Editorial

Recent advances in the syntax of speech acts

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This editorial sketches some general ideas and issues in the field of speech act syntax, and it highlights the development of the so-called cartographic approach to syntax in that domain. Given the recent focus of encoding speaker, addressee, and further speech act categories in the left periphery of the clause, the editorial points out the relevance of the contributions to this Virtual Special Issue.

1. Speech acts and syntax

For many decades now, speech acts have been one of the most prominent and pervasive topics in pragmatics. According to classical speech act theory, the illocutionary force of a speech act is characterized by a set of felicity conditions that hold for performing an act via a proposition-level linguistic utterance (Searle 1969). In other words, a set of sentences feature the same illocutionary force if they are subject to the same set of felicity conditions.

When we turn to the syntactic form of such sentences, the literature on speech acts has pointed out that changing the linguistic form of an utterance systematically influences how the utterance is interpreted at the level of illocutionary force. In particular, Searle (1969: 22) gives the following English examples where all three utterances are about Sam and smoking habitually, but the different word orders (± subject-auxiliary inversion) and modalities (± imperative) all express different speech acts: (1a) is an assertion, (1b) is a question, and (1c) performs an order.

(1) a. Sam smokes habitually.

   b. Does Sam smoke habitually?

   c. Sam smoke habitually!

Examples like in (1) have traditionally been accounted for by a literalist conception of speech acts, according to which the sentence types above differ in their syntax-semantics, and these differences determine their respective illocutionary forces (see Meibauer 2019; Recanati 2005 on the distinction between 'literalist' and 'contextualist' approaches in pragmatics). However, many years of syntactic research have shown that once we look at the interface between linguistic form and speech acts in more detail, we see that postulating a direct correspondence between form and speech act is far too simplistic (see Siemund 2018 for a recent overview of relevant phenomena). For instance, we can perform a question by using the word order *Sam smokes habitually?* (*Really?*) with rising intonation, or we can as well perform an assertion by using auxiliary-subject word order such as *Did he ever lift a finger to help you?* (meaning: 'He never helped you.'); see Trotzke (2023) for a comprehensive study on the different forms of those non-canonical questions.

Given this situation, one could adopt a view of the syntax-pragmatics interface that has already been articulated in early works of generative syntax, namely that grammar is to be strictly distinguished from language use (Chomsky 1965)—which would also mean the exclusion of pragmatic phenomena such as speech acts from syntactic theory. On the one hand, according to this view, there is propositional syntax and compositional semantics; on the other hand, there is pragmatics dealing with meaning in context (i.e., performed language), and the two domains are two distinct cognitive capacities.

Specifically, the generative tradition has distinguished between the cognitive foundations of grammatical competence and the cognitive basis of pragmatics, which has been regarded as an independent mental component that involves a "system of rules and principles constituting pragmatic competence" (Chomsky 1980: 224). All in all, although Chomsky (1965, 1980) and others did indeed mention the pragmatic component of human language, it was not regarded as a topic in most of the work in formal syntax at the time (with Ross 1970; Sadock and Zwicky 1985 being important exceptions).

This exclusion of pragmatic meaning from formal syntax was revisited when the so-called cartographic program in generative linguistics took off in the late 1990s—its central claim being that the full interpretation of sentences and in particular its illocutionary component is far more determined by syntactic and semantic principles than previously thought (see Rizzi 1997 and subsequent work). More specifically, cartographic approaches have focused on the so-called C-domain of the clause, where 'C' stands for 'complementizer'. To see the relevance of that domain for the topic of speech acts and illocutionary force, consider the following examples, in which the choice of the complementizer (i.e., the C-head) *whether* results in an interrogative and the choice of *that* in a declarative:

(2) a. (I wonder) whether Sam has smoked habitually.

    b. (I know) that Sam has smoked habitually.

