

How to Do Things with Wands and Words: The Pragmatics of Magic

This paper investigates spell-casting in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels from a linguistic perspective. Drawing on speech act theory and syntactic analysis, we argue that spells are performative utterances in which the wand functions like a demonstrative. That spells require skill and focus and that they can sometimes be blocked seem to differentiate them from everyday performatives. We argue that ordinary speech acts too benefit from locutionary expertise and that they are far more social than individualist pragmatic theories might suggest. Less ordinary but close non-fictional parallels are found in attested linguistic practices such as divinations and charms from earlier periods and from non-industrial societies.

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"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest." *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Chapter 10.

1. Introduction

The idea that works of fiction can provide useful insights into language and the mind is hardly new; Lewis (1978), Currie (1990), Byrne (1993) are just a few among those who have written on this topic. In this paper we investigate spell-casting in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels from a linguistic perspective. We begin by demonstrating that spells in the Harry Potter corpus are constrained syntactically, both in the form of the spell utterance and in the use of the wand itself - we show that the latter is in some ways similar to a demonstrative in involving the integration of nonlinguistic material into utterances, perhaps to be modeled as a special kind of deictic pronominal.¹

¹ All data comes from a written corpus consisting of the following works by J.K. Rowling, all published by Bloomsbury in the UK, by Scholastic in the US. The titles are followed by the abbreviations by which they will be referenced:

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's/Sorcerer's Stone (1997/1998)	[SS]
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (1998/1999)	[CS]
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (1999/1999)	[PA]
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000/2000)	[GF]
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2003/2003)	[OotP]
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2005/2005)	[HBP]

We consider the pragmatics of the spell, from the point of view of speech act theory. The bulk of the paper focuses on the pragmatic constraints that characterize spells in Harry Potter, which we analyze as special kinds of performative utterances that use words to change the world. We will consider the role of intention; some spells happen without the spell-caster's meaning them to, yet intentions can matter. Although spells can happen unintentionally, focus is crucial to ongoing magical success. Spells are not just texts; they are *performances* (cf. Garner 2004 on Anglo-Saxon charms). There are differing degrees of magical skill, which reflect both innate gifts and practice. Finally, we consider counterspells - magic spells can be resisted and deflected in various ways, introducing an interactional component that makes spells less a personal than a social achievement.

We draw on speech act theory and recent work in the philosophy of language and literature to show how the spells in the world of Harry Potter created by J.K. Rowling draw on attested linguistic practices, some in the world we and our colleagues inhabit and others in different historical or cultural contexts, where witchcraft, prayer, divination, and charms are believed effective.

We then consider its relationship to real-life cursing and expressives, which have certain similarities of syntactic form. However, in both use and meaning, the magical spells are shown to be quite different from the expressives analyzed by Potts (2007) and others. This result is in accord with that of Culpeper and Semino's (2000) finding that the speech act values of verbs in texts relating to witch hunts in Early Modern England differ from their counterparts in the present day.

2. The structure of spells

In this section, we provide a brief overview of the syntax of spells in the Harry Potter corpus. Spells are mostly imperative in form (subjectless), containing verbs based primarily on Latin (or something Latin-like) and English, with a few examples from Greek and other languages. The majority of spells can be classified according to their VP structure, and the corresponding role of the wand, revealing a number of interesting generalizations.

2.1 *Object drop*

The first category to consider are those spells which take no syntactic object, but seem to require a deictic function of the wand (the wand is pointed at the object of the spell). An example of this type is REPARO (repairs damage to an object), along with EXPELLIARMUS (the disarming spell),² STUPEFY, AVADA KEDAVRA (the killing spell), ALOHOMORA (the door unlocking charm), and EVANESCO (the vanishing spell):

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (2007/2007)

[DH]

² Mark Mandel (p.c.) has pointed out that in addition to being directed at the holder of a weapon (usually/always? a wand), EXPELLIARMUS specifies expulsion of a weapon from its wielder's grasp. As such, it might also be included under the spells with an incorporated object in section 2.4.

(1) a. 'Yeah,' said Harry. 'In ... in a minute. I'll just clear this up.' He indicated the smashed bowl on the floor. Ron nodded and left. '*Reparo*,' Harry muttered, pointing his wand at the broken pieces of china. They flew back together, good as new, but there was no returning the Murtlap essence to the bowl. OotP, Ch. 15³

b. "Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, '*Alohomora*!' The lock clicked and the door swung open. PS, Ch. 9

c. Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "*Expelliarmus*!" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet CS, Ch. 11

As the contexts indicate, the pointing function of the wand here is essential. Indeed, the wand seems to be acting as a pronominal object of some kind (this may be comparable to deictic pronouns in ASL, see Meier 1990). We discuss this deictic function in more detail below.

2.2 *Explicit object*

A second category of spell is that which *requires* a syntactic object. As far as we have been able to determine, there is only one spell of this type in the corpus: LOCOMOTOR (moves objects).

(2) Professor Flitwick went scurrying after them, his wand held out before him; he squeaked '*Locomotor trunks*!' and Professor Trelawney's luggage rose into the air and proceeded up the staircase after her, Professor Flitwick bringing up the rear. OotP, Ch. 26

It is interesting to note that in all examples of LOCOMOTOR, the object is a bare noun. The spell is not a command to move just any of instance of the noun, but a certain individual (or set of individuals, in the case of the plural). Thus, it appears that in these cases the wand is functioning as a definiteness or demonstrative marker.

2.3 *Optional object*

A third type of spell takes an object, but permits object drop under certain conditions. The canonical case of this is ACCIO (the Summoning Charm). When the object is present, however, it is a bare noun. The spell also seems to require that caster of the spell has some idea of where the object is. Furthermore, when the object is proximal, the wand is pointed at it. That is, once again the wand seems to be acting as a definiteness or (more likely) a demonstrative marker.

(3) "Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, "threaten me with a dragon. Right..." He raised his wand once more. "*Accio Dictionary*!" GF, Ch. 20.

³ We give only chapter numbers, rather than page references, since the pagination varies across the different editions.

(4) Harry seized the wand lying beside his camp bed, pointed it at the cluttered desk where he had left his glasses, and said “*Accio Glasses!*” DH, Ch. 7

The following example is an exception to bare noun generalization, one of only two full NP cases in the corpus (the other is a failed spell/misfire, a situation about which we will have more to say in subsequent sections).

