People use language principally as a tool to do things: request a favor, make a promise, report a piece of news, give directions, offer a greeting, seek information, invite someone to dinner, and perform hundreds of other ordinary verbal actions of everyday life. Sometimes the things we do with language have serious consequences: propose marriage, declare a mistrial, swear to tell the truth, fire an employee, and so on. These speech acts are part of speech events such as conversations, lectures, student-teacher conferences, news broadcasts, marriage ceremonies, and courtroom trials. In addition to births, deaths, fires, robberies, hurricanes, automobile accidents, and the like, which are not speech acts, much of what is reported in the pages of newspapers are speech acts: arrests, predictions, denial, promises, accusations, announcements, warnings, and so forth. Earlier chapters in this book examined the structure of words and sentences. Now we examine what we do with these structures and how our utterances accomplish their work.

Knowing a language is not simply a matter of knowing how to encode a message and transmit it to a second party who then decodes it in order to understand what we intended to say. If language use were a matter simply of encoding and decoding messages—in other words, of grammatical competence—every sentence would have a fixed interpretation irrespective of its context of use. But that's not the case, as the following scenarios illustrate.

1. You're stopped by a police officer, who surprises you by informing you that you've just driven through a stop sign. "I didn't see the stop sign," you say.
2. A friend has given you directions to her apartment, including instructions to turn left at the first stop sign after the intersection of Oak and Broad. You arrive about 30 minutes late and say, "I didn't see the stop sign."
3. You're driving with an aunt, who's in a hurry to get to church. You slow down and glide through a stop sign, knowing that on Sunday mornings there is seldom traffic at that intersection. As you enter the intersection, you see a car approaching and jam on the brakes, startling your aunt. "I didn't see the stop sign," you say.

To the police officer, your statement ("I didn't see the stop sign") is an explanation for failing to stop and a subtle plea not to be cited for the violation. To the friend, your utterance is an excuse for your tardiness and a claim that it was neither intended nor entirely your fault. To your aunt, the same sentence (an untruthful one in this case) is uttered as an apology for having frightened her. She recognizes your intention to apologize and says, "It's all right. But please be careful." The linguistic meaning of the sentence I didn't see the stop sign is the same in all three cases, but uttering it in these different contexts serves different purposes and conveys distinct messages.

Sentence Structure and the Function of Utterances

Traditional grammar books say that declarative sentences make statements (It's raining), imperative sentences issue directives (Close the door), and interrogative sentences ask questions (What time is it?). That analysis is oversimplified, even misleading. Consider the sentence, Can you shut the window? Taken literally, its interrogative structure asks a
question about the addressee's ability to shut some particular window. If asked this question by a roommate trying to study while a university marching band practiced nearby, you would probably interpret it not as a question about your abilities (and therefore requiring a verbal response), but as a request to close the window. (A request in question form is marked in speech by the absence of voice raising and sometimes in writing by the absence of a question mark: Would you please respond promptly.) Conversely, the imperative structure Tell me your name again would normally be taken not as a directive to do something but as a request for information.

Take another case: Suppose a knock is heard at the door, and Megan says to Alex I wonder who's at the door. If Megan believed Alex knew the answer, this declarative sentence might be uttered as a request for information. Often, though, it would actually be a polite request for Alex to open the door.

Finally, interrogative sentences can sometimes be used to make statements, as in Suze's reply to Eric's question.

Eric: Is Amy pretty easy to get along with?
Suze: Do hens have teeth?

Suze's question communicates an emphatically negative answer to Eric's inquiry. Two things are clear, then: (1) People often employ declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences for purposes other than making statements, asking questions, and issuing commands, respectively; and (2) a pivotal element in the interpretation of an utterance is the context in which it is uttered. Recall the three faces of language use depicted in Chapter 1 (page 6), showing context as the base of a triangle linking meaning and expression.

You recognize that a sentence is a structured string of words carrying a certain meaning. By contrast, an utterance is a sentence that is said, written, or signed in a particular context by someone with a particular intention, by means of which the "speaker" intends to create an effect on the addressee. Thus, as an interrogative sentence, Can you close the window? has the meaning of a request for information ('Are you able to close the window?'), but as a contextualized utterance it would more often than not be a request for action ('Please shut the window'). Drawing the appropriate inferences from conversation is an essential ingredient for interpreting utterances. To understand utterances, one must be skilled at "reading between the lines," and the skills one employs in using and interpreting the sentences shaped by grammatical competence are part of one's communicative competence.

