

Are performatives real? Evidence from a language with realis/irrealis distinction¹

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Abstract. In this short squib, I reopen the issue whether declarations, including explicit performatives, are a special case of assertions (namely, self-verifying assertions), or whether they form a distinct type of speech acts (namely, acts that do not describe the world but change it). I argue that languages with a realis/irrealis distinction bear on this issue because, under the second hypothesis, they should not show realis but irrealis morphology. I show that this is indeed the case in the Oceanic language Daakie spoken in Ambrym, Vanuatu.

Keywords: declarations, performatives, speech acts, realis, irrealis, Oceanic languages

1. Introduction

In spite of being the focus of Austin’s groundbreaking essay *How to do things with words?*, and in the face of being identified as one of the five major categories of speech acts in Searle (1975), performative speech acts, or “declarations”, are shabbily treated in linguistic semantics. They also often go unmentioned in descriptive grammars and are rarely treated in language typology (but see Fortuin 2019).

In this short article, I will report an observation about the Oceanic language Daakie spoken in Vanuatu that throws light on the nature of declarations. Daakie is a language with a strict realis/irrealis distinction, where the realis modality is reserved for reporting events that actually happened or are happening, and states that obtained in the past or still obtain. The question that naturally arises in such a system is: Are declarations, which do not describe the world but whose utterance are meant to change it – are they marked by realis modality, or by irrealis modality?

Prima facie, one can justify two expectations. On the one hand, by uttering a declaration like *I wish you a happy birthday* or *I promise to hand in my report in time* or *I hereby open the buffet* or *The meeting is hereby adjourned*, the speaker S guarantees that the core proposition is true – that S has a certain attitude towards addressee’s birthday, that S is under an obligation to hand in the report in time, that S opens the buffet, and that the meeting is suspended. With the uttering of these declarations, that is, at the very moment they are uttered, these propositions are true, and the addressee can count on their truth. Consequently, we should expect realis morphology. On the other hand, one could argue that at the moment when these declarations are being uttered

¹I feel very honored to contribute to this Festschrift for Regine Eckardt. I think we must have met first back in 1995 in Blaubeuren when the plan came up to create the Sinn und Bedeutung conference, and we had many inspiring conversations since. I was happy to have lured her into the position of a vice director at ZAS, and later, when ZAS became a member of the Leibniz Association, as our representative in the Geisteswissenschaftliche Zentren Berlin. This short squib is related to the project ERC 787929, ERC Advanced Grant SPAGAD “Speech Acts in Grammar and Discourse”. It is inspired by Regine’s work on explicit performatives, even though it disagrees with her analysis.

they are not true yet; rather, they become true only after the utterance is completed. This is a good reason to expect irrealis morphology.

The answer to this question has consequences for our understanding of declarations in general. There is an ongoing debate whether declarations are a genuine speech act type, or rather a subtype of assertions (or “representatives”). For example, Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) argue that declarations – in particular, explicit performatives that name the particular act they perform, as in *I promise to come* – are a special type of assertions. The idea is attractive, as declarations in general, and explicit performatives in particular, are expressed by declarative sentences, the same syntactic clause type that is used for assertions. They are special assertions insofar as they are self-verifying: To check whether they are true one does not have to look at the circumstances that obtain in the world at large, but the utterance of the assertion itself suffices as a guarantee that they are true. As Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) state, this line of reasoning has been pursued by many philosophers of language and linguists, and they cite prominent scholars like Bach and Harnish (1979) and Bierwisch (1980) that side with them.

On the other hand, in Searle’s famous taxonomy of illocutionary acts (Searle 1975), declarations belong to a distinct type of speech act. They differ from assertions in their direction of fit: In assertions, the words should express what the world is like, whereas in declarations, the goal is to make the world follow the words. In this, declarations are fundamental for creating the social world around us (Searle 2010). Searle (1989) defended this view of declarations against the analysis as self-verifying assertions, arguing that declarations come with a sincerity condition that the speaker actually intends to perform the act, and the mere assertion that the proposition is true does not guarantee that the speaker has this intention. Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) challenge this argument, but do not address the general property of declarations as speech acts that are designed to change aspects of the social world.

