

10 Mood and the analysis of non-declarative sentences

Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber

How are non-declarative sentences understood? How do they differ semantically from their declarative counterparts? Answers to these questions once made direct appeal to the notion of illocutionary force. When they proved unsatisfactory, the fault was diagnosed as a failure to distinguish properly between mood and force. For some years now, efforts have been under way to develop a satisfactory account of the semantics of mood. In this chapter, we consider the current achievements and future prospects of the mood-based semantic programme.

10.1 Distinguishing mood and force

Early speech-act theorists regarded illocutionary force as a properly semantic category. Sentence meaning was identified with illocutionary-force potential: to give the meaning of a sentence was to specify the range of speech acts that an utterance of that sentence could be used to perform. Typically, declarative sentences were seen as linked to the performance of assertive speech acts (committing the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed), while imperative and interrogative sentences were linked to the performance of directive speech acts (requesting action and information, respectively). Within this framework, pragmatics, the theory of utterance interpretation, had at most the supplementary role of explaining how hearers, in context, choose an actual illocutionary force from among the potential illocutionary forces semantically assigned to the sentence uttered.

The speech-act semantic programme foundered on cases where sentence meaning and illocutionary-force potential come apart. For instance, declarative sentences are not always used to perform assertive speech acts. They ‘occur unasserted’ – and without change of meaning – in metaphor and irony, acting and impersonation, fiction and fantasy, jokes and example sentences, loose talk and rough approximations, and free indirect speech and thought; and as constituents of complex sentences: for example, in conditionals and disjunctions, or as subject or object complements. The fact that a sentence can retain its meaning although used without any of the potential forces semantically assigned to it is an argument against identifying meaning with force.

This suggests that illocutionary force is a pragmatic rather than a semantic category, a property not of sentences but only of utterances. What is it, then, that distinguishes declarative, imperative, and interrogative sentences on the purely semantic level? An answer increasingly proposed in the literature is that it is not force but mood.

Here, 'mood' should be taken not in its traditional syntactic sense, as referring to verbal inflection (e.g. indicative, imperative, optative), but in a semantic sense, as referring to the semantic or logical properties that distinguish, say, declarative sentences from imperative, interrogative and exclamative sentences. In the narrow syntactic sense, English has no interrogative or exclamative mood; in the semantic sense, at least if the mood-based semantic programme is to go through, it must. On this approach, each syntactic sentence type must be seen as determining a proprietary semantic mood common to literal and non-literal, serious and non-serious, embedded and non-embedded utterances of tokens of that type.¹ And, at least in non-literal, non-serious cases, determining the force of an utterance is no longer a simple matter of choosing among a range of potential forces semantically assigned to the sentence uttered.

The new mood-based programme has two interdependent tasks: to characterise the semantic moods, and to describe the relation between mood and force. A crucial constraint on the overall account is that it should help to explain why utterances have the forces they do. As Donald Davidson (1979b) puts it,

[A satisfactory theory of mood] must assign an element of meaning to utterances in a given mood that is not present in utterances in other moods. And this element should connect with the difference in force between assertions, questions and commands in such a way as to explain our intuition of a conventional relation between mood and use. (Davidson 1979b/1984: 116)

Thus, sentence meaning, and in particular the meaning of mood, must interact with contextual assumptions and pragmatic principles to yield a satisfactory account of how utterances are understood.

The new, mood-based programme, then, is really a combined semantic and pragmatic programme. Differences in the semantic characterisation of mood often result from differences in assumptions about the nature and role of pragmatics. Is pragmatic interpretation carried out by code-like rules or conventions, or by inferential enrichment based on contextual assumptions and general pragmatic principles? We want to propose an inferential treatment of the relation between mood and force.

We will argue that most existing mood-based proposals are in fact empirically inadequate, and will briefly sketch an alternative account. This alternative account, however, casts doubt on a fundamental, though implicit, assumption of the mood-based programme, and thus on this programme's general feasibility.