(5) 'We need to return to the castle at once,' said Dumbledore. 'Rosmerta,' and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation, 'we need transport - brooms - 'I've got a couple behind the bar,' she said, looking very frightened. 'Shall I run and fetch -?' 'No, Harry can do it.' Harry raised his wand at once. '*Accio Rosmerta's brooms.*' HBP, Ch. 27

The full NP in this case (the possessive *Rosmerta's*) is required to override a default. Both wands and brooms are very personal items. “*Accio broom(s)*” would normally summon the caster’s (in this case, Harry’s) own brooms, to bring about a summoning of someone else’s brooms, a full NP specification is required.

Turning now to the possibility of object drop with the summoning charm, several types of this occur. In one situation it appears that wand point in itself in some sense determines the object. It may even be that the wand point *is* the object. We will refer to this as a PRONOMINAL SUMMONS.

(6) Harry pointed his wand at the bullfrog that had been hopping hopefully towards the other side of the table - '*Accio!*' - and it zoomed gloomily back into his hand. OotP Ch. 18.

The wand can also be used in a manner that that is distributive or collective; the summons is clearly not accomplished by pointing at a single object:

(7) 'Quills down, please!' squeaked Professor Flitwick. That means you too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parchment! *Accio!* Over a hundred rolls of parchment zoomed into the air and into Professor Flitwick's outstretched arms, knocking him backwards off his feet. OotP, Ch. 28

Finally, there are cases of object drop that are context-dependent in the sense that the pointing of the wand is not sufficient to determine the object of the summons:

(8) "George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped. "What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody. "What is that in your pocket?" "Nothing!" "Don't you lie to me!" Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "*Accio!*" Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley's outstretched hand. "We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. "We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!" It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all. "*Accio! Accio! Accio!*" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans. "We spent six months developing

those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away. "Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!" GF, Ch. 6

In this example it is Mrs. Weasley's question "*What is that in your pocket?*" that determines (at least the initial) target of the spell. We suggest that this might be compared to various theories of pronominal reference which incorporate definite descriptions such as the E-type pronouns of Evans (1980) or the D-type analyses of donkey anaphora (Neale 1990, Heim 1990). However, this example cannot strictly be seen as a case of E-or-D-type anaphora, since what is involved is a wand-point rather than a pronoun, and the anaphoric relationship is to a demonstrative rather than a definite description. Therefore, we claim that the wand-point is a *W-type pronoun*.

What exactly is a W-type pronoun? A demonstrative pronoun (**that**) whose referent is determined either deictically (explicit pointing with the wand as in examples (1) and (6)), or anaphorically (as in (8) via Mrs. Weasley's initial question). In (8) there are probably in fact multiple wand-points subsequent to Mrs. Weasley's question, but the target (the object of ACCIO) is already determined.

2.4 Incorporated objects

A further syntactic phenomenon seen in spells is that some spells seem to have incorporated nominal objects. An example of this is MOBILI- (a spell used to move things). There are two clear utterance examples of this in the Potter corpus:

MOBILIARBUS: a spell to move a tree

(9) Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, *Mobiliarbus!*" The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. PA, Ch. 10

MOBILICORPUS: a spell to move a person

(10) "There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little -- overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er -- perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safety back in the castle. We can take him like this...." He muttered, *Mobilicorpus.*" As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. PA, Ch. 19

In both of these cases, what we see is clearly an example of noun incorporation (NI) of the direct object (cf. Baker 1988). Where a wand point occurs, it may be pronominal (W-type). Syntactically, this is similar to the optional doubling seen in noun incorporation structures. But, the wand could also be specifying the direction in which the object is to be moved. It is in fact difficult to be certain here. These are the only two examples of MOBILI- in the entire corpus, and neither offers much clarity on this point.⁴

⁴ Including EXPELLIARMUS in this class (as suggested in footnote 2, per a suggestion by Mark Mandel) expands the number of cases considerably. However, this does little to clarify the role of the wand. If, as Mandel suggests, EXPELLIARMUS specifies "expulsion of a weapon from its wielder's grasp", it is difficult

2.5 Wand as object

Finally, there are cases in which the wand itself is the object of the spell. Examples of this kind include: LUMOS/NOX (illuminates, turns off light), conjuring spells: AVIS (birds come out of wand), ORCHIDEOUS (produce flowers), AGUAMENTI (produce water).

(11) "*Lumos*," Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. PA, Ch. 3

(12) "Yes... hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees. . . quite rigid. . . ten and a quarter inches. . . *Avis!*" The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight. GF, Ch. 18

Once possible (and quite plausible) analysis of these (suggested by John Whitman, p.c.) is that they involve covert imperatives directed at the wand itself: "Produce X!"

Summing up the structural constraints on spells, even this rather brief overview⁵ illustrates a number of crucial points. First, the incantation itself is not sufficient to cast a spell. The wand is essential to the successful casting of a spell. Indeed, a broken wand causes trouble, resulting in potentially disastrous misfires, as we'll discuss below. Second, the syntactic function of the wand in the casting of a spell varies. In many spells it serves a spatial/directional role, in the sense of being aimed at target, or specifying direction (cf. "directional" signs in ASL). In others, the wand is the object of the spell itself: when illuminated, or conjuring substances such as water, birds, or flowers. In other cases (those involving object drop), the wand serves as a pronominal marker – this is the use we have dubbed the W-type pronoun. Finally, the wand functions as a demonstrative marker when a bare noun is present.

The licensing of object drop relies on the context as well as the wand point. As mentioned above, the wand point serves as both a demonstrative marker (for bare nouns, examples (2-4)) and as a W-type pronoun (in cases of object drop). It is interesting to note that the demonstrative pronoun associated with the wand displays no distance distinction, but this is not unheard of cross-linguistically (cf. French, German) and languages with only one demonstrative pronoun exist (Koromfe, Niger-Congo; Kera, Chadic; Koyraboro Senni (Songhai), and Supyire, Gur).⁶ Perhaps as a consequence, spells which take syntactic objects prefer the minimal object (that is, a bare noun) needed to specify the desired "target" the spell. If the

to separate the aiming of the wand from the weapon (presumably the wand) from its wielder. That is, is the wand-point in this case a pronoun doubling the incorporated direct object, or is it a demonstrative specifying the indirect object?

⁵ For example, we have not discussed such lexical oddities as DESCENDO – which is transitive, and causes the object to move downwards.

(i) "*Descendo*," muttered Ron, pointing his wand at the low ceiling. A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder slid down to their feet. DH, Chapter 6

A more detailed examination of these possibilities will have to be postponed to future research.

⁶ Haspelmath (2005), thanks to John Whitman for pointing out the facts and the reference.

context requires, this constraint can be overridden (as in the example with “Rosmerta’s brooms”).

3. Speech acts and spells

Magical beings though they are, wizards and witches (unlike, for example, giants and centaurs) are definitely human.

