UC Berkeley
Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society

Title
Speaker Alignment and Embedded Performatives

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4kb3w00v

Journal
Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, 1(1)

ISSN
2377-1666

Authors
Thompson, Henry
Wright, James

Publication Date
1975

Peer reviewed
Speaker Alignment and Embedded Performatives
Author(s): Henry Thompson and James Wright

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via [http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/](http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/).

*The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* is published online via eLanguage, the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.
Speaker Alignment and Embedded Performatives

Henry Thompson and James Wright
University of California, Berkeley

Numerous papers have appeared challenging Ross's formulation (Ross 1970) of the performative analysis, e.g. (Anderson 1969), (Fraser 1969), and (Sadock 1974). One of the most frequently attacked parts of this formulation has been the performative-as-highest-verb hypothesis. Although many counter-examples have been given, we know of no attempt to characterize the conditions under which performatives may embed while retaining their performative force. We believe that such conditions exist, and in this paper, we would like to examine one such condition on a class of embedding constructions in terms of the function of that embedding.

Jerry Morgan has discussed the utility of such a "functional" approach to grammar, that is, an examination of grammatical elements in terms of their function in a discourse (Morgan 1973). Explicit performatives, by their nature, do something rather than be something, and thus are uniquely suited to such a functional investigation.

The class of performative embeddings we are considering are those in which the performative is embedded in an expression of emotional state. Perhaps the most famous example of this class is given in (1):

(1) I regret to inform you that my cobra ate your chihuahua.

A more productive form of this class is that of infinitival complementation under adjectives, exemplified by (2) - (4).

(2) I'm pleased to announce the ascension of my only begotten son.

(3) I'm proud to nominate Homer T. Pettybone to be the next chairman of the Fraternal Order of Mastodons.

(4) I'm sorry to find you guilty of conspiracy to over-populate, Mr. Rabbit, but the law leaves me no choice.

Although this construction is highly productive, it is constrained in a number of interesting ways. Thus, many emotional state adjectives are not suitable for embedding performatives, as in (5), and other emotional state adjectives, when embedding performative verbs, remove those verbs' performative force, as in (6).
(5) *The Chair is surprised to recognize the delegate from Pretoria, confused, disconcerted.

(6) I am reluctant to find you guilty, but I may have to if your attorney doesn't stop making obscene gestures at opposing counsel.

After eliminating such cases, we are left with a group of emotional state adjectives that occur frequently with performatives while retaining performative force, a representative sampling of which we list below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am happy to</td>
<td>I am sad to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glad</td>
<td>sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pleased</td>
<td>distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proud</td>
<td>embarrassed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relieved</td>
<td>(I regret to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delighted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The positive adjectives above are part of a natural class which serves to report a positive emotional attitude on the part of a speaker towards some act or event. It follows that embedding a performative under one of these adjectives reports the speaker's attitude toward the speech act performed. In the case of the positive adjectives, this aligns the speaker favourably towards his performance of that act, while in the case of the negative adjectives, which are part of a natural class reporting negative emotional attitude, the alignment is unfavourable.

At the same time, many performative verbs have alignments of their own, so that one would expect that if the alignment implicit in a given performative is contradictory to that of the adjective under which it is embedded, the resulting sentence will be anomalous. This is indeed the case, as seen in (7) and (8).

(7) I am *sorry to congratulate on winning a year's supply of Cupid's Quiver, the raspberry flavoured douche.

(8) Your Honor, I am sorry that I must object to *glad opposing counsel's outrageous behaviour.

In order to account for for these grammaticality judgments in accordance with our comments above we propose the following principle:
The Speaker Alignment Principle (SAP)

A performative utterance may be embedded under a member of one of the classes of adjectives listed above only if that adjective functions to align the speaker in a direction consistent with the alignment implicit in context of that utterance.

The SAP predicts the grammaticality judgements in (7) and (8). The unfavourable alignment associated with sorry is inconsistent with the notion of favourable reaction which congratulate functions to communicate, while that of glad is consistent; whereas in (8) a favourable alignment towards the act of objecting, which is culturally marked as rude and impolite, is clearly inappropriate.

"Implicit in context" is necessarily vague, but involves such factors as speaker-based felicity conditions on the performative act, prevailing social attitudes, and the degree of speaker control over the action itself. There is, in addition, the speaker's anticipation of the addressee's reaction. It is the diverse character of this phenomenon that motivates the appellation of "functional", because it cuts across the traditional boundaries of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in seeking an explanation for an overtly syntactic constraint, as such a condition on the permissibility of embedding might once have been considered.

On the basis of this concept of alignment in context, it is possible to distinguish four classes of performative verbs with respect to favourable and unfavourable alignments: those which are neutral, embedding freely under either type of adjective; those which strongly involve a favourable alignment, thus embedding only under positive adjectives; those which tend to involve a favourable attitude, but which may also embed under negative adjectives in contexts where the speaker is not a free agent; and finally a small class which strongly involve an unfavourable alignment, embedding only under negative adjectives. A representative sampling of each class is given below:

I. Neutral: announce, inform, report, say, tell (In McCawley's expansion of Austin's classifications (McCawley 1973), these are all Expositives.)

II. Favourable Alignment: apologize, baptize, bequeath, congratulate, nominate, promise, pronounce, swear, undertake, vow (McCawley - Behabitives, Operatives, Commissives)
III. **Favourable Alignment** But (allowing unfavourable alignment when performed under duress): allow, recognize, resign, permit, propose, vote, declare, find

IV. **Unfavourable Alignment**: complain, object, protest  
(McCawley - Dehabitves, Expositives)

Verbs in Category I are characterized by a lack of implicit alignment, stemming from their use as emotionally neutral, informative verbs. Note that they all belong to the class of Expositives. Because of this lack of alignment a speaker is free to embed a category I verb under either a positive or a negative adjective, thereby aligning himself either favourably or unfavourably towards his speech act, as we see in (9).

