

Business Logic

Lecture 5: Uses and Function of Language

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Lecture Learning Objectives:

At the end of the lecture, you will be able to:

1. Distinguish the different functions of language.
2. Explore ways in which sentences/passage serve multiple functions.
3. Differentiate linguistic form from language functions
4. Explore the many uses and forms of language.

A mixture of functions is a natural feature of almost all our uses of language. We can see this in our own speech and writing. Emotive language may be used to advance our purposes in directing others: “That conduct is utterly disgusting!” says parent to child, expressing an attitude, seeking to direct behavior, and (with those same words) probably reporting a fact. We may say that language has **three major functions**:

1. Informative
2. Expressive
3. Directive

To these we may add less common types of use:

4. **Ceremonial language** (as when we say, “How do you do?” upon being introduced to a stranger), in which words may combine expressive and other functions; and
5. **Performative language** (as when we say, “I apologize for my foolish remark”), in which words themselves serve, when spoken or written, to perform the function they announce. **Other examples** are “I congratulate you, . . .” “I accept your offer, . . .” and “I promise you that. . .

”**Logicians** are chiefly concerned with language used informatively affirming or denying propositions, formulating or evaluating arguments, and so on. In reasoning it is this informative function of language that is the principal concern.

The **uses of language** must be distinguished from the forms of language. The several uses of language (informative, expressive, etc.) are implemented using different forms. **Sentences** (the units of our language that express complete thoughts) may be declarative in form, or exclamatory, or imperative, or interrogative.

In summary, the principal uses of language are three: informative, expressive, and directive. The grammatical forms of language are essentially **four**: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory. There is no sure connection between the grammatical form of a passage and the use or uses its author intends.

Language that serves any one of the three principal functions may take any one of the four grammatical forms.

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These broad categories of non-informative uses language will include the following:

- Expressive
- Directive
- Performative
- Ritual (in Copi's book – Ceremonial)

Identifying these different uses is often not an easy matter. Skill in doing so will come only with attentive practice. We must develop an ear, as it were, for picking out which use is most prominently involved in the passages we are interpreting. Recognizing the primary use that a particular sentence is intended to have requires close attention to context and content. And developing this skill in recognizing differences in languages uses will take practice.

• The Expressive Use

I have tried to make it clear that not every sentence has an informative use. Indeed, we quite often use sentences for purposes other than providing information. A very common example of such a use of language is what we will call its expressive function. Expressive Directive Performative Ritual. Consider this **example**: Someone says, "I am so sorry your cat is ill. Please accept my sympathy." It should be clear to you that the primary function of these sentences is not to inform someone of something. There is little, if any, intention to inform, despite the fact that some information is conveyed (information about the health of the cat, the psychological state of the speaker, and so forth). Rather, in this case, the speaker's primary interest is not to inform, but to express his or her emotions or feelings. Because such sentences are not used primarily to inform and as such have no content that can be evaluated as true or false, such sentences would not ordinarily figure in the construction of arguments.

One caution: Don't be misled by the use of "express" here, for while all uses of language may be considered "expressions", we are using the term "expressive" in this context as roughly equivalent to the ideas of venting, revealing, manifesting, evoking, or provoking feelings. We use language in this expressive function when we are trying to vent our own emotions or when we are trying to evoke emotions in our audience, or both.

As an example of the use of language both to vent and to evoke feelings, consider this: "OMG!" "How vicious can a person be?"

• The Directive Use

Here we have yet another task that sentences are used to accomplish. In this case, the task is to get someone to do, or not to do some action. Suppose someone says: "Take your cat to the veterinarian!" It would be a mistake to think that this person was trying merely to convey information or to express his or her feelings. Rather, in this case the speaker's primary intention is to provoke action in his or her audience; as we might put it, the speaker here is issuing a command or an imperative. We call this the directive language use. The speaker is not providing information but has issued a directive that is neither true nor false.

Accordingly, **directives** do not ordinarily form a part of arguments. However, even though such directives are neither true nor false, it does make sense to appraise them as, for example, appropriate or inappropriate, warranted or unwarranted, loving or hateful.

Another caution: There is a difference between the sentence "Take your cat to the veterinarian!" and "You ought to take your cat to the veterinarian." The latter sentence may express some claim that is either true or false. Consider this example: Someone notices that your cat has a runny nose and watery eyes. He says to you, "These are symptoms of feline upper respiratory infection. This is a serious feline illness. A veterinarian may be able to help your cat recover. You ought to take the cat to the veterinarian." Now we have an argument. The conclusion of this argument is intended to cause some action, but also to inform the cat owner of some course of action that the facts call for. Such arguments have often been called practical syllogisms or practical arguments, since their conclusions do serve the practical function of informing us of what course of action we ought to take.

What this example also makes clear is that one and the same sentence can involve more than one language use. Indeed, more than two functions can be present. With a certain urgency of voice, I may well add the expressive function to my claim and directive: "Take your cat to the veterinarian right now!" Because language uses can be combined in this way, I have made a point to refer to the "the primary intention" of a speaker or writer in determining the primary language use at play in the particular passage under investigation. Accordingly, we will identify the language use of a sentence as informative, expressive, or directive if that function is the primary one. Making this identification does not preclude acknowledging that other functions may also be at play in the passage that is being interpreted.