**Speech Acts**

Besides what we accomplish through physical acts such as cooking, eating, bicycling, gardening, or getting on a bus, we accomplish a great deal each day by verbal acts. In face-to-face conversation, telephone calls, job application letters, notes scribbled to a roommate, and a multitude of other speech events, we perform verbal actions of different types. In fact, language is the principal means we have to greet, compliment, and insult one another, to plead or flirt, to seek and supply information, and to accomplish hundreds of other tasks in a typical day. Actions that are carried out through language are called speech acts, and a surprisingly large number of reports in newspapers are reports of speech acts.
Types of Speech Act

Among the various kinds of speech act, six have received particular attention:

1. **Representatives** represent a state of affairs: assertions, statements, claims, hypotheses, descriptions, suggestions. Representatives can generally be characterized as true or false.

2. **Commissives** commit a speaker to a course of action: promises, pledges, threats, vows.

3. **Directives** are intended to get the addressee to carry out an action: commands, requests, challenges, invitations, entreaties, dares.

4. **Declarations** bring about the state of affairs they name: blessings, hirings, firings, baptisms, arrests, marrying, declaring mistrials.

5. **Expressives** indicate the speaker's psychological state or attitude: greetings, apologies, congratulations, condolences, thanksgivings.

6. **Verdictives** make assessments or judgments: ranking, assessing, appraising, condoning.

Because some verdictives (such as calling a baseball player "out") combine the characteristics of declarations and representatives, these are sometimes called *representational declarations*.

Locutions and Illocutions

Every speech act has several principal components, two of which directly concern us here: the *utterance itself* and the *intention of the speaker* in making it. First, every utterance is represented by a sentence with a grammatical structure and a linguistic meaning; this is the **locution**. Second, speakers have some intention in making an utterance, and what they intend to accomplish is called an **illocution**. (A third component of a speech act—one we will not discuss at length—is the effect of the act on the hearer; this is the *perlocution*, or the "uptake.""

Consider the utterance, *Can you shut the window?* Like all utterances, it can be viewed as comprising a locution and an illocution. The locution is a *yes/no* question about the addressee's ability to close a particular window; as such, convention would require an answer of *yes* or *no*. Let's assume that the speaker's intention (the illocution) is to request the addressee to shut the window; as such, convention would enable the addressee to recognize the structural question as a request for action and to comply or not. In discussions of speech acts, it is common for the illocutionary act itself to be called the speech act; thus promises, assertions, threats, invitations, and so on are all speech acts.
Distinguishing Among Speech Acts

How do people distinguish among different types of speech acts? How do we know whether a locution such as *Do you have the time?* is a yes/no question (*Do you have the time [to help me]?*) or a request for information about the time of day? To put the matter in more technical terms, given that a locution can serve many functions, how do addressees know the illocutionary force of a speaker’s utterance? The answer of course is “context.” But how do people interpret context accurately?

We begin our analysis by distinguishing between two broad types of speech act. Compare the following two utterances:

1. *I now pronounce you husband and wife.*
2. *It is going to be a very windy day.*

In the appropriate context, the first utterance creates a new relationship between two individuals; it is a declaration that effectuates a marriage. The second utterance is a simple statement or representation of a state of affairs. As any weather predictor will attest, it will have no effect on the weather. As you saw earlier, utterances such as sentence 2 make assertions or state opinions and are *representatives.* Utterances such as sentence 1 change the state of things and are *declarations;* they provide a striking illustration of how language in use is a form of action. Children exposed to fantastical declarations such as “*Abracadabra, I change you into a frog!*” eventually learn that real-life objects are more recalcitrant than fairy-tale objects, but all speakers come to recognize a verbal power over certain aspects of life, especially with respect to social relationships.