(13) “Centaur are not the servants or playthings of humans,” said Firenze [a centaur addressing a classroom of young witches and wizards] ...

“Professor Trelawney [a witch on the Hogwarts faculty]—“ began Parvati [young witch who is a student at Hogwarts] ...

“—is a human,” said Firenze simply. “And is therefore blinkered and fettered by the limitations of your kind.”

OotP, ch. 27

We can expect then that the semantics and pragmatics of speech acts in everyday human languages should help us understand the many and varied spells humans with magical powers cast. The preceding section sketches the main outlines of the syntactic structure of spells. But now we need to think more carefully about just how wizards and witches manage to do things using words in conjunction with their wands. Our hope is that in the course of this discussion we may also further understanding of how the rest of humankind, unequipped with wands or magical powers, manages to do things with words.

3.1 Clausal structure and utterance effects

Discussions of speech acts often begin by examining connections between syntactically distinct clausal types and what standardly gets done with utterances of sentences of particular structural types. So, for example, a declarative is canonically used to assert or state something, an interrogative to inquire or ask, an imperative to issue some kind of directive (order, invitation, advice). Several recent formal accounts associate with clausal structures a type of effect their utterance has on ongoing discourse. Assertive utterance of a declarative, e.g., can be viewed as adding the content of the proposition expressed by the declarative to the Common Ground (see Stalnaker 1978), which is (more or less) what interactants are taking as mutual knowledge. An interrogative has a different discourse effect, adding to something that has been called the Questions-Under-Discussion component (see e.g., Ginzburg 1995a,b; Roberts 1996 and 2004), and an imperative, it has been argued, adds something to the addressee’s To-Do List (Roberts 2004, Portner 2007).

Yet though we can associate clausal types with these abstract kinds of discourse effects, there is an imperfect correspondence between clausal type and what we more ordinarily think of as utterance force (what is often called ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE, a notion we discuss in more detail below), the kinds of effect associated with the speech acts designated by words like *advise*, *warn*, *apologize*, *promise*, *order*, *invite*, or *bet*. Advising, e.g., can be done by uttering an imperative, as in (14a) but it can also happen via utterances of declarative (14b,c) or even interrogative form (14d).

- (14) a. Practice some simple spells with your wand every day.
b. You should practice some simple spells with your wand every day.
c. I advise you to practice some simple spells with your wand every day.
d. Are you practicing some simple spells with your wand every day?

Declarative 14b uses a modal and its relation to the imperative 14a illustrates an intimate connection between imperative and modal semantics that Portner 2007 explores in some detail, relating different ‘force’ of imperatives (orders, advice, invitation, etc.) to different kinds of modality (deontic, teleological, bouletic, etc.). This tight connection, Portner argues, closely parallels that between assertive contributions to Common Ground and subsequent evaluation of epistemic modals. What is put on an addressee’s To-Do list by utterance of an imperative becomes part of the ordering source used to evaluate subsequent non-epistemic modals. (See Kratzer 1991, 2009, and Portner 2007, 2009 for further discussion; we will consider below the question of whether we can always identify the basic discourse effect of uttering an imperative with updating an addressee’s To-Do list.)

3.2 Imperatives in spell-casting and elsewhere

Given that what seems essentially the same speech act—e.g., advising an addressee to practice some simple spells every day—can be accomplished by uttering any of a number of different sentential forms, there is no reason to think that the verbal component of all spells takes the same syntactic form. Analyzing the syntax is made a bit tricky by the use of fake Latin, Greek, Aramaic, etc., but none of the incantations attested in the corpus appears to have an overt subject. One possibility is that there is no subject, as in a common sentence type in English – the imperative:

- (15) a. Locomotor trunks! ‘Move the trunks!’
b. Lumos! ‘Produce light’

The missing subject in many ordinary uses of imperatives generally corresponds to the addressee. Observe, however, that for these spells there is no obvious addressee—and certainly no human agent for whom the spell is added to their To-Do list. Indeed, spells generally have targets rather than addressees.⁷ So does this mean that the apparent imperative form of some spells is deceptive, that they are not like other English imperatives? Sadock and Zwicky 1985 have observed that English imperatives are very similar syntactically to curses – not necessarily the magical kind.⁸

- (16) a. Screw you.

⁷ We owe this observation to Carl Ginet (p.c.). Curses also can target an inanimate object or an absent enemy.

⁸ Not all curses in English take this form:

- (a) You swine!
(b) Bastard!

- b. Damn this computer.

Wishes in English, which may but need not have explicit addressees, also sometimes look like imperatives.

- (17) a. Have a happy birthday!
- b. Be well.
- c. Don't rain. [muttered to oneself while driving to picnic site]

Utterances of 18a,b are typically directed to an addressee and it is the addressee of whom the utterer wishes the stated property—having a happy birthday, being well—to hold. It is implausible, however, to say that the addressee is being enjoined in any way to act so that the ‘to-do’ list might more appropriately be called a ‘to-be’ list, a point that Portner 2007 credits Craig Roberts with suggesting (in the form of ‘make-true-of-X’ list, a form that may still problematically suggest action). In the case of 18c, one might say the utterer is also the addressee but certainly that individual is not assuming responsibility for the weather. And recall John Whitman’s suggestion, which we mentioned earlier, that some spells may have the wizard or witch’s wand as that entity whose ‘to-do’ (or ‘to-be’) list is to be altered.

Prayers, which are addressed not to human actors but to a divinity, also often use imperative form in English.

- (18) a. Give us this day our daily bread.
- b. Bless all who are sick or hungry tonight.

Notice that the Judeo-Christian god is reported (in English language translations of the Bible) using what look like imperatives to get things done, presumably through divine powers, but even ordinary humans, if appropriately authorized, can use similar forms to effect something without relying on any addressee’s action. 19a and b do not seem to enjoin an addressee capable of action; they contrast sharply with an obvious addressee-directed (advising/instructing) imperative like 19c.

- (19) a. Let there be light. [And there was light.]
- b. Let the games begin. [And the games are thereby launched.]
- c. Let the dough rise until double in size.

If it were not the case that English does not allow *pro*-drop except in special contexts like postcard writing, it would be tempting to say that the sentences in 19a,b have a phonologically null first-person subject. Perhaps the verb *let* can be used (by appropriately empowered utterers) without an overt first-person subject in initiating actions. Spell-casting may well be another context in which *pro*-drop operates in English.