10.2 Characterising imperative mood

Given a powerful enough pragmatic theory, the moods themselves might be treated as semantically primitive, mere notational inputs to code-like rules or conventions of pragmatic interpretation. This is how we propose to understand the claim that mood is a conventional indicator of force. On this account, although mood is distinct from force, there is nothing more to understanding a mood than simply knowing the range of speech acts it is conventionally, or standardly, used to perform. As R. M. Hare (1970) puts it,

When we say that ‘The cat is on the mat’ is a typical indicative (when we mention its mood, that is), we identify the type of speech act which it is standardly used to perform. Thus mood signs . . . classify sentences according to the speech acts to which they are assigned by the conventions which give meanings to those signs. (Hare 1970/1971: 91)

Here, the whole burden of interpretation is left to pragmatics, which must describe not only the range of ‘standard’ forces and how the appropriate member of this range is chosen in context, but also how, in ‘non-standard’ cases, the conventional correlation between mood and force can break down, and what the effects of the breakdown will be.

The conventional correlation between mood and force is generally seen as breaking down in two main ways: in non-literal or non-serious utterances, and under embedding. For the moment, we will leave these two types of case aside, and consider various proposals about the standard or conventional force of imperative mood.²

Take the claim that imperative utterances are standardly used with directive force, where a directive act is defined as an attempt to get the hearer to perform the action described by the proposition expressed. The following look like clear counterexamples, in that a main-clause imperative is literally and seriously used without the predicted directive force:

Advice

- (1) a. PETER: Excuse me, I want to get to the station.
b. MARY: Take a number 3 bus.

Here, Mary is advising Peter what to do. There is no reason to think she cares whether Peter follows her advice, and hence no reason to analyse her utterance as an attempt to get Peter to take a number 3 bus.

Permission

- (2) a. PETER: Can I open the window?
b. MARY: Oh, open it, then.

Here, Mary is giving Peter permission to open the window. There is no reason to think she cares whether Peter performs the permitted action, and hence no reason to analyse her utterances as an attempt to get him to open the window.

Threats and dares

Mary, seeing Peter about to throw a snowball, says threateningly:

- (3) Go on. Throw it. Just you dare.

Mary's utterance is not an attempt to get Peter to throw the snowball – on the contrary.

Good wishes

Mary, visiting Peter in hospital, says:

- (4) Get well soon.

Since the 'action' described is not under Peter's control, there is no reason to analyse Mary's utterance as an attempt to get Peter to perform it.

Audienceless cases

Imperatives can be used in the absence of an agent or hearer, as when Mary looks at the sky and says:

- (5) Please don't rain,

or gets into her car and mutters:

- (6) Start, damn you.

The absence of both hearer and agent makes it hard to see these utterances as attempts to get someone to perform the action described.

Predetermined cases

Imagine a child, sent to apologise to someone, thinking to herself as she reluctantly approaches his door:

- (7) Please be out.

Or a mother, whose notoriously ill-tempered child has been sent to apologise to someone, thinking to herself as the child arrives home:

- (8) Please don't have made things worse.

Here, not only is there no hearer, but the events described have already happened (or failed to happen), and cannot be affected by what is said. Again, the predictions made by the directive analysis of imperatives are not borne out.

We know of no analysis of imperative mood as a conventional indicator of force that deals satisfactorily with the full range of examples listed above. For instance, Susan Schmerling (1982), who discusses many of them, offers the following alternative: a serious, literal imperative counts as an attempt by the speaker to bring about the state of affairs described by the proposition expressed (but not necessarily an attempt by the speaker to get the *hearer* to bring about this state of affairs). While this proposal would deal with good wishes, audienceless cases and predetermined cases, it does not handle advice, permission, threats or dares.

John Searle (1975a) defines directive speech acts as attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to perform some action (but not necessarily the action described by the proposition expressed). While this proposal would deal with threats and dares, it sheds no light on our other categories of example. It also creates a new problem: how does the hearer decide which action the speaker wants him to perform?

One could, of course, abandon the search for a unitary analysis, and say simply, as Jennifer Hornsby (1988) seems to do, that the imperative mood in English can be used with the force of a request, command, advice, permission, threat, dare, good wish, and so on. This squares with the description of mood as a conventional indicator of force. However, it also means abandoning any attempt at an explanatory account of the relation between mood and force. Why, in language after language, do imperative sentences have just this cluster of uses? We should surely be looking for a characterisation of mood that enables us not merely to describe but to explain these facts.