With the utterance *I now pronounce you husband and wife,* the nature of the social relationship between two people can be profoundly altered. Similarly, the utterance *You’re under arrest!* can have consequences for one’s social freedom, as can *Case dismissed.* An umpire can change a baseball game with so simple a declaration as *Safe!* or *Strike three!* Typically, to be effective, declarations of this type must be uttered by a specially designated person. If called by a nondesignated individual—a fan in the stands, for example—*Out!* would be a verdictive, not a declaration. Indeed, a declaration by one designated umpire will override the opposite call by an entire stadium of fans.

Appropriateness Conditions and Successful Declarations

The efficacy of any declaration depends on well-established conventions. *I now pronounce you husband and wife* can bind two individuals in marriage, but only if several conditions are satisfied: the setting must be a wedding ceremony and the utterance made at the appropriate moment; the speaker must be designated to marry others (a minister, rabbi, justice of the peace) and must intend to marry them; the two individuals must be legally eligible to marry each other; and they must intend to become spouses. Finally, of course, the words themselves must be uttered. If any condition is not satisfied, the utterance of the words will be ineffectual as a *performative* speech act—one whose words effectuate the act. Made on a Hollywood movie set by an actor in the role of a pastor and addressed to two actors playing characters about to marry, the utterance may help secure an Academy Award, but it will not effectuate a marriage.

The conventions that regulate the conditions under which an utterance serves as a particular speech act—as a marriage, promise, arrest, invitation—have been called appro-
priateness conditions by philosopher John Searle, and they can be classified into four categories.

1. **Propositional content condition** requires merely that the words of the sentence be conventionally associated with the intended speech act and convey the content of the act. The locution must exhibit conventionally acceptable words for effecting the particular speech act: *Is it raining out?*, *I now pronounce you husband and wife*, *You're under arrest*, *I promise to ...*, *I swear ...*

2. **Preparatory condition** requires a conventionally recognized context in which the speech act is embedded. In a marriage, the situation must be a genuine wedding ceremony (however informal) at which two people intend to exchange vows in the presence of a witness.

3. **Sincerity condition** requires the speaker to be sincere in uttering the declaration. At a wedding, the speaker must intend that the marriage words effectuate a marriage; otherwise, the **sincerity condition** will be violated and the speech act will not be successful.

4. **Essential condition** requires that the involved parties all intend the result; for example, in a wedding ceremony, the participants must intend by the utterance of the words *I now pronounce you husband and wife* to create a marriage bond.

**Successful Promises** Now consider the commissive, *I promise to help you with your math tonight*. In order for such an utterance to be successful, it must be recognizable as a promise: in addition, the preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions must be met. In the propositional content condition, the speaker must use the conventional term *promise* to state the intention of helping the addressee. The preparatory condition requires that speaker and hearer are sane and responsible, that the speaker believes she is able to help with the math, and that the addressee wishes to have help. The preparatory condition would be violated if, for example, the speaker knew that she could not be there or that she was incapable of doing the math herself, or if the participants were reading the script of a movie in which the utterance appears. If the speaker knew that the hearer did not want help, the promise would not succeed. For the sincerity condition to hold, the speaker must sincerely intend to help the addressee. This condition would be violated (and the promise formula abused) if the speaker had no such intention. Finally, the essential condition of a promise is that the speaker intends by the utterance to place herself under an obligation to provide some help to the hearer. These four appropriateness conditions define a successful promise.

**Successful Requests and Other Speech Acts** Appropriateness conditions are useful in describing not only declarations and commissives but all other types of speech act. In a typical request (*Please pass me the salt*), the content of the utterance must identify the act requested of the hearer (passing the salt), and its form must be a conventionally recognized one for making requests. The preparatory condition includes the speaker's beliefs that the addressee is capable of passing the salt and that, had he not asked her to pass it, she would not have ventured to do so. The sincerity condition requires that the speaker genuinely desires the hearer to pass the salt. Finally the essential condition that the speaker intends by the utterance to get the hearer to pass the salt to him.
The Cooperative Principle

The principles that govern the interpretation of utterances are diverse and complex, and they differ somewhat from culture to culture. Even within a single culture, they are so complex that we may wonder how language succeeds at communication as well as it does. The principles that we examine in this section, however commonsensical they may seem to Western readers, are by no means universal; as you will see later, what seems common sense to one group may not be common sense to all groups.