3.3 Spells with (unpronounced) first-person subjects: performatives?

Actual Latin, which provides a source for many verbs used in spells, is among the many languages that do allow empty pronominal subjects. Some of the Latin-derived verbs used in

casting spells seem to carry what looks like 1st-person agreement morphology, and the interpretations assigned to them strongly suggest a missing first-person subject but not an addressee with a To-Do list to be updated.

- (20) a. Accio Firebolt! ‘(I) summon (my) Firebolt!’⁹
b. Descendo. ‘(I) lower [target].’
c. Expecto patronum. ‘(I) expect/look for/call forth (my) patronum.’¹⁰

Is the dropped subject the speaker, or some Magical Force? (We may wonder whether there is a substantive difference, since the Magical Force is presumably contained within the speaker.) Assuming that it is indeed a first-person subject that is dropped, the resulting syntactic possibility (first person, simple present tense, indicative, active...) looks rather like these Ordinary English sentences:

- (21) a. I bequeath my snow shovel to my dear friend Molly.
b. I dub thee Sir Walter, Knight of the Round Table.
c. I hereby christen this ship the H.M.S. Flounder.
d. We find the defendant guilty as charged.
e. I bet you 17 dollars it will rain tomorrow.
f. I now pronounce you spouses for life.

It was just such structures that provided J.L. Austin, to whom we owe our title, with his central examples of the world-changing potency of speech acts of all kinds. Early in Austin 1962, his landmark discussion of how to do things with words, he drew attention to utterances whose world-changing effects may seem particularly dramatic, overriding their status as truth-evaluable. He said of examples such as those in 21, “to utter the sentences (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it... When I say, before the registrar or altar ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.” (p. 6) He called such sentences and utterances of them (explicit) PERFORMATIVES and claimed that it would be senseless to evaluate them as either true or false, noting (p. 56) that “verbs in the first person singular present indicative active” are especially well suited for performative use.

The examples in (21) illustrate what Austin suggested might be the canonical form for explicit performatives: first-person subject and simple present tense on the verb. But, as he observed, many sentences in other grammatical forms seem to be on a par with the performatives in (22) in that their utterance seems less to describe than to do.

- (22) a. You’re hired!
b. The defendant is hereby sentenced to life without parole.
c. This certificate entitles the bearer to a free ice cream cone.
d. This court finds Mrs. Packer sane.
e. This meeting is declared adjourned.

⁹ A Firebolt is a type of broom.

¹⁰ Every witch and wizard has a distinctive Patronum—Harry’s is a silver stag—that may be called forth in times of need for protection. We will say more below about the important Patronus spell.

- f. Use company e-mail for only for business-related communications.

Agentless passives as in 22a,b,e are plausibly closely connected to the 1st-person active forms in 20; the grammatically third-person subject of 22d probably designates the (collective) utterer and is thus semantically like the first-person subjects in 22. And of course, it is hardly surprising that the imperative in 22f seems less to represent an existing state of the world than to establish one (in this case to set in play a prohibition). Imperatives generally aim to shift how things are, not to describe them. Declarative sentences, however, have typically been the focus for discussions of performativity. In the case of imperatives there is an alternative account of their world-changing potency—updating a To-Do list or something similarly action-oriented—whereas it is for declaratives that the contrast with the more traditionally recognized function of (simply) stating or asserting—adding to the Common Ground, just expanding the list of what interactants are treating as known—seems to arise.

Towards the end of his discussion, Austin himself rejected a sharp distinction between performatives and what he had initially called *CONSTATIVES*, utterances that primarily state or describe or report on some state of the world whose existence does not depend on the utterance. But perhaps he was a little too quick. The contrast emerges most clearly with sentences—e.g. 23a—that can be used in either way. So although someone who used sentence 23a simply to report a hiring rather than (also) to do it is, as Austin notes, still “doing something,” there do seem to be interesting differences in the kind of thing done. Reporting is an action but one that seems simply communicative, unlike a hiring, which has effects far beyond the conveying of information.

Subsequent writers have found it useful to try to refine Austin’s account of performativity. Ginet 1979, e.g., argues that sentences used performatively do describe or state that something is being done but also *through so stating* actually do what they state that they do. A similar point is made by Searle and Vanderveker 1983, who classify speech acts in terms of what they describe as the direction of word-to-world fit. Ordinary statements or assertions illustrate the word-to-world fit: the world is (was) a certain way, independently of what anyone is uttering, and the point of the words being uttered is to ‘fit’ some aspect of how the world is (was). They suggest that (most uses of) imperatives illustrate the world-to-word fit: the words indicate some propositional content—typically an action the addressee is being directed to take—and the world is supposed to evolve so that indeed that action is taken and the words do fit the world. But explicit performatives, they suggest, standardly illustrate ‘the double direction’ of fit between words and the world: what Searle calls *DECLARATIONS* ‘thereby’ adjust the world to fit the words.

The possibility of inserting *hereby* was proposed by Austin as diagnostic of a sentence uttered performatively as it “serves to indicate that the utterance (in writing) of the sentence is, as it is said, the instrument effecting the act of warning, authorizing, etc.” (p 57). *Hereby* nicely indicates the deictic character of performativity: saying what one is doing is exactly what does it. But, as Austin made clear, it is not only the saying that is required for full efficacy of the performative: there are many of what he dubs *FELICITY CONDITIONS*.

- (23) A: (i) There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect;
(ii) The circumstances and the person must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.
B: The procedure must be executed (i) correctly and (ii) completely.

C: Often, (i) the person must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must do the specified act.

3.4 Felicity conditions for performatives and speech acts generally

Just saying the appropriate words is not all that is needed. The list above shows the felicity conditions Austin sketched for performatives to work as they should.

So, for example, A(ii) speaks to the question of who is licensed to perform certain acts. No matter how hard or often they might try, neither Molly nor Sally can christen ships, or dub knights. It just doesn't work. Molly can adopt the conventional procedure for knighting and say, while touching Sally with her sword, "I dub thee Sir Walter" but the attempted conferring of knighthood does not come off. There is, as Austin puts it, a MISFIRE. Austin speaks of 'the person' being appropriate, which suggests only constraints on the one attempting to perform the act in question. But even if Molly were entitled to confer knighthoods, Sally would not be eligible for the title *Sir*: she'd need to be dubbed *Dame* (and such an option became available only about a century ago). Marriages misfire if the officiant is not properly licensed by the state. In the US, they also do not come off if one of the potential spouses is at the time of the attempted marriage ceremony married to a third party, and in many jurisdictions, they also misfire if the two potential spouses are of the same sex.