All this suggests that mood cannot be satisfactorily analysed as a conventional indicator of force. However, this is not the end of the mood-based programme. It might be possible to assign the moods some intrinsic semantic content that would lay a satisfactory foundation for an explanatory pragmatic account of force. Truth-conditional semanticists typically look for some analogue of truth conditions to assign to non-declarative sentences. For example, Colin McGinn (1977) treats imperatives as having not truth conditions but fulfilment conditions, which are satisfied if and only if the state of affairs described by the imperative is 'made the case'.³

Could this semantic characterisation interact with contextual assumptions and pragmatic principles to yield an explanatory account of the full range of forces with which imperative sentences can be uttered? It is hard to tell, since little is said about the pragmatic principles with which the semantic characterisation is supposed to interact. Standardly, a connection is made, via a pragmatic maxim of truthfulness (e.g. 'Do not say what you believe to be false'), between declarative utterances and expressions of belief. Let us suppose there is an analogous maxim connecting imperative utterances with expressions of desire, so that the speaker of an imperative utterance would be understood as communicating a desire that the state of affairs described should be 'made the case'.

Then advice, permission, threats and dares – which, as we have seen, need communicate no such desires – are counterexamples to this analysis. But then again, if there is no connection between imperative utterances and expressions of some attitude at least akin to desire, it is hard to see why the hearer of an imperative utterance should ever recognise that the speaker wants him to bring about the state of affairs described.

Even assuming that this problem could be solved, some of our examples (1)–(8) would still be troublesome for a framework such as McGinn's. With good wishes such as 'Get well soon', audienceless cases such as 'Please don't rain', and predetermined cases such as 'Please don't have made things worse', the state of affairs described is under no-one's control, and so nothing is 'made the case'. Nor is there any obvious reason to regard these utterances as non-serious or non-literal. This suggests that McGinn's analysis, and any analysis that replaces truth conditions with fulfilment, obedience or compliance conditions, is empirically inadequate.

Martin Huntley (1984) makes a more radical semantic proposal. The distinction between declarative and imperative sentences, he argues, is a special case of a more general semantic distinction between indicative and non-indicative mood. Semantically, indicatives 'involve indexical reference to the actual world', whereas non-indicatives (i.e. imperatives, infinitival clauses and non-finite 'that'-clauses) do not. As a result, non-indicatives, and imperatives in particular, can 'represent a situation as being merely envisaged as a possibility, with no commitment as to whether it obtains, in past, present or future, in this world' (1984: 122). This proposal is a radical departure from those considered so far, in that it makes no reference, even indirectly, to notions from the theory of force. The question is, as Huntley acknowledges, whether it lays an adequate semantic foundation for the prediction of illocutionary force.

It seems to us that it does not. It is hard to see why a hearer should conclude, from the mere fact that the speaker is envisaging a certain situation as a possibility, that he is being requested, advised, permitted, etc., to bring it about. There is a crucial difference between imperatives and infinitival clauses in this respect. As Huntley predicts, the speaker of the infinitival utterances (9a) and (9b) can envisage a certain state of affairs without necessarily representing it as either achievable or desirable:

- (9) a. To spend all one's life in the same room. Imagine.
 b. To meet the president of the United States. Hmm!

Thus, as one might expect, (9a) and (9b), and infinitival clauses in general, can be seriously and literally uttered without imperatival force (that is, without being intended or understood as orders, requests, advice, permission, good wishes, or any of the other speech acts standardly performed by imperative utterances). By the same token, Huntley's analysis predicts that imperatives can

be seriously and literally uttered without imperatival force. But of course, they can't. We conclude that imperatives and infinitival clauses cannot be treated as semantically equivalent.