The analysis by Eckardt (2012) follows the assertoric analysis, but with a twist: In an explicit performative like *I (hereby) promise to come*, the performative verb *promise* introduces an event argument, and the utterance of the sentence self-referentially refers to this event, as can be seen with the overt demonstrative *hereby*. With the explicit performative, the speaker then says that the utterance event (or rather the event of information transfer) is a promise to the speaker to come. So, explicit performatives are analyzed as assertions about the utterance itself. It is a bit unclear whether we should understand this as an assertion about the world – it depends on whether the utterance is seen as part of the world, or as outside of the world it describes. Also, it is unclear what to think about declarations that are not explicit performatives and do not name the act itself, as in *The meeting is adjourned*. There is no obvious reason to assume that the utterance of such sentences can be understood as being about the utterance event.

One groundbreaking semantic treatment that models Searle’s distinction between assertions as fitting the words to the world, and declarations as fitting the world to the words, is Szabolcsi (1982). With an assertion, a speaker applies a proposition, a function from world-time indices to truth values, to a particular world-time index (typically the world and time at which the utterance happens), claiming that the result is truth. Notice that this does not change the world, it rather diagnoses the world, or rather that world-time index, as being such-and-such. This is different with a declaration: Here, the speaker changes the world-time index from one in which the core proposition was not true to one in which the proposition is true. If I tell, as a

guest, to my partner, *The buffet is open*, I just change the shared information between me and my partner. If I announce, as a host, *The buffet is open*, I change the state of the world itself, where before guests were not allowed to eat from the buffet, and after, they are. Szabolcsi proposes radically different interpretations for assertions and declarations, where assertions are interpreted as functions from indices to truth values, and declarations, as functions from input-indices to output-indices; hence her article is also one of the first instances of dynamic semantics. She even proposes that the meanings of subexpressions, down to lexical items, is split between a descriptive type and a performative type.

I showed in Krifka (2024b, a) that the assumption of a split between descriptive types and performative types is not necessary. I also tried to make precise the idea of a minimal change of an index to another one in which a proposition holds, employing a branching-time framework and arguing that this change is not functional, mapping an input index to a unique output index, but relational, relating an input index to potentially many output indices. In Krifka (2024c) I argued that there are syntactic differences between declarative sentences that are used in assertions and those used in declarations.

In a language with a realis/irrealis distinction, realis is the typical modality of assertions, whereas irrealis is reserved for predictions, commands, promises and the like (cf. von Prince et al. 2022). Hence, following the assertoric account of declarations, we should expect realis morphology. Following the dynamic account of declarations, we should not be surprised to find irrealis morphology, as the core proposition is not true at the input index.

2. Daakie

So, let us look at the situation in Daakie. The data are based on my own ongoing fieldwork that started in 2009. Daakie has five simple and one complex mood markers, in particular realis RE expressed by *m*, potentialis POT expressed by *b/p*, and an augmented form for future FUT expressed by the combination of a prefix *a-* with potentialis (the three other markers for distalis, realis negation and dependent negation are not relevant for our discussion). See Krifka (2016) for the uses of these moods in root clauses and embedded clauses, and von Prince (2015) for a similar system of the closely related language Daakaka.²

I will illustrate the uses of the three moods first before we look into the expression of declarations. Example (1), from a report about events during the fighting for the independence of Vanuatu in 1980, illustrates the use of realis for past events and states. The references refer to the audiovisual corpus that I recorded, which is partially available at the DoReCo database (<https://doreco.info/>), and will become fully accessible at the ELAR database (<https://www.elararchive.org/>).

- (1) kidye-**m** syivye popat, (...) popat **mwe** kapu-pwet.
1EX.PC-RE slaughter pig (...) pig RE lie-stay
'We slaughtered a pig, the pig was lying (there)' (Indep.080)

²As for the glosses, 1, 2 and 3 stand for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person, EX and IN for exclusive and inclusive, SG, DU, PC and pl for singular, dual, paucal and plural, C.RE and C.NR for realis and non-realism complementizer, LNK for linker, POSS for possessive, DEM for demonstrative, FOC for focalizer and TR for transitive.

The use of realis for ongoing events and/or states is illustrated in (2), a sentence uttered when the speaker showed me the plants in his garden.

- (2) lii-vih buk **mo** pa dudumuo.
 tree-banana already RE carry.fruit first
 ‘This banana tree is already carrying fruit, before others.’ (Jemis2.052)

Potentialis, in root clauses, is used for suggestions, commands, and promises, as illustrated in the following example:

- (3) Mwe kie ka, do-**p** kuo, ngyak ko-**p** kuo ot ke lan womela,
 RE say CP.NR 1IN.DU-POT run, 2SG 2SG-POT run place C.RE at beach
 ngyo na-**p** kuo lon teh.
 1SG 1SG-POT run in sea
 ‘He said, let’s run, you, you should run on the beach, me, I will run in the sea’ (Aiben2.037)

Future is expressed by a combination of the prefix *a-* with potentialis, where *a-* is presumably derived from the non-realis complementizer *ka*, which occurs in these cases in Daakaka. This is illustrated by (4), which also contains an occasion of potentialis to mark commands (‘run away’).

