((unintelligible))

A: come-3sg.past newspaper Mr ((first name))

B: OK bravo I one look ((unintelligible))

A: 'The newspaper has arrived Mr ((first name)).'

B: 'OK good. I ((just wanna take?)) a look.'

Examples (11)-(13) exemplify the first class of utterance, where no illocutionary force is conventionally specified. When illocutionary force is specified by a convention of usage, there are two possibilities. The first is that C-ILLOC is instantiated along with the compositional semantics. The values of C-ILLOC we consider are REQUEST and OFFER which can be formalized along the lines of Perrault and Allen's (1980) approach. There, for instance, REQUEST(S,H,ACT) (where S is Speaker, H is Hearer and ACT is some action) has the constraint that H is the agent of ACT, the precondition that WANT(S,ACT(H)), the body BELIEVE(H,WANT(S,ACT(H))) and the effect that WANT(H,ACT(H)).

As a concrete example, take the case of *thelis* ('do you want x?') with a VP argument where the speaker is the agent of the VP, as in (14).

- (14) [At a shoe-shop; Speaker: female, aged 18-30, working class; Addressee: female, 31-50, working class; Relationship: salesperson to new customer]

thelis na valumen kanena pataki mesa?

want.2sg SUBJ put.1pl any insole in?

'Do you want us to put an insole in?'

C-ILLOC is specified as an OFFER in the formula, with the argument to the *thelis_rel* in the compositional semantics being coindexed to the argument position of OFFER. Schematically:

CONTENT: int(want (h, $\boxed{1}$ put-insole-in(s)))

C-ILLOC: OFFER(S,H, $\boxed{1}$)

In (14), the action offered is directly specified from the compositional semantics. However, this is not possible for all formulae. In a subset of the examples of conventional formulae this direct link is not possible. A relatively straightforward example is (8) where the argument to *thelis NP/VP?* is an NP. Here, the interpretation involves conventionalized metonymy and the argument to OFFER could be fleshed out as OFFER(S,H,TRANSFER(S,H,NP)), where TRANSFER is some suitably generic predicate.

A more complex case was shown in (3). In context, (3) realizes as an offer, but our formal OFFER requires that the agent of the action is the speaker. Thus the C-ILLOC of (3) cannot be OFFER(S,H,cover-up(H)). To allow for examples such as (3), we have to distinguish between the cases where *thelis* takes a VP with the speaker as the subject, which can be construed directly as conventional offers, and the cases where the hearer is the subject, which we treat as conventional offers with an indirection between OFFER and the specified action. Thus the C-ILLOC of (3) corresponds to something like:

OFFER(S,H,ACT'(S)) \wedge PRECONDITION(ACT'(S),cover-up(H))

That is, there is some implicit action ACT' which is offered, which is a precondition to the explicitly mentioned action of the hearer.

The third possibility mentioned above is that C-ILLOC is instantiated but there is no (useful) compositional semantics. An example of this is found with greetings like *Hello!*. However it is not clear whether request or offers ever fall into this category.

The value of C-ILLOC on a phrase is taken to be the unification of the C-ILLOC values of the daughters. Only a single conventional illocutionary force can be specified and thus if there were multiple C-ILLOC values, they would have to be mutually consistent. For instance, in (9) above, two C-ILLOC values are instantiated, one conventionally associated with the formula *tha ithela* and another due to the lexical item *ligho* (informal 'please'). Since both are specified as C-ILLOC REQUEST, unification succeeds in this case.

On the contrary, if *parakalo* (formal 'please') with a C-ILLOC value of REQUEST were to be added to (3) above, which conventionally bears the C-ILLOC value of OFFER due to use of the formula *thelis VP?*, the sentence would not receive an analysis as an OFFER. However, a sentence such as (15) does have an interpretation as a request.

- (15) *thelis na scepastis parakalo?*
 want.2sg SUBJ cover.pass.2sg please?
 'Do you want to cover up please?'

In (15), we assume that *thelis VP?* is not used as a formula, but has a purely compositional interpretation. In general, we assume that a non-formulaic interpretation is available when the formulaic interpretation is blocked, but leave a detailed account of this to future work.