Despite occasional misinterpretations, people in most situations manage to understand utterances essentially as they were intended. The reason is that, without cause to expect otherwise, interlocutors normally trust that they and their conversational partners are honoring the same interpretive conventions. *Hearers* assume simply that speakers have honored the conventions of interpretation in constructing their utterances. *Speakers*, on the other hand, must make a twofold assumption: not only that hearers will themselves be guided by the conventions, but also that hearers will trust speakers to have honored those conventions in constructing their utterances. There is an unspoken pact that people will cooperate in communicating with each other, and speakers rely on this cooperation to make conversation efficient.

The **cooperative principle**, as enunciated by philosopher H. Paul Grice, is as follows:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

This pact of cooperation touches on four areas of communication, each of which can be described as a maxim, or general principle.

**Maxim of Quantity**

First, speakers are expected to give as much information as is necessary for their interlocutors to understand their utterances, but to give no more information than is necessary. If you ask an acquaintance whether she has any pets and she answers, *I have two cats*, it is the **maxim of quantity** that permits you to assume that she has no other pets. The conversational implication of such a reply is 'I have two (and only two) cats (and no other pets).' Notice that *I have two cats* would be true even if the speaker has six cats or six cats, two dogs, and a llama. But if she had such other pets, you would have reason to feel deceived. While her reply was not false as far as it went, your culturally defined expectation that relevant information will not be concealed would have been violated. In most Western cultures (but not in all cultures), listeners expect speakers to abide by this maxim, and—equally important—speakers know that hearers believe them to be abiding by it. It is this unspoken cooperation that creates conversational implicatures.

To take another example, suppose you asked a man painting his house what color he had chosen for the living room, and he replied:

The walls will be off-white to contrast with the black sofa and the Regency armchairs I inherited from my grandmother. Bless her soul, she passed away last year after a long marriage to my grandfather, who never appreciated her love of the
performing arts. Then the trim will be peach except near the door, which Amber said should be salmon so it doesn’t clash with the black and red Picasso print I brought back from Spain when I vacationed there in, uh, let’s see, I think it was 2002. Or was it 2001? I forget, actually. Gosh! time goes fast, doesn’t it? And the stairway leading to the bedrooms will be a pale yellow.

In providing too much information, far more than was sought or expected, the man is as uncooperative as the woman who withheld information about her pets. The maxim of quantity provides that, in normal circumstances, speakers say just enough, that they supply no less information—and no more—than is necessary for the purpose of the communication: Be appropriately informative.

Society stigmatizes individuals who habitually violate the maxim of quantity; those who give too much information are described as “never shutting up” or “always telling everyone their life story,” while those who habitually fail to provide enough information are branded sullen, secretive, or uncommunicative.

**Maxim of Relevance**

The second maxim directs speakers to organize their utterances in such a way that they are relevant to the ongoing context: Be relevant at the time of the utterance. The following interaction illustrates a violation of this maxim.

Zane: How’s the weather outside?

Zora: There’s a great movie on HBO Thursday night.

Taken literally, Zora’s utterance seems unrelated to what Zane has just said; if so, it would violate the maxim of relevance. Owing to the maxim of relevance, when someone produces an apparently irrelevant utterance, hearers typically strive to understand how it might be relevant (as a joke, perhaps, or an indication of displeasure with the direction of the conversation). Chronic violations of this maxim are characteristic of schizophrenics, whose sense of “context” differs radically from that of other people.

**Maxim of Manner**

Third, people follow a set of miscellaneous rules that are grouped under the maxim of manner. Summarized by the directive Be orderly and clear, this maxim dictates that speakers and writers avoid ambiguity and obscurity and be orderly in their utterances. In the following example, the maxim of manner is violated with respect to orderliness.

A birthday cake should have icing; use unbleached flour and sugar in the cake; bake it for one hour; preheat the oven to 325 degrees; and beat in three fresh eggs.

This recipe is odd for the simple reason that English speakers normally follow a chronological order of events in describing a process such as baking.

Orderliness is not only dictated by the order of events: in any language there are rules that dictate a “natural” order of details in a description. Because in American English more general details usually precede more specific details, when a speaker violates this rule the result appears odd.
My hometown has five shopping malls. It is the county seat. My father and my mother were both born there. My hometown is a midwestern town of 105,000 inhabitants situated at the center of the Corn Belt. I was brought up there until I was 13 years old.

