

4. Wider Political Applications

The force of an assertion cannot be simply determined by its grammatical properties. Consider:

(1) Could you pass the salt?

That has the grammatical form of a question about your abilities, but in almost every conceivable circumstance it has the force of a request to pass the salt. Other cases are more flexible:

(2) A: Would you like some supper?
B: I'm starving!

In many places B's utterance might be a simple statement; but here it looks like a request for supper. Sometimes then the interpretation becomes highly conventional, as in (1). In others the interpretation is a matter of context. In (2) A's question expects a reply; B's statement can thus be understood as constituting one. Understood in Stalnaker's way, the common ground primes us to understand it as 'Yes!'.

Other cases though are more difficult. When the door of the Commons is slammed in Black Rod's face at the State Opening of Parliament, and Black Rod has to knock three times to gain admission, no one takes it as a real refusal. But when someone says 'no' to a sexual advance, in a context in which refusals are rarely taken seriously, how should we understand it? Here are some comments from Rae Langton:

If you are powerful, you sometimes have the ability to silence the speech of the powerless. One way might be to stop the powerless from speaking at all. Gag them, threaten them, condemn them to solitary confinement. But there is another, less dramatic but equally effective, way. Let them speak. Let them say whatever they like to whomever they like, but stop that speech from counting as an action.... Some kinds of speech acts are unspeakable for women in some contexts; although the appropriate words can be uttered, those utterances fail to count as the actions they were intended to be.

(Langton 1993)

Two examples (from many) given by Ishani Maitra:

A bunch of friends want to go on a hike on the coming weekend. They begin to discuss the logistics of the hike: where to go, for how long, what to bring, how to get there, and so on. Some in the group express mild preferences for one or another of the available options, but no one expresses strong preferences. The discussion goes on, and on. In fact, it continues for so long that one of the group, Andy, begins to be concerned that nothing will get organized. He decides to take over, and begins to make decisions. He assigns each of the other group members a specific task: one is to pick a location, another is to buy enough food for the group, a third is to find some tents, and so on. No one objects. Everyone completes their tasks, and the hike takes place as Andy planned.

An Arab woman is on a subway car crowded with people. An older white man walks up to her, and says, “F***in’ terrorist, go home. We don’t need your kind here.” He continues speaking in this manner to the woman, who doesn’t respond. He speaks loudly enough that everyone else in the subway car hears his words clearly. All other conversations cease. Many of the passengers turn to look at the speaker, but no one interferes.

(Maitra 2012)

Another two from Quill Kukla:

Celia is a floor manager at a heavy machinery factory where 95% of the workers are male. It is part of her job description that she has the authority to give orders to the workers on her floor, and that she should use this authority. She uses straightforward, polite locutions to tell her workers what to do: “Please put that pile over here,” “Your break will be at 1:00 today,” and so on. Her workers, however, think she is a “bitch,” and compliance is low. Why? One possible explanation is that the workers are just being blatantly sexist and insubordinate. They are refusing to follow her orders, which is still a way of taking them as orders. This sort of direct transgression is relatively straightforward. However, a subtler and more interesting explanation is that even though Celia is entitled to issue orders in this context, and however much she follows the conventions that typically would mark her speech acts as orders, because of her gender her workers take her as issuing requests instead.

Consider an older male faculty member who is attracted to his young female graduate student. Being a basically well-intentioned fellow, what he would like to do is to invite her, in the gentlest possible terms, to reciprocate his affections. Indeed, he is horrified at the idea that she might take him as ordering or even requesting that she have sex with him; he does not want her to feel compelled to sleep with him, or even to sleep with him as the granting of a favor. He wants to sleep with her only if she is genuinely and freely interested. And so he tries to issue this invitation. But it may well be that no matter how he words and performs the speech act in accordance with the standard conventions for issuing an invitation—no matter how much he assures her that he is inviting rather than requesting or ordering, that there will be no repercussions from her turning him down, and so on—it is simply impossible for him to broach the topic without creating pressure to acquiesce.

(Kukla 2014)