Misfires can also occur if the performer, even if properly authorized, gets the procedure wrong in some way or fails to finish it. So, for example, if Sally's will does not contain appropriate language her attempt to bequeath her snow shovel to Molly by uttering (21a) may misfire and just not happen at all. If she breaks off her utterance of (21a) after "shovel" there is a misfire due to incompleteness. Or Molly's invitation to Sally for dinner may, through placing an envelope in the wrong box or typing in the wrong e-mail address or looking at the wrong person, misfire by targeting someone other than Sally. In this case an invitation has indeed been issued but not the one Molly intended: the intended invitation to Sally does not come off. Condition B in (23) addresses this kind of constraint on a fully successful performative.¹¹ In some cases it seems clear what is meant by "correct and complete" execution of the conventional. If the wrong words are produced or offered to the wrong audience, we might get misfires. What Austin does not explicitly discuss is the possibility of better or worse execution.

Now Austin famously distinguished LOCUTIONARY, ILLOCUTIONARY, and PERLOCUTIONARY acts as involved in what utterances do. When people talk of speech acts, they often are speaking of illocutionary acts—things like promising, warning, christening. And

¹¹ The question of a misfire was quite publicly raised on January 20, 2009 during administration of the presidential oath of office to President Barack Obama by John Roberts, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The words of the oath as specified in the US Constitution were (inadvertently) changed by Justice Roberts (*faithfully* migrated later in the sentence and *of* became *to*), perhaps because President Obama, expecting a pause at a different place from where it occurred, began speaking over Justice Roberts. The Chief Justice did correct himself but the new President repeated the oath with the incorrect word order initially used by the Justice. Although there seems little reason to doubt that, in spite of the bungled oath-taking, Barack Obama became president of the United States on January 20, 2009, the two men redid the ceremony the next day. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/us/politics/22oath.html>

perlocutionary acts have to do with further effects—things like frightening someone by issuing a warning. We'll say more about illocutionary and perlocutionary acts below but will consider the effect of locutionary acts on the effectiveness of execution of performatives.

Locutionary acts often get short shrift in pragmatic discussions. A locutionary act corresponds roughly to making a linguistic text publicly accessible—sounds or graphic marks or manual signs—doing something that counts as producing a certain linguistic structure, rendering it publically accessible. But there is more going on: locutionary acts are at the heart of verbal *performance*, which Garner (2004) argues was central to Anglo-Saxon charms of healing, promoting plant growth, and the like. The locutionary act does not simply produce a text: it can add layers of significance through vocal characteristics, gaze, gestures, and the like that constitute a particular performance of a text. Locutionary acts in media other than speech can also bring performance enrichment to the fore—choice of fonts, color of ink, illustrative materials, emoticons, and the like are ways to transform linguistic texts into performances that carry illocutionary force. Performance quality can be critical to the success of many performatives.

Nelson (2008) does indeed emphasize the importance of locutionary acts in her discussion of Hank Morgan's achievements as the Connecticut Yankee whom Mark Twain transports to King Arthur's court. She is here describing Morgan's attempt to escape his scheduled execution by predicting an eclipse, emphasizing the importance of his talents as performer (p 30):

He nevertheless begins a defense that depends on his power to effectively perform a series of speech acts. Morgan, then, is the *performer*. The situation? He is condemned to be burned at the stake at high noon of a day he mistakenly thinks is June 20th, not the 21st. But he nevertheless assumes the right to *command* his young messenger to carry a message to the king.

All the prisoner has to back up himself up at this point is the power of his own *locution*, but he pulls out all the stops. As he describes his manner of utterance when he *commands* Clarence, whom he has barely met, to deliver a message to King Arthur, "I paused, and stood over that cowering lad a whole minute in awful silence; then in a voice deep, measured, charged with doom, I began, and rose by dramatically graded stages to my colossal climax, which I delivered in as sublime and noble a way as ever I did such a thing in my life" (87-88).

Throughout, Morgan draws on such skills to help him do things with words.

A performative act may work in some sense, may look good from a performance angle, but nonetheless be marred by the performer's lacking the proper intentions or feelings as noted in Ci. The cases Austin discusses he calls ABUSES and involve insincerity. For example, Sally might utter (24a), an overt promise, or (24b), an overt apology, or (24c), an overt piece of advice.

- (24) a. I promise to pay you tomorrow the \$20 I borrowed from you last week.
b. I apologize for not attending your lecture.
c. I advise you to invest in designer clothing.

She has promised even if she has no intention whatsoever of returning your \$20 to you, she has apologized even if she is overjoyed at missing your lecture and not in the slightest bit sorry to

have done so, and she has advised you even if she has no interest at all in your following my advice and perhaps think it would be unwise for you to do so. Though the act has come off something is amiss in such circumstances. What the speaker has done is akin to lying or claiming without any evidence in the case of a simple assertion. Given a suitably skillful performance, she may well fool you, however.

Perhaps the most interesting and the least clear of these felicity conditions, however, is Cii, which notes that the full success of an illocutionary act may depend on subsequent acts. An illocutionary act draws on the text and its utterance--the locutionary act of its performance--to endow the uttered text with a certain force—e.g., ordering or warning or promising. What Austin called a perlocutionary act is what might be accomplished by means of the utterance: someone's being persuaded or frightened or pleased. But as Austin fully recognized, the line between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is not always easy to draw: many illocutionary acts seem to require subsequent developments—often further acts of the utterer or of the addressee—if the illocutionary act is to be fully completed or successful. As he says (115-116):

Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed. ... I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say in a certain sense. An effect must be achieved on the audience if the illocutionary act is to be carried out. *Generally* [emphasis added] the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution. So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of *uptake*. ... [However,] many illocutionary acts invite by convention a response or sequel, which may be 'one-way' or 'two-way': thus we may distinguish arguing, ordering, promising, suggesting, and asking to, from offering, asking whether you will and asking 'Yes or no?' If this response is accorded, or the sequel implemented, that requires a second act by the speaker or another person; and it is a commonplace of the consequence-language that this cannot be included under the initial stretch of action.

So a promise that is not followed up by the promiser's delivering on what was promised at the appropriate time need not be insincere but it is certainly seriously flawed. And it is not only a second act from the speaker that might be required for felicity: many times the addressee has a crucial role to play. For example, an order fails if, though fully understood and recognized as an order, it is simply ignored. Addressees do not always cede control of their To-Do lists: they may just refuse to ratify speakers' attempts to update those lists. Even if the speech acts in question are the apparently straightforward communicative kind felicity depends not just on the speaker. Suppose someone asserts that it is raining and the audience understands what has been said and that the utterance is offered as an assertion intended to add its content—namely, that it is raining (here and now)—to the Common Ground. Further suppose that in subsequent moves addressees behave as if they do not assume that it is raining (here and now)—i.e., the assertion is simply ignored. The attempted speech act of assertion has not fully succeeded. The required UPTAKE has not occurred¹².