As for the speech act potential of syntactic structures, the cartographic program for speech act syntax has thus focused on the widely-held assumption that "C is basically an indicator of mood or force […]: declarative, interrogative, and so on" (Chomsky 1995: 240) and thus determines clause types. In this context, Rizzi (1997) suggested that a single functional head within the C-domain is not enough to account for the speech act potential of the clause vis-à-vis other interpretive imports of the C-domain. In addition to the specification of force, the second kind of informational contribution of the C-domain concerns the fact that a complementizer is connected to certain properties of the verbal system. For example, since "COMP may be realized as *that* before tensed sentences and as *for* before infinitives" (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977: 434), the choice of the complementizer co-occurs (in English) with the choice of a tensed or an infinitival verb with *to*. When we adopt Rizzi's (1997) assumption that the C-system expresses an abstract specification of 'finiteness' (Fin) and put this together with the property of specifying the illocutionary force aka speech act potential of a sentence, the structural representation of CP, as a first approximation, can be dissolved into a force-finiteness system, as illustrated in the following schema:

(3) $[_{ForceP} Force^0 [_{FinP} Fin^0 [_{TP}\ldots]]]$

Crucially, the decomposition of the C-domain in (3) suggests that the concept of clause type or sentence mood (e.g., interrogative) is tantamount to the notion of illocutionary force or speech act. This is not quite accurate and has thus been noted by some cartographic approaches that explicitly distinguish between the encoding of clause type and the encoding of speech acts, thereby going beyond Rizzi's (1997) original proposal. Consider for instance indirect requests such as example (4a). In this context, Coniglio and Zegrean (2012: 446) have pointed out that the left periphery of the clause must contain (at least) two distinct syntactic projections (4b): one for the illocutionary force (ILL) and one for clause type (CT):

(4) a. Could you close the window, please? (#Yes, I could.)

    ILL = directive (requesting an action); CT = interrogative

    b. $[_{ILL} [_{CT} \ldots [_{TP}\ldots]]]$

This distinction between clause type and illocutionary force is in line with more recent approaches to speech act syntax because it facilitates the detailed investigation and decomposition of the actual pragmatic interpretation of syntactic forms—asking to what extent there are morphosyntactic reflexes of the speech act itself (and not only of the respective clause types). Those recent accounts are all based on the assumption that we can further decompose the notion of speech act once we look at the syntactic forms in more detail.

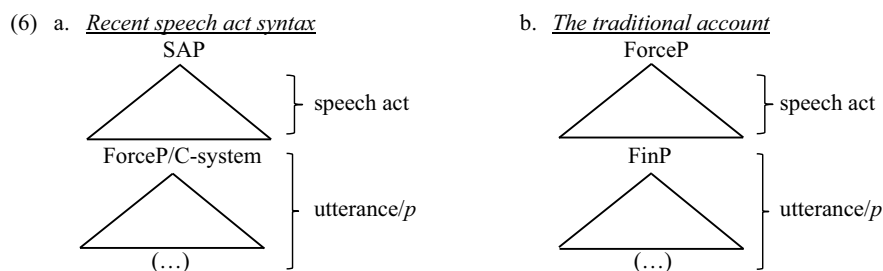## 2. Speech act phrase in recent theories and this special issue

The contributions in this Virtual Special Issue (VSI) are based on a recent development in cartographic syntax that many call a revival of the famous 'performative hypothesis' by Ross (1970). Look at the following two examples (Ross 1970: 222−223; 250):

(5) a. Prices slumped.

    b. I tell you that prices slumped.

Ross (1970: 223) claims that sentences like (5a) "must be analyzed as being implicit performatives, and must be derived from deep structures containing an explicitly represented performative main verb." In other words, the sentence (5a) involves a syntactic deep structure that contains two clauses (5'b), and (5'a) is derived from (5'b) via transformational rules.

(5') a. [s Prices slumped.]

   b. [s I tell you [s (that) prices slumped.]]

The postulation of an explicit encoding of the speech act (e.g., 'I tell you … ') in syntax has been adopted by a flurry of more recent syntactic research that proposes a (version of a) 'Speech Act Phrase (SAP)' in addition to Rizzi's (1997) ForceP sketched in Section 1 above. Crucially, this has consequences for the overall functional architecture of the clause in cartography. The version in (6a) is modelled according to Haegeman and Hill (2013), but it is representative of a whole strand of recent work postulating that there is an SAP above the complementizer system (C-system). In the original proposal by Rizzi (1997), speech act meaning was still encoded in syntax as part of the C-system (6b), as already sketched above:

(6) a. *Recent speech act syntax*

SAP
— speech act

ForceP/C-system
— utterance/p

(…)

b. *The traditional account*

ForceP
— speech act

FinP
— utterance/p

(…)

The main idea of more recent accounts, summarized in (6a), is that ForceP is selected by an articulated SAP, which can capture the (social) relation between speaker and addressee in the situation where the speech act is performed. Accordingly, the SAP is further decomposed into relevant projections for the role of the speaker and the role of the addressee (the 'hearer' in Haegeman's 2014: 134 terms):