We want to suggest that the crucial semantic and pragmatic differences between imperatives and infinitival clauses are linked to the notions of achievability and desirability: the semantic analysis of imperatives must make reference to these notions, while the semantic analysis of infinitival clauses need not. This is not to say that infinitival clauses can never be used with imperatival force. When can they be so used? When it is clear in the context that the state of affairs 'envisaged as a possibility' is also regarded by the speaker as both achievable and desirable. Why do serious, literal imperatives have the imperatival forces they do? Because the notions of achievability and desirability are there from the start, as part of the meaning of imperative sentences themselves. We believe that this semantic characterisation can interact with additional contextual assumptions and general pragmatic principles to yield an explanatory account of the full range of imperative utterances, including those in (1)–(8). Here is a sketch of how an account along these lines might go.

We start from the fairly standard assumption that thoughts can be entertained, and the utterances that express them can be used, as descriptions (i.e. truth-conditional representations) of states of affairs in different types of world. In particular, they can be entertained or used as descriptions of states of affairs in the actual world, or in alternative possible worlds, some of which may be not only possible but *desirable*, while others may be not only possible but *potential*, where a potential world is compatible with the individual's assumptions about the actual world, and may therefore be, or become, actual. Different linguistic constructions might then be semantically specialised for use with descriptions of states of affairs in different types of world. For instance, imperative sentences may be specialised for describing states of affairs in worlds which are regarded as both *potential* and *desirable*.

In the simplest types of case, an imperative is used to describe a state of affairs which is regarded as both potential and desirable by the speaker herself. Notice that desirability is a three-place relation: x regards y as desirable from the point of view of z . Normally, in using an imperative, the speaker has some specific person z (typically, either herself or her hearer) in mind, and expects the hearer to recognise who this is and interpret the utterance accordingly. This semantic characterisation of imperatives is thus compatible with a number of different, more specific, pragmatic interpretations. We will argue that serious, literal imperatives fall into two broad pragmatic categories, depending on how this semantic indeterminacy is pragmatically resolved.

With requests, commands, orders, good wishes, audienceless and predetermined cases, the indeterminacy is resolved in favour of the speaker, who is understood as indicating that the state of affairs described is desirable from her

own point of view. Within this broad category of cases, additional contextual assumptions are needed to distinguish the subcategories familiar from the work of speech-act theorists.

For example, if the hearer is manifestly in a position to bring about the state of affairs described, the utterance will have the force of something like a request, command, order or plea. These subcategories are distinguishable from each other by manifest assumptions about the social and physical relations between speaker and hearer, and about the degree of desirability of the state of affairs described.

Good wishes fall into the same broad category as requests, but require two additional assumptions: first, the speaker manifestly believes that neither she nor her hearer is in a position to bring about the state of affairs described, and second, she manifestly regards this state of affairs as beneficial to the hearer. Audienceless and predetermined cases are also types of wish, though here the assumption is that the state of affairs described will be beneficial to the speaker, and there need be no hearer present at all.

Advice and permission belong to the other broad category of imperative utterances, in which the semantic indeterminacy is resolved in favour of the hearer: the speaker communicates that the state of affairs described is desirable not from her own point of view but from her hearer's. When Mary advises Peter to take a number 3 bus, she indicates that from his point of view it would be desirable to take that particular bus, given that he wants to get to the station. With permission, the indeterminacy is again resolved in favour of the hearer, but what is at issue is the potentiality rather than the desirability of the state of affairs described. When Peter asks Mary if he can open the window, he represents a certain state of affairs as desirable from his own point of view, but expresses doubts about its potentiality, given that Mary can refuse to let him open it. By saying 'Oh, open it, then', Mary incidentally concedes the desirability (to Peter) of this state of affairs, but more importantly, she guarantees its potentiality, thus removing the only obstacle to Peter's opening the window.

On the account just sketched, the relation between linguistic form and force (or, more generally, pragmatic interpretation) is mediated by a direct semantic link between linguistic form and representations of propositional attitude. The intrinsic semantic properties of imperative form are characterisable in terms of a complex propositional attitude, itself analysable into two more elementary attitudes: the belief that a certain state of affairs is potential, and the belief that it is desirable from someone's point of view. These elementary attitudes recur in the analysis of other linguistic constructions. For instance, the difference between hortatives and optatives seems to be that while both involve assumptions about desirability, only hortatives involve assumptions about potentiality: one can wish for, but not exhort someone to bring about, states of affairs that one knows to be unachievable. The proposed treatment of imperatives might thus form the basis for a rather more general account.