Our aim here is to see how spells compare to Ordinary English performatives. The parallels are indeed striking. And the dependence of even quite everyday "purely"

¹² Murray (2010) uses the notion of an 'illocutionary proposal', which separates the attempt to change the Common Ground from success in so doing.

communicative speech acts like assertion for full success on performance and on consequences that cannot be guaranteed by the speaker independently of other people or other things will prove especially important. Speech acts are not isolated actions of individuals but are embedded in social institutions and in other kinds of causally important relationships. Spells too depend on more than the spell-caster.

4.0 Are spells special?

Well, yes, spells are special but perhaps not so radically different from the more ordinary speech acts we regularly perform as we might think at first.

4.1 *Felicity conditions for spells*

There are a number of conditions on successful spells, some of which seem fully parallel to those on ordinary speech acts, others of which look somewhat different.

- (25)
- a. Only wizards and witches can perform spells.
 - b. Incantations generally have conventional forms that must be performed correctly, completely, and effectively.
 - c. Wand movement must be executed properly and wands must be in good working order.
 - d. Intentions matter but spells can be unintended.
 - e. Concentration and skill are required.

Restriction (25a) is fundamental: humans who are not witches or wizards, dubbed *Muggles* by Rowling, completely lack the power to perform spells just as Molly and Sally lack the power to christen ocean liners or to marry people or to fire a worker at Wal-Mart¹³. What seems rather different is that the power to christen or to marry or to fire derives from social arrangements whereas the power to perform spells seems a basic feature of the capacities with which a witch or wizard comes into the world, something independent of social institutions, more akin to being able to run a four-minute mile than to being able to fire a Wal-Mart employee.

Social institutions and regulations do indeed constrain magical spells, which are regulated by the Ministry of Magic. For example, underage witches and wizards are strictly forbidden to perform many spells, especially when Muggles might observe them. When Harry violates the rules by performing a Patronus Charm to save his cousin Dudley and himself from a deadly Dementor attack the Ministry's Improper Use of Magic Office immediately sends him the following communication via an Owl.

¹³ Being a witch or wizard is connected to but not fully determined by one's parentage. Offspring in magical families are occasionally completely unable to perform spells; such people are called 'squibs'. And one may have Muggle ancestry and yet be a witch or wizard: Hermione Granger, the extraordinarily talented young witch who is a close friend of Harry's, was born to Muggle parents.

(26) Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Patronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of a Muggle.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 a.m. on August 12th.

OotP, ch. 2

Depriving Harry of his wand could indeed considerably lessen his power to perform spells, many of which depend on wands and their manipulation (see discussion below of 25c, for example). But the power to perform the Patronus Charm was not itself bestowed on Harry by the Ministry—it does not derive from social institutions and arrangements as the power to marry does. That magical power—or at least the potential to develop it—is somehow part of Harry's inborn capacity.

As with running a four-minute mile or being successful in other kinds of performance, however, inborn capacity is not all that is needed for performing spells effectively. First, there are instruments. Access to a wand, preferably one's own, is essential for most spells. Similarly, no matter what one's innate musical talent one needs a cello to perform as a cellist and even a Federer or Nadal, though blessed with unusual athletic skill, needs a racquet to show his stuff as a tennis player. And, as with musical and athletic ability, instruction and practice are often required to develop the person's intrinsic magical capacities. Furthermore, as with athletic and musical ability, magical powers come in degrees and in different forms: some are more talented spell-casters than others and they may be particularly good at particular spells¹⁴.

Linguists, we note, have generally ignored talent and skill as entering into language use, often seeming to assume that, apart from speech acts like marrying that depend on social institutions, all speakers are on an equal footing in doing things with words. But of course some are more effective in securing the desired ends of their speech acts than others. They may choose their words wisely, time their utterances skillfully, make their claims or issue their directives in particularly compelling tones and with helpful accompanying nonverbal trappings: their locutionary acts are award-worthy performances. All of this (and more) can matter—and, as with spells, effective performance of speech acts depends to some extent on innate skills but also on training and practice. As we will see in the next section, however, individual talent and skill do not by themselves guarantee success because speech acts like spells play out interactively.

What happens when an incantation is not produced correctly or completely (25b)? The general importance of correct verbal procedures is noted in Professor Flitwick's injunction to the class quoted in our epigraph.

¹⁴ The game of Quidditch, played while flying around on brooms, dominates athletics at Hogwarts, and skill in playing the game varies greatly. Although broom-flying does not involve verbal incantations so far as we know, it does involve concentration and practice as well as a certain element of inborn capacity just as casting spells does.

(27) “[S]aying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest.” SS, ch. 10

Or consider this instance where the disarming spell (EXPELLIARMUS) has been incorrectly produced.

(28) “Oh no,” said Cho rather wildly as he approached. “*Expelliarmious!* I mean, *Expellimellius* - oh, sorry, Marietta!” Her curly-haired friend's sleeve had caught fire; Marietta extinguished it with her own wand and glared at Harry as though it was his fault.

OotP, Ch. 18

Notice that the incorrect pronunciations do not mean no magical act has been performed: rather the outcome is an unintended effect—a buffalo on the chest, a sleeve catching fire—is magically produced.

The epigraph from Professor Flitwick also addresses the importance of good form in handling one's wand (25c).

(29) "Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick.” SS, ch. 10

Moving the wand properly is not just an optional nicety: Ron fails to perform SILENCIO (a silencing charm) because of poor wand form.

(30) “*Silencio.*” The large and ugly raven in front of him let out a derisive caw. “*Silencio. SILENCIO!*” The raven cawed more loudly. “It's the way you're moving your wand,” said Hermione, watching Ron critically. 'You don't want to wave it, it's more a sharp *jab.*’

OotP, Ch. 18

A broken wand can have profound consequences, as illustrated when Gilderoy Lockhart, teacher of Defense against the Dark Arts in Harry's second year, botches his attempted memory-erasing charm (OBLIVIATE). He is targeting Harry and Ron but the broken wand apparently ends up aimed at Lockhart himself.

(31) "The adventure ends here, boys!" he [Lockhart] said. "I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body - say good-bye to your memories!" He raised Ron's Sellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, "*Obliviate!*" The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thundering to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock. "Ron!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Ron!" "I'm here!" came Ron's muffled voice from behind the rockfall. "I'm okay - this git's not, though - he got blasted by the wand.” CS, Ch. 16

In this case, the wand did implement the intended spell but the target got shifted. A badly damaged wand may become effectively stripped of its magical powers.