• The Performative Use

It was **J. L. Austin** who helped to bring our attention to the performative language use. As he pointed out, in successful performative utterances we accomplish an action in and through the saying of certain words. Here we must not be confused by the fact that all language uses involve doing things with words, for example, informing, directing, venting. The **performative language use** is a special case of doing things with words. In the case of the performative language use, some particular action is accomplished in and by saying certain things in certain circumstances.

Consider the act of making a bet or a promise. The way that we engage in these actions is by saying certain things in certain circumstances with the appropriate sincerity, etc. The way that I engage in the act of betting you something is by saying to you, "I bet you..." If you agree, and you are competent, sincere, and so forth, the bet is on. Similarly, the way that I promise you something is by saying certain words to you with the appropriate earnestness and with your willingness to trust me. Usually, I say, "I promise..."

While such performative utterances are neither true nor false, and accordingly cannot be used to construct arguments, they certainly can be assessed as being successful or not. **For example**, just saying the words, "I bet you," is not sufficient for engaging in the act of betting, for among other things, you must agree to enter the wager. Lots of things can go wrong. If you do not agree, my attempt to bet you something fails I said the words, "I bet" but I did not bet you.

• The Ritual Use

The **ritual language** use is very closely related to the performative function. As in the case of the performative, the ritual function may involve the accomplishment of some deed by the use of words. **For example**, in saying the words of the pledge of allegiance to the flag, we may well be doing something, namely, pledging our allegiance to our country. But we need not be doing this. Indeed, we might just be going through the motions of a ritual. This use of language marks it off from the performative in an important way. We put this difference as follows: unlike its performative cousin, in its ritual function, words are not used to bring something about.

There are countless such ritual uses of language, for example, saying a prayer, saying "Good-bye," saying "Happy Birthday," toasting newlyweds, and so forth. Normally, when we say to someone "How ya doing?" this is not an inquiry into his or her well-being, but a ritual greeting. We engage in the act of greeting someone by saying these words. The words, we might say, constitute a kind of handy formula for greetings. Of course, we

can greet each other differently, with different words, but when we adopt commonly accepted formulas, we are using language in its ritual function. Perhaps you can think of some further examples of this ritual use of language.

Exercise 1

A. Which of the various functions of language are exemplified by each of the following passages?

1. Check the box on line 6a unless your parent (or someone else) can claim you as a dependent on his or her tax return.

—U.S. Internal Revenue Service, “Instructions, “Form 1040, 2006

Answer: Directive

2. ‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 1871

3. What traveler among the ruins of Carthage, of Palmyra, Persepolis, or Rome, has not been stimulated to reflections on the transiency of kingdoms and men, and to sadness at the thought of a vigorous and rich life now departed . . . ?

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 1823

4. Moving due south from the center of Detroit, the first foreign country one encounters is not Cuba, nor is it Honduras or Nicaragua or any other Latin American nation; it is Canada.

5. I was a child, and she was a child,

In this kingdom by the sea,

But we loved with a love that was more than love—

I and my Annabel Lee—

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Annabel Lee,” 1849

6. Reject the weakness of missionaries who teach neither love nor brotherhood, but chiefly the virtues of private profit from capital, stolen from your land and labor. Africa awake, put on the beautiful robes of Pan-African Socialism!

—W. E. B. Dubois, “Pan-Africa,” 1958.

7. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
—I Cor. 13:1

8. I herewith notify you that at this date and through this document I resign the office of President of the Republic to which I was elected.
—President Fernando Collor De Mello, in a letter to the Senate of Brazil, 29 December 1992

9. American life is a powerful solvent. It seems to neutralize every intellectual element, however tough and alien it may be, and to fuse it in the native good will, complacency, thoughtlessness, and optimism.
—George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, 1934

10. The easternmost point of land in the United States—as well as the northernmost point and the westernmost point—is in Alaska.

B. What language functions are most probably intended to be served by each of the following passages?

1. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful.
—Justice John Harlan, dissenting in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 1896
Answer: Informative. The purpose of the passage is to inform that the United States permits no system of caste or preference.

2. Judges do not know how to rehabilitate criminals—because no one knows.
—Andrew Von Hirsch, *Doing Justice—The Choice of Punishment* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976)

3. When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilization.
—Daniel Webster, “On Agriculture,” 1840

4. The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.
—Edmund Burke, letter to William Smith, 1795

5. They have no lawyers among them, for they consider them as a sort of

people whose profession it is to disguise matters.

—Sir Thomas More, Utopia, 1516
Answer: The primary function of this passage is expressive, evoking the reader's antipathy toward lawyers

6. White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.

—The National Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), 1968

7. The bad workmen who form the majority of the operatives in many branches of industry are decidedly of the opinion that bad workmen ought to receive the same wages as good.

—John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, 1859

READINGS AND VIDEO (Please see the digital copies of the materials.)

Reading 1 Hall, R. Logic: A Brief Introduction. Retrieved from
<https://www.stetson.edu/artsci/philosophy/media/A.%20chapter2.pdf>

Reading 2 Copi, I., Cohen, C & McMahon, K. (2014). Introduction to Logic Fourteenth Edition. London: Pearson Education Limited

Video 1 Functions of Language in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsWjk020ag0>

LECTURES (Please refer to the PowerPoint presentations)

ACTIVITY AND ASSESSMENT

Answer Exercise 1 (Write your answer in a separate sheet of paper)

REFERENCES:

Introduction to Logic

Irving Copi

Carl Cohen

Kenneth McMahon

14th edition, Pearson Education Limited, 2014

Logic : A Brief Introduction

Ronald Hall, Stetson University