- (4) ki-**p** kuo byen mango **a-bwe** muot **a-bwe** top-bini et.
 2PL-POT run because mango FUT-POT fall FUT-POT hit-kill 1IN.DU
 ‘Run away because the mango tree will fall and kill us.’ (Aireen1.010)

Example (5), from a fable, shows a use of the first person potentialis expressing a promise. There is no word expressing the notion of ‘promise’ in the language.

- (5) na-**p** lingi vovyoh ne ngyo bwe saa-pwet lan lii-óó.
 1SG-POT put heart LNK 1SG POT hang-stay on tree-coconut
 ‘I (promise that) I will put my heart up hanging on the coconut tree.’ (Ilsong5.059)

Example (6) illustrates the future with a first-person use, which is clearly not a promise but a prediction.

- (6) mwe kie ka yaapuo mwe kie ka **a-na-p** met **a-na-p** pwet
 RE say C.NR god RE say C.NR FUT-1SG-POT die FUT-1SG-POT stay
 okelé.
 here
 ‘He said, God, he said, when I die I will stay at this place.’ (Andri9.095)

The use of potentialis for commands and promises as in (3) gives rise to the expectation that potentialis may be used with declarations. In particular, promises can be seen as guarantees to make a presupposition true, a meaning that is close to the index change triggered by declarations. I investigated this informally by asking native speakers about the modal forms to be used for actions that accompany transfer of property, as in ‘I (hereby) give you this mango’, and found that, in general, the potentialis was used. There is an example of this type in the corpus, when a visiting bishop of the Presbyterian church who was born in the village gives a speech to the congregation and hands over a wrapped-up tent for emergencies. The example is given in (7). The left screenshot of the movie is taken at the very moment when the bishop is finishing

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this sentence; he is placing the tent on the floor. The right screenshot shows the bishop shaking hands with the elders of the congregation seconds after that sentence was uttered.

- (7) **na-p** sengane m-an tiri ki-nyee nge.
1SG-POT give POSS-3SG something DEM-PL FOC
'I hereby give this (belonging to the house³) all.' (Obed1.040)



Figure 1: Bishop handing over a tent to the congregation and making a round of shaking hands. Port Vato village, Ambrym, 2023, recorded by Abel Taho. Precise date unknown, as date feature of camera was not set properly.

We find the use of irrealis also in magic formulas that are supposed to change the world, as in the translation of a children's bible by Abel Taho (Krifka and Taho 2013). Notice that, after the creation of light in a declaration, there is an assertion that states that the light in fact existed.

- (8) Yaapuo mwe kie ka, "Ot **bo** lóp." Lonlakele, ot **mo** lóp.
God RE say C.NR place POT light now place RE light
'God said, "Let there be light." And it was light.'

There are also instances in the corpus in which speakers refer to their own speaking. In this case, realis is used; note that English allows for the progressive in such cases.

- (9) **na-m** kie ko-p van gone.
1SG.RE say 2SG-POT go make.TR
'I tell you / I am telling you, you should go and do it.' (Wanmei3.073.)

We can understand such sentences as referring to the locutionary act, the act of speaking, and not the illocutionary act, a distinction that was also made by Eckardt (2012) in her analysis in which explicit performatives refer to aspects of the act of utterance itself.

These data suggest that declarations are not special cases of self-verifying assertions. The use of the potential in such cases is consistent with the analysis originating with Szabolcsi (1982), which ascribes an interpretation as devices that change the index of interpretation to such sentences.

³The sentence features a possessive for objects that are drinkable or belong to the house.

3. Conclusion

So, how should the question in the title of this squib be answered? Declarations are of course “real” in the sense that they exist, as specific speech acts, in language. However, they do not describe reality; rather, they are tools to change it. Languages with a realis/irrealis distinction bear direct witness to this property, and should be included in typological investigations of declarations. However, the irrealis strategy is certainly not the only one that we find in the expression of performativity. Fortuin (2019) lists various instances in which declarations are expressed as perfectives or perfects such as the Ancient Greek aorist (cf. Bary 2012); a similar case can be seen in the performative use of past participles in German (cf. Ørnes 2020). Declarations remain a somewhat paradoxical speech act after all.

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