(32) The holly and phoenix wand was nearly severed in two. One fragile strand of phoenix feather kept both pieces hanging together. The wood had splintered apart completely. Harry took it into his hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury. He could not think properly. Everything was a blur of panic and fear. Then he held out the wand to Hermione. “Mend it. Please.” “Harry, I don’t think, when its broken like this -” “Please, Hermione, try!” “*R-Reparo.*” The handling half of the wand resealed itself. Harry held it up. “*Lumos!*” The wand sparked feebly, then went out. Harry pointed it at Hermione. “*Expelliarmus!*” Hermione’s wand gave a little jerk, but did not leave her hand. DH, Ch. 17

As with Muggle speech acts, something may go wrong if one does not have the appropriate intentions or state of mind when performing a spell (25d). A clear case is Harry’s failure to bring off fully the powerful CRUCIO (torture) curse he tries to aim at Bellatrix Lestrange.

(33) Hatred rose in Harry such as he had never known before; he flung himself out from behind the fountain and bellowed, “*Crucio!*” Bellatrix screamed: the spell had knocked her off her feet, but she did not writhe and shriek with pain as Neville had ... “Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?” she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. “You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain—to enjoy it—righteous anger won’t hurt me for long—I’ll show you how it is done, shall I? I’ll give you a lesson.”
OotP, Ch. 36

Molly Weasley is unable to use the boggart-banishing RIDDIKULUS spell successfully because she lacks strength at that moment to push aside her intense fears for her family and Harry in order to concentrate on visualizing those fears in forms she will find laughable.

(34) “*R - r - riddikulus!*” Mrs Weasley sobbed, pointing her shaking wand at Ron’s body. *Crack.* Ron’s body turned into Bill’s, spread-eagled on his back, his eyes wide open and empty. Mrs Weasley sobbed harder than ever. “*R - riddikulus!*” she sobbed again. *Crack.* Mr Weasley’s body replaced Bill’s, his glasses askew, a trickle of blood running down his face. “No!” Mrs Weasley moaned. “No ... *Riddikulus Riddikulus! RID-DIKULUS.*” *Crack.* Dead twins. *Crack.* Dead Percy. *Crack.* Dead Harry ...
OotP, Ch. 9

Apart from specific desires and fears that animate certain spells, more general concentration (25e) is required for many spells to work. So when Harry and Ron let their minds wander in class the Transfiguration spell they are attempting fails to come off properly.

(35) He and Ron both tapped the teacups they were supposed to be charming with their wands. Harry’s sprouted four very short legs that could not reach the desk and wriggled pointlessly in midair. Ron’s grew four very thin spindly legs that hoisted the cup off the desk with great difficulty, trembled for a few seconds, then folded, causing the cup to crack into two. [OoTP, Ch. 30]

Notice that Austin seems to assume that only improper procedures would result in a misfire, an act's failing to come off. Felicity conditions involving intentions and other cognitive/mental conditions seem to arise for Austin only with respect to the sincerity or good will of the actor. Yet in the case of magical spells states of mind can be crucial for the act's not misfiring. In a real sense, states of mind can be constituents of procedures for casting spells as much as proper pronunciation of words and appropriate manipulation of the wand. Beatrix LeStrange has got it right: for some spells to work "you need to mean them."

What is it to 'mean' what you say? Grice 1957, though problematic in a number of ways (see Grice's own refinements in Grice 1968, 1969, 1982 as well as discussions in Alston 1964, Searle 1969, Schiffer 1972 and many other publications), is nonetheless still of fundamental importance. Grice 1957 locates 'meaning that p' in the intention to produce in one's audience a certain effect—namely that you intend to have the audience believe that p—and to do so by means of having the audience recognize that intention. In later discussions he made the intended effect on the audience belief that the speaker believes that p, though noting that one usually has the further intention (or at least wish) that the audience believe that p. In the case of directives, he moved from having the intended effect be that the audience do something to having it be that the audience intend to do something—add it to the to-do list¹⁵; again he notes that one usually has a further intention (wish) that the addressee actually do the act in question. Notice that in many circumstances producing the further effects on audience's beliefs or actions is the primary point of the speech event. Not to have done that is in an important way to have failed. Thinking of explicit performatives like *promise*, notice that if the audience takes the speaker to believe that s/he has promised then, promises being the sorts of things they are, the audience takes the speaker through reporting that belief thereby to have promised, to have made a commitment to some future course of action. Indeed, no matter what the speaker intended, commitments may be made in some circumstances just by engaging in particular conventionalized uses of language—e.g., signing a lease commits both tenant and landlady to certain future courses of actions.

In casting a spell, just as in performing more ordinary speech acts, the witch or wizard should aim to produce a certain effect. Conditions, including the state of mind of the person attempting the spell, usually have to be right for that to happen. . That state of mind undergirds the caster's performance. It is not that spells cannot on occasion be cast unintentionally. As children, Tom Riddle, who becomes arch-villain Voldemort, and Harry Potter both surprised themselves by finding they had unintentionally accomplished something magically.

In a fascinating discussion of meaning that does not require intention, DuBois (1987) notes that certain kinds of language use may involve apersonal meaning precisely in order to avoid placing individual responsibility for socially important decisions, divination practices from various cultures being his major example. Harry Potter and other children with magical powers are sent to Hogwarts at age 11 in order to teach them responsible use of spells. Underage magic, as we have already noted, is supposed to be confined to the classroom because underage wizards and witches are not held yet able to assume full control of and responsibility for their spells.

¹⁵ As noted earlier, even this more modest effect may be hard to achieve in the way Grice requires. Surely you can have meant for me to do X even if you do not succeed in getting me to form an intention to do X. This lack of desired uptake doesn't mean you haven't directed me to do X though it does mean that your directive was not fully successful.

4.2 *Blocking spells*

In most discussions of performatives and speech acts generally, failure is linked only to felicity conditions connected to the attempted single act: inadequate procedures or lack of appropriate status, for example. Magical spells, however, can be perfectly executed by an authorized witch or wizard in the appropriate mental state and with an excellent and intact wand putting on a stellar performance and yet still fail because a counter-spell has been put in place beforehand or because a defensive action is taken by an opponent during ongoing conflict.

Hermione's attempted door-opening charm fails because previous spells made the door openable only by use of a special winged key.

(36) They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm. SS, Ch. 16

And Harry's Summoning Charm is blocked by a previous Shield Charm.