(7) [SAP RoleP_speaker [SA' SA [SAP RoleP_hearer [SA' SA [ForceP (utterance)]]]]]

This VSI takes stock of this neo-performative strand of syntactic research and provides a representative collection of the latest advances in the syntax of speech acts. In particular, recent approaches in this field of research investigate the extent to which the illocutionary force component of syntax can be further decomposed (e.g., Corr 2022; Corr and Munaro 2022; Frey 2020; Frey and Meinunger 2019; Krifka 2023; Miyagawa 2022; Woods 2016), and explore whether we need separate projections for speaker and addressee within such decompositions (e.g., Haegeman and Hill 2013; Speas and Tenny 2003; Wiltschko 2021). Another 'hot topic' in this field pertains to the kind of role syntax plays for the illocutionary force of so-called non-canonical speech acts (e.g., Endo 2022; Hinterhölzl and Munaro 2021; Trotzke 2020, 2023), again taking into account the role of speaker and addressee for those special interpretations of certain clause types. Last but not least, a lot of insights for this type of functional decomposition above the Force domain of the clause come from empirical work on the syntax of discourse markers and pragmatic particles (see Haegeman 2014; Paul 2014; Artiagoitia et al. 2022; Bayer et al. 2015; Bayer and Struckmeier 2017; Del Gobbo et al. 2015 for representative collections).

The VSI includes work from all those recent domains. In particular, Krifka (2024) is concerned with the speech act decomposition of the major clause type declarative, proposing a syntax-semantics where a variety of different speech act interpretations of this particular clause type is not relegated to pragmatics, but can rather be derived compositionally from syntactic structure. Gärtner and Pankau (2024) and Trotzke (2024) address the distinction between indirect and non-canonical speech acts on the one hand and canonical speech acts on the other, with both contributions providing new perspectives on our notions of markedness and canonicity. Specifically, Gärtner and Pankau (2024) investigate the use of an enclitic particle in information-seeking questions in a variety of German and claim that this particle cannot be used in some of the prominent cases of non-canonical questions. Similarly, Trotzke (2024) also rethinks prevailing canonicity assumptions about the morphosyntactic inventory used to perform speech acts, and he proposes a new approach to the syntactic left periphery by focusing on components of social meaning such as politeness, and the way in which those components are encoded in syntax. The contributions by Villalba (2024) and Wiltschko (2024) extend the empirical domain from particle elements to discourse markers more generally. Villalba (2024) examines the syntax of some markers in Romance languages that are used as cues for exclamation speech acts. Wiltschko (2024), on the other hand, focuses on discourse markers in Austrian German and uses the interactional spine hypothesis to capture both their syntactic distribution and their pragmatic interpretation. The present VSI also includes two contributions that deal with the decomposition of speech act meaning in embedded domains (Woods 2024) and in non-propositional speech acts such as nominal reference (Trinh 2024). In particular, Woods (2024) compares different types of embedded root clauses in German and English and provides a detailed syntax-

pragmatics account for embedded attitudes and language-specific mechanisms of perspective shifting. Trinh (2024) compares different forms of address in Vietnamese and English and proposes to analyze the empirical patterns as a parametric difference that is based on the hypothesis that speech-act meaning is represented in syntax.

In sum, this VSI presents a collection of work that applies insights from different morphosyntactic domains to the syntactic representation of speech acts more generally, also working with the latest decompositions in that domain, which concern more recent functional pragmatic categories such as 'commitment', 'judge', 'grounding', and many more. In doing so, all contributions demonstrate to what extent linguistic form (aka 'grammar') can be regarded as a window through which we can view and determine relevant distinctions in the pragmatic domain of speech acts. While a lot of recent volumes have addressed recent trends in the investigation of speech acts from the perspective of (formal) semantics and philosophy (e.g., Fogal et al. 2018), this is the first state-of-the-art collection that solely focuses on the recent advances that have been achieved in the field of the syntax of speech acts. Accordingly, the VSI makes a distinctly new contribution to the field; all existing collections are either clearly restricted to a specific empirical phenomenon (e.g., Woods and Wolfe 2020), or they are not representing the current state of the art in the syntax of speech acts anymore (e.g., Aelbrecht et al. 2012; Beninca and Munaro 2011). My hope is that the new data, analyses, and frameworks presented in this VSI will further advance our understanding of the interplay between linguistic form and language in use.

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