(9) I am pleased to announce that Nelson Rockefeller's sorry appointment has just been confirmed.

Verbs in Category II are characterized in normal circumstances by a felicity condition which requires that the speaker perform the act voluntarily. Searle has discussed this in some detail with respect to the verb *promise* (Searle 1969), and the rest of the verbs in this category seem to share a similar felicity condition. This in turn implies a favourable alignment on the part of the speaker, permitting embedding under positive adjectives, but precluding it under negative adjectives, as can be seen in (7) above.

Verbs in Category III differ from those in Category II in that when a speaker performs a speech act involving one of them he does not necessarily do so voluntarily. For instance, one may resign voluntarily or under pressure. Embedding these verbs under a negative adjective is thus possible only in contexts involving coercion or duress, since one does not voluntarily do what one is opposed to. The pattern for verbs of this category is exemplified in (10) - (12).

(10) I am pleased to cast my vote for Phineas T. Phogbound.
(11) *I am sorry to cast my vote for Manfred Malaprop, considering that he is the perfect man for the job.*
(12) I am sorry to cast my vote for Manfred Malaprop, but he owns the mortgage on my house.

Verbs in Category IV appear to be socially marked as non-cooperative, thereby implicating that the
speaker is obliged to do as he does by force of circum-
stances and precluding a favourable alignment. Example
(8) above belongs in this class. This class appears to
be extremely limited in membership, and it is not clear
to us that it does, in fact, constitute a separate
class.

This classification of performatives is in terms
of characteristics orthogonal to those used in previous
taxonomies, and so there is no simple relationship ap-
parent between the position of a verb in any of those tax-
onomies (we have examined those of Searle, Austin,
Fraser, and McCawley), and its category as defined
above. It does seem reasonable however that all Cate-
gory I verbs will be Expositives in the Austin-McCawley
sense, although the converse is probably not true. We
think the phenomenon discussed in this paper exemplifies
the kind of explicit metric needed to adequately class-
ify performative verbs, where previous investigators
have largely used their intuition (pace Searle's word
to world/world to word work).

Fraser has shown (Fraser 1973) that it is possible
to embed performatives under certain modals (e.g. must,
have to, can, be able to) while retaining the perfor-
mative force of the utterance. The SAP correctly pre-
dicts both which modals will combine with which verbs
to create hedged performatives, and when such hedged
performatives will embed under what adjectives. First
we note that for have to and must the lack of voluntar-
ine they convey implies a negative alignment, while
the voluntariness associated with can and be able to
implies a positive alignment. The SAP claims then that
we will be able to find can and be able to forming
hedged performatives with verbs from categories I, II,
and III but not from IV. Likewise it predicts that
have to and must will combine with verbs from categories
I, III, and IV. Examples (13) – (20) below demonstrate
the correctness of this claim.

(13) I am now able to report that we can see the light
at the end of the tunnel.
(14) I am now able to bequeath the Hope diamond to you,
my only remaining relative.
(15) After considerable effort, I am now able to find
in favour of the defendant.
(16) ??After spending two nights in this dump, I am
able to complain that the food is terrible. 
(17) I have to report that the tunnel just collapsed.
(18) *I have to swear to love, honour and obey.
(19) Mr. Nice, I have to declare you guilty, despite
my personal feelings in the case.
(20) Waiter, I have to complain about the cockroaches in my soup.

Hedged performatives formed like those above adopt the alignment of the participating modal. Thus hedged performatives containing *can* and *be able to* function as performatives in category II, that is, they embed only under positive adjectives, while those containing *must* and *have to* behave like those in category IV, embedding only under negative adjectives. This pattern is exemplified by examples (21) and (22) below, where we see a verb from Category I which normally has no restrictions on embedding. When it forms a hedged performative with *be able to*, it behaves like a category II verb, but when it combines with *have to*, it behaves like a category IV verb.

(21) I am happy to be able to tell you the results of the last race.

(22) I am *happy to have to* tell you the results of the last race.

The SAP attempts to account for a single condition on a particular class of embedded performative constructions. It is difficult to imagine a way to account for the facts presented in other than functional terms. Other conditions on this and other similar classes of embedding constructions are certainly needed, and they also will require statement in functional terms. (23)–(26) below give some examples of such other constructions which seem to invite a functional explanation.

(23) It will come as no/a surprise to you, my friends, when I declare my opposition to the measure at hand.

(24) The man who I hereby nominate for this office is Homer T. Pettibone.

(25) You two, who I now pronounce man and wife, may now embrace.

(26) I choose to resign.

In conclusion, we hope we have demonstrated in this paper the utility of investigating grammatical phenomena in a frame of reference which, although not formal, is nevertheless explicit, and that this small demonstration will encourage the use of such a functional approach in other investigations of similar recalcitrant problems which, like this one, cut across traditional boundaries.
Footnotes

1. We owe a debt of gratitude to George Lakoff, for many helpful suggestions and examples, to friends too many to mention for many hours of discussion, and to Robin Lakoff for championing the "explicit but not formal" approach. Needless to say, all errors of both omission and commission are none's responsibility but our own.

2. Due to Robin Lakoff

3. The grammaticality judgements for these sentences are for the performative reading.

Bibliography


Morgan, Jerry L. 1973. "How can you be in two places at once when you aren't anywhere at all?". CLS 9.