(37) He pointed the wand at the silvery shape and murmured, "*Accio Sword.*" It did not stir. He had not expected it to. If it had been that easy, the sword would have lain on the ground for him to pick up, not in the depths of a frozen pool. DH, Ch. 19

Next we have a case of blocking in the course of competitive hurling of spells. In this case, Harry's quick defensive Shield Charm manages to interrupt and block the Death Eater's attempted Summoning Charm targeting the prophesy-holding sphere in his hands.

(38) The words were hardly out of his mouth when the female Death Eater shrieked: '*Accio proph—*' Harry was just ready for her: he shouted '*Protego!*' before she had finished her spell, and though the glass sphere slipped to the tips of his fingers he managed to cling on to it. OotP, Ch. 35

It might seem that the possibility of misfires due to blocking from counter-spells sharply differentiates Magical Spells from ordinary speech acts. But that is perhaps because focus in speech act theory and in pragmatic inquiry more generally has been on individual acts rather than on social interaction as it affects developing discourse. Recall that the point of meaningful utterances is to produce certain effects—e.g., add to the Common Ground (and ultimately perhaps to shift others' beliefs) or others' To-Do Lists (and ultimately get others to act in ways they might otherwise not have). The intended or aimed-for effects of one person's utterance may not be achieved precisely because of utterances previously or subsequently made by others.

There are a few contexts where non-magical humans engage in competitive verbal exchanges that are similar in some ways to battles among witches and wizards in which spells and counter-spells fly past one another. A somewhat pathetic and clearly ineffective attempted counter-spell was heard on playgrounds in years past as retort to an insult:

(39) Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

Of course it was precisely because words did indeed hurt that the target of the insult bothered to respond by intoning (39). But verbal counters may be more effective.

Rap duels in contemporary US cities and similar ritualized verbal insult exchanges in earlier times and in other cultural contexts offer perhaps more convincing examples of counter speech actions. Participants in such events seek to top one another, typically in cleverness and outrageousness of insults. Another kind of case is the formal debate, which explicitly offers a time slot for rebuttal in which the arguments of the opposing team can be countered, potentially lessening their impact on judges. And courtrooms too offer explicitly competitive arenas with defense lawyers and witnesses contending with what the prosecution offers for jury and judge to believe.

Even in less obviously combative contexts, speakers making assertions generally are trying to get them taken up as ongoing parts of the Common Ground, treated as mutually known by conversational participants. Such efforts, however, can fail because others offer counter-assertions or perhaps impugn the competence or veracity of the original speaker. Similarly, directives can fail because of incompatible directives from another source.

Assertions and directives both can also fail because of more general prior discourse (as well as nonverbal experience) that has worked to incline those to whom they are directed either not to trust certain sources (or content) or to resist compliance with certain kinds of directives or would-be directors. For example, psychologist Sandra Bem (1983) speaks of “inoculating” children against the influences of gender-schemas and cultural sexism and much of what she proposes might go into that inoculation is linguistic in nature: stories one reads or tells, explanations one offers in response to kids’ questions, exchanges between caregivers and their charges and also among adults in a child’s environment. And parents often try to arm their children with the skepticism and critical awareness they need to withstand the assault of mass media advertising. Less positively, disparaging comments in the presence of children from trusted elders or peers about people of certain ‘kinds’—generally, kinds based on demographic characteristics like gender, race, religion—may weaken the openness of those children to speech acts directed at them by folks they identify as of the devalued kind.

Admittedly, ordinary speech acts are not blocked with the immediate and complete effectiveness with which Harry’s prompt “*Protego!*” managed to cut off the Death Eater’s “*Accio.*” A fuller exploration of both collaborative and competitive dimensions of ordinary natural language discourse is certainly needed but lies outside the scope of this paper. We are persuaded, however, that using spells to block other spells—to render them causally inert—differs from ordinary speech act practices mainly in degree and that the differences in degree derive from the different causal mechanisms operative in spells as opposed to more familiar speech acts and social interaction to which we now turn.

4.3 *Causality*

Perhaps the biggest difference between spells and the speech acts we ordinary humans regularly perform is that our speech acts generally work by affecting a mind that understands what has been said whereas spell targets may be uncomprehending inanimate objects like locomoting trunks. Saying something even if simultaneously waving a holly stick with a phoenix feather inside just doesn’t seem to be the right way to get a trunk down the stairs: the causal structure of our ordinary world, according to dominant scientific theories, does not support such ways of

doing things. Mr. Weasley, a great admirer of technological inventiveness as a way of making magic-deprived existence easier, might note that a luggage trolley and an elevator could get the trunk down the stairs. But words seem not only inadequate but beside the point unless one is doing something like asking a friend to help maneuver the trunk.

Potts (2007) discusses expressive uses of language like curses and slurs and argues that they do indeed have effects on their targets, arguing that such effects are essential to expressivity. This ignores the fact that we swear at inanimates. More importantly, it does not distinguish the kinds of effects on people of expressives—feeling humiliated, angered, sad—from those that witches and wizards can pull off through their spells—e.g., causing a person to break out with pustules, faint and fall to the floor, or even die. Culpepper and Semino (2000) show that words like *curse* and *wish*, which in contemporary English have only expressive meaning, had different and richer meanings in early modern English when belief in witchcraft was prevalent. Then such words implied possible physical harm to their targets, including to nonhuman targets like milk that might be soured or crops caused to fail. Those earlier meanings were supported by earlier widespread belief in supernatural powers of witches; most of those accused of practicing witchcraft were women and poor. With the rise of skepticism about magical powers, the earlier meanings were lost.

Yet perhaps we underestimate the potential power of current human words to have effects outside minds. Instead of wands, we now have access to computers and the magic they have created: smart houses allow their owners to turn on lights by saying ‘lumos’ or the equivalent, and words and other symbols entered on a keyboard can download music, order boots, or steal money from someone else’s bank account. No one has yet constructed a device that would make Molly look like Sally or vice versa nor one that causes someone else to break out in ugly red pustules. But who thought that we’d have something that could track a car and tell it when to turn when we want to go from behind Morrill Hall at Cornell to the Ithaca airport. Or, perhaps even more mundane, that we could point something at a car that would flash the lights and unlock the doors.

It may be illuminating to think of magic as drawing on something like computer programs (Haber 2006), including those involved in the many little microchip-equipped devices that are nowadays part of many lives (though of course still not all). It is important to keep in mind that language and related symbolic systems are critical to developing such technological magic. And of course some are more skilled in this arena than others and more creative just as with magic. The Weasley twins, Fred and George, managed to develop amazing new magic by hacking around. As with other hackers, they sometimes produced unintended effects, but they also often got really useful or at least amusing results.

Spells are indeed special. Doing things with words and wands is related both to ordinary speech acts and to computationally-assisted action but, at least for now, goes beyond both.

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