4 Dual uptake

A potential advantage of representing C-ILLOC in CONTEXT and separately from compositional semantics is that the latter is not lost and thus might licence dual responses (cf. Clark 1979, Clark and Schunk 1980). For instance, in response to A's turn in (16) B provides both an answer as well as an action complying with her request.

- (16) [At a pharmacy; Speaker A: female, aged 18-30, working class; Speaker B: female, aged over 51, middle class; Relationship: new customer to salesperson]

A: *na mu kopsete apodhiksin?*
 B: *ne* ((proceeds to issue receipt))

A: SUBJ me cut.2pl receipt?
 B: yes ((proceeds to issue receipt))

A: 'Can you give me a receipt?'
 B: 'Yes.' ((proceeds to issue receipt))

The two parts of B's response in (16) are not equivalent. This lack of equivalence is seen in two ways. First, in the ordering of the two parts: responding to the interrogative semantics of A's turn takes place *before* complying with her request (or possibly overlaps with the beginning of the action). The reverse order of responding (first to the request, and then to the question) is intuitively ungrammatical, and indeed all 79 dual responses found in the corpus exhibit the order seen in (16), i.e. the answer always precedes compliance. The second way in which lack of

equivalence between the two parts of B's response shows up in the interactional consequences of providing only one of them. Not providing a verbal answer to the interrogative, while complying with the request, may at worst result in perceived impoliteness (cf. Clark and Schunk 1980).⁷ However, merely providing an answer but not proceeding to comply with the request can be considered downright uncooperative, and the 'smart alecky' nature of such responses has been noted more than once (cf. Bach and Harnish 1979; Bertolet 1994; Terkourafi 2001).

Other authors consider dual uptake. Asher and Lascarides motivate the introduction of dot types for conventionalized ISAs by dual uptake ((2001: 193ff.) but they do not provide an account of the asymmetry noted above. Representing the compositional semantics of utterances separately from their illocutionary force in our approach may enable us to capture this basic asymmetry.

Our approach is in contrast to Terkourafi and Villavicencio (2003), who assume that a conventional formula gives a default illocutionary force in the feature structure which may be overridden by an inferred value. However, *please* etc. depend on the utterance being a conventional request, a distinction which they cannot capture. Furthermore, if the value is a default there is little predictive power in the account, since in any constraint-based approach to defaults there can be no penalty for overriding a default. Finally, the overriding account implies a single computed illocutionary force and gives no insight into dual responses.

5 Conclusion and future work

We have outlined an approach to encoding conventional speech acts as conventions of usage within HPSG that is grounded on extensive empirical data. Our account is intended to capture Morgan's (1978) insight that conventional speech acts are interpretive shortcuts. Although modern versions of the performative hypothesis, such as Ginzburg and Sag (2001), could perhaps be extended to the formulae considered here, we believe that such an approach is inherently too inflexible to account for the observed use of the formulae. We do not have space here to discuss in full why the shortcut approach is preferable, but we believe that Morgan's argumentation is still essentially valid.

However, our account remains somewhat schematic. Although Green (2000) discusses a wide range of issues that affect the treatment of CONTEXT, overall the literature is limited and this makes it difficult to refine our assumptions about C-ILLOC, for instance. One important aspect of Terkourafi's work is the finding that the use of formulae is heavily dependent on extra-linguistic features as described in §2. Terkourafi and Villavicencio (2003) give a formalization of this in terms of a set of features in BACKGROUND. The intention there seems to be to hardwire these features as part of the formulae, but an alternative is to regard the distribution as more probabilistic in nature. This point is particularly relevant to the defeasibility of intentions inferred from the conventionalized C-ILLOC of speech act formulae: empirically, conventionalization shows up in relation to a context and not when considering the corpus as a whole, which means that there are other contexts in relation to which a particular speech act 'formula' may not function as a formula (i.e. as an interpretive shortcut) at all, but always require full-blown reasoning instead, leading to an open-ended list of potential interpretations. Future work will be aimed at fleshing out this account, by looking at data from English and Japanese in addition to the Cypriot Greek data and by considering discourse particles in more detail, as well as refining the encoding of the background features for extra-linguistic information.

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⁷ Clark (1980) reports on a series of experiments showing that the most important consequences—and, hence, reasons for—seriously attending to the literal meaning of indirect requests (by, e.g. acknowledging it in one's reply) lie with politeness.

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