Notice that the semantic characterisation we have proposed makes no reference to terms from the theory of force. However, we have shown that, unlike Huntley's characterisation, it does lay an adequate foundation for an explanatory account of force. The force of an imperative utterance is determined, on the one hand, by the fact that the speaker has represented a certain state of affairs as both potential and desirable, and on the other hand, by manifest contextual assumptions. So far, we have said nothing about the general pragmatic principles by which contextual assumptions are selected and semantic indeterminacies resolved. Answers to these questions will be sketched below.

10.3 Explaining non-literal, non-serious cases

Most work on the semantics of non-declarative sentences treats the interpretation of non-literal, non-serious cases – for example, metaphor, irony, impersonations, jokes and example sentences – as a purely pragmatic matter: it is assumed that, semantically, there is nothing to distinguish them from literal, serious cases. Since we think these non-literal cases hold the key to the analysis of interrogative sentences, we will discuss them briefly here.

In our book *Relevance* (1986a: [chapter 4](#), section 7), we argued that there are two fundamentally different types of representation, and therefore two fundamentally different uses to which thoughts or utterances can be put. On the one hand, there is *descriptive* representation, which is a relation between thoughts or utterances and possible or actual states of affairs which make (or would make) them true. On the other hand, there is *interpretive* representation, which is a relation between thoughts or utterances and other thoughts or utterances that they resemble in content. While the notion of descriptive representation is quite familiar, the notion of interpretive representation is less so. We see interpretive representation as playing a fundamental role in the analysis of both non-literal utterances and interrogatives.

In appropriate conditions, any object in the world can be used to represent another object that it resembles. You ask me what is the shape of Brazil, and I point to an appropriately shaped cloud in the sky; I encourage you to buy me another drink by imitating the act of drinking; I make fun of someone by mimicking his walk. It follows that any utterance can be used to represent another object that it resembles. In direct quotation, an utterance is used to represent another utterance that it resembles in linguistic form, while in indirect quotation, an utterance is used to represent another utterance or thought that it resembles in propositional content. Indirect quotation of speech or thought is a typical example of *interpretive representation*, based on *interpretive* resemblances between two items with a propositional content.

In *Relevance* (1986a: [chapter 4](#), section 7), we analyse interpretive resemblance in terms of shared analytic and contextual implications. The *analytic implications*

of a proposition P are its non-trivial logical implications; these remain invariant from context to context. The *contextual implications* of a proposition P , by contrast, are determined by the context (i.e. the set of mentally represented background assumptions) in which it is processed. The contextual implications of a proposition P in a context C are those propositions logically implied by the union of P and C , but by neither P nor C alone. On this approach, any thought or utterance can be used to represent another thought or utterance that it interpretively resembles – that is, with which it shares analytic or contextual implications.

Interpretive resemblance is a matter of degree. At one extreme, two utterances or thoughts may share no analytic or contextual implications when processed in a given context, and thus not resemble each other interpretively at all. At the other extreme lies full identity of analytic and contextual implications. When a thought or utterance P is used to represent another thought or utterance Q that it resembles in content, P is a *literal* interpretation of Q if and only if P and Q share all their analytic and contextual implications. Literalness, so defined, is a special case of interpretive resemblance.

In a framework with a maxim, norm or convention of literal truthfulness, utterances are expected to be fully literal interpretations of the speaker's thoughts. We reject the maxim of truthfulness and the assumption that non-literality involves a departure from the norms of communication. We have argued instead that the expectation crucial to communication is one not of literal truthfulness but of optimal relevance, where in order to be optimally relevant, an utterance must convey enough contextual implications to be worth the hearer's attention, and put the hearer to no unjustifiable effort in obtaining them (Sperber and Wilson 1987a, 1987b).

In this framework, loose talk and metaphor arise naturally in the search for optimal relevance. Suppose that a speaker has a complex thought P , with many implications, which it would not be economical to spell out explicitly. Still, these implications are easily derivable from utterance Q when it is processed in an appropriate context. Q also has further implications which do