As a third example, consider the utterance Ted died and was hit by lightning. If it was the lightning that killed Ted, the maxim of manner has been violated here. Although in logic joins clauses whose time reference is not relevant (thus, She studied chemistry and she studied biology is logically equivalent to She studied biology and she studied chemistry), the maxim of manner dictates that an utterance such as They had a baby and got married has different conversational implications from those such as They got married and had a baby. The maxim of manner in this instance suggests that the sequence of expressions reflects the sequence of events or is irrelevant to an appropriate interpretation. Of course English and other languages provide ways around misinterpretation: They had a baby before they got married; first they had a baby, and then they got married; they got married after they had a baby; and so on.

Maxim of Quality

The fourth general principle governing norms of language interpretation is the maxim of quality: Be truthful. Speakers and writers are expected to say only what they believe to be true and to have evidence for what they say. Again, the other side of the coin is that speakers are aware of this expectation; they know that hearers expect them to honor the maxim of quality. Without the maxim of quality, the other maxims are of little value or interest. Whether brief or lengthy, relevant or irrelevant, orderly or disorderly, all lies are false. Still, it should be noted that the maxim of quality applies principally to assertions and certain other representative speech acts. Expressives and directives can hardly be judged true or false in the same sense.

It is useful to reflect further on the maxim of quality. On the one hand, it is this maxim that constrains interlocutors to tell the truth and to have evidence for their statements. Ironically, however, it is this maxim that also makes lying possible. Without the maxim of quality, speakers would have no reason to expect hearers to take their utterances as true, and without the assumption that one’s interlocutors assume one to be telling the truth, it would be impossible to tell a lie. Lying requires that speakers are expected to be telling the truth.

Violations of the Cooperative Principle

It is no secret that people sometimes violate the maxims of the cooperative principle. Certainly not all speakers are completely truthful; others have not observed that efficiency is the desired Western norm in conversational interaction. More interestingly, speakers are sometimes forced by cultural norms or other external factors to violate a maxim. For example, irrespective of your aesthetic judgment, you may feel constrained to say What a lovely painting! to a host who is manifestly proud of a newly purchased artwork. The need to adhere to social conventions of politeness sometimes invites people to violate maxims of the cooperative principle.
Indirect Speech Acts

As mentioned earlier, interrogative structures can be used to make polite requests for action, imperative structures can be used to ask for information, and so on. Such uses of a structure with one meaning to accomplish a different task frequently play a role in ordinary interaction, as in this exchange between colleagues who have stayed at the office after dark.

Kayla: Is the boss in?
Ryan: The light's on in her office.
Kayla: Oh, thanks.

Ryan's answer makes no apparent reference to the information Kayla is seeking. Thus in theory it would appear to violate the maxim of relevance. Yet Kayla is satisfied with the answer. Recognizing that the literal interpretation of Ryan's reply violates the maxim of relevance but assuming that as a cooperative interlocutor Ryan is being relevant, Kayla seeks an indirect interpretation. To help her, she knows certain facts about their boss's habits: that she works in her own office, that she does not work in the dark, and that she is not in the habit of leaving the light on when gone for the day. Relying on this information, Kayla infers an interpretation from Ryan's utterance: Ryan believes the boss is in.

Ryan's reply is an example of an indirect speech act—one that involves an apparent violation of the cooperative principle but is in fact indirectly cooperative. For example, an indirect speech act can be based on an apparent violation of the maxim of quality. When we describe a friend as someone who never parts with a dime, we don't mean it literally; we are exaggerating. By exaggerating the information, we may seem to be flouting the maxim of quality. But listeners usually appreciate that the statement should not be interpreted literally and make an appropriate adjustment in their interpretation. Similarly, we may exclaim in front of the Sears Tower in Chicago, That's an awfully small building! This utterance appears to violate the maxim of quality in that we are expressing an evaluation that is manifestly false. But speakers readily spot the irony of such utterances and take them to be indirect speech acts intended to convey an opposite meaning.

