

Neustic Nuances

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In fairly recent research, published in e.g. [2] and [4], Peter Hanks and François Recanati bring up the phenomenon of *force cancellation*. Force cancellation occurs when a given utterance, or part of an utterance (or (il)locutionary act or what have you), does not actually have its *prima facie* illocutionary force/mood, perhaps not even any force at all.

Hanks and Recanati provide the following alleged examples of this phenomenon: lines uttered by an actor on-stage [2], assertoric sentences in a poem [2], direct quotation in spoken language [2], irony [4], echoed utterances [4], thought and speech reports [4], negated clauses [2, 4], clauses joined by various connectives (from “or” to “*puisque*”) [2, 4]. That is, on the one hand, utterances somehow “put on display” by a sentence and, on the other, utterances somehow embedded as clauses in complex sentences.

Hanks and Recanati both hold that force cancellation takes place in special *cancellation contexts* that prevent the force of sentences uttered in such a context to take effect; their force does not actually come into force, as it were. In his account of cancellation Recanati also reminds his readers of Hare’s fruitful distinction between the *tropic* and the *neustic* aspect of an utterance [3, 4].

To Hare in [3] the phrastic of a sentence is the “content” that assertorical, interrogative, and imperative sentences can share; the tropic is the “force” or “mood” that makes a sentence assertorical, interrogative, or imperative; the neustic is what tells us that the speaker “subscribes”, “endorses”, or “commits” himself to what he says. Cancellation (according to both [3] and [4]) consists in uttering a sentence that has a tropic (and a phrastic), but no neustic.

Recanati wants a uniform theory of cancellation for both embedded and unembedded (displayed) cases of cancellations: to him the tropic force of an utterance is what ties the constituents of a proposition together, whereas whether an utterance has neustic force or not depends on whether the speaker is also the “enunciator” of the utterance, i.e. on whether the speaker at the time of the utterance commits himself to what he says or whether he acts as an alleged mouthpiece for what somebody else (possibly a quite generic somebody) says or would say or might say.

To us, building on the, unfortunately not so well known, speech act theoretical tradition from [1] and [5], a tropic or mood is rather defined by the obligations an utterance with that tropic/mood places on the sender/enunciator and that specify the happiness conditions of the utterance (like believing and having good-enough evidence for what you assert, wondering what you ask, wanting an addressee to do what you ask him to, or having authority over people you order about). The neustic force of an utterance, to us, is not a constituent of the utterance at

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all, but the fact that these tropic obligations are come into force; that the speaker does have these obligations.

Consequently, we recognize (at least) three distinct kinds of phenomena that one may conceivably describe in terms of force cancellation: (1) subsentential clauses joined by connectives – e.g. disjunctions or conditionals, (2) utterances not used in communication proper – e.g. speaking to yourself or writing sample sentences on a whiteboard, (3) displayed utterances – e.g. in fiction or drama or in irony. But we stress that these are really three quite different kinds of cases.

In the first case, the connective sentence case, we would say that the constituent clauses do not have a force or mood at all. The complex sentence as a whole (or rather: the *message* it expresses) has a tropic, but none of the constituent clauses of a conditional or disjunction has one.

In the second case, where the speaker is not engaged in communication, her utterances may well have a tropic (and there need be no enunciator distinct from the speaker), but she need not fulfil any of the happiness conditions that go with the illocutionary act. Such utterances quite lack the neustic aspect; the fundamental conditions for such an utterance's having neustic force are never met.

In the third case, the case of displayed utterances, the neustic aspect of the utterance is not really cancelled but rather re-directed (or displaced, as [4] has it). The speaker, in and by engaging in communication, signals that the happiness conditions of a "locutionary message" (phrastic + tropic) are fulfilled; call this the "illocutionary message" (cf. [5]) of the utterance. In the normal case, the speaker conveys an implicit illocutionary message to the effect that she meets the happiness conditions of the explicit locutionary message of what is said. In this kind of cancellation cases, the illocutionary message conveyed is rather that someone else is committed to meet them. In effect an illocutionary message is a, normally implicit, report on what [4] calls "the illocutionary context" of the utterance.

Using the discussion in [2] and [4] as exemplification, we aim to show how such a more nuanced view on the workings of neustic (and tropic) force may be useful in contemporary philosophy of speech acts and communication.

References

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