Characteristics of Indirect Speech Acts From these examples, we can identify four characteristics of indirect speech acts:

1. Indirect speech acts violate at least one maxim of the cooperative principle.
2. The literal meaning of the locution of an indirect speech act differs from its intended meaning.
3. Hearers and readers identify indirect speech acts by noticing that an utterance has characteristic 1 (it violates a maxim) and by assuming that the interlocutor is following the cooperative principle.
4. As soon as hearers and readers have identified an indirect speech act, they identify its intended meaning with the help of knowledge of the context and of the world.

Thus, to interpret indirect speech acts, hearers use the maxims to sort out the discrepancy between the literal meaning of the utterance and an appropriate interpretation for the context in which it is uttered.
Try It Yourself: In this brief exchange, what name would you give to the speech act in A? In B? Does D represent a direct speech act or an indirect one? What about A?

A. Anna: Who finished the bread I made yesterday?
B. Juan: With the raisins?
C. Anna: Yeah.
D. Juan: Did you ask Raul?

Indirect Speech Acts and Shared Knowledge One prerequisite for a successful indirect speech act is that interactors share sufficient background about the context of the interaction, about each other and their society, and about the world in general. If Jacob asks Emma Are you done with your sociology paper? and she replies Is Rome in Spain?, Jacob will certainly recognize the answer as an indirect speech act. But whether or not he can interpret it will depend on his knowledge of geography.

Using and understanding indirect speech acts requires familiarity with both language and society. To cite an example from another culture, when speakers of the Polynesian language Tuvaluan want to comment on the fact that a particular person is in the habit of talking about himself, they may say koo tagi te tuli ki tena igoa 'The plover bird is singing its own name.' The expression derives from the fact that the plover bird's cry sounds like a very sharp "tuuuuuuliiii," from which speakers of Tuvaluan have created the word tuli to refer to the bird itself. Thus the expression has become an indirect way of criticizing the trait of singing one's own praises. In order to interpret the utterance as an indirect speech act, one must be familiar not only with the plover bird's cry and the fact that it resembles the bird's name but also with the fact that Tuvaluans view people who talk about themselves as being similar to a bird "singing its own name." Clearly, considerable background information about language, culture, and environment is needed to interpret indirect speech acts.

Politeness

Indirect speech acts appear to be a complicated way of communicating. Not only must you spot them, but you must then go through a complex reasoning process to interpret them. One might think it would be more efficient to communicate directly. The fact is, though, that indirect speech acts have uses besides asking and answering questions, criticizing others, and so on. They sometimes add humor and sometimes show politeness. Emma's indirect reply (Is Rome in Spain?) to Jacob's question suggests 'Don't be ridiculous; of course I'm not done.' Questions such as Can you shut the window? are perceived as more polite and less intrusive and abrasive than a command such as Shut the window! One message that indirect speech acts convey is 'I am being polite toward you.' Indirect speech acts are thus an efficient tool of communication: they can convey two or more messages simultaneously.
Respecting Independence and Showing Involvement

There are two basic aspects to being polite. The first rests on the fact that human beings respect one another's privacy, independence, and physical space. We avoid intruding on other people's lives, try not to be overly inquisitive about their activities, and take care not to impose our presence on them. We respect their independence and do not intrude (some call this negative politeness). On the other hand, when we let people know we enjoy their company, feel comfortable with them, like something in their personality, or are interested in their well-being, we show involvement (what some call positive politeness). While everyone expects both independence and involvement, the first requires us to leave people alone, while the second requires us to do the opposite. Fortunately, these competing needs usually arise in different contexts. When we shut ourselves in a room or take a solitary walk on the beach, we affirm our right to independence. When we attend a party, invite someone to dinner, or call friends on the telephone to check up on them, we show involvement. Both are forms of politeness.

In conversation, interlocutors give one another messages about their needs for independence and their wishes for involvement and acknowledge one another's needs for both types of politeness as well. The expectation that others won't ask embarrassing questions about our personal lives stems from the need for independence. By contrast, when you tell a friend about a personal problem and expect sympathy, you are seeking involvement. Excusing oneself before asking a stranger for the time acknowledges the stranger's right to freedom from intrusion. When we express the hope of meeting an interlocutor at a later date (Let's get together soon!), we acknowledge the interlocutor's need for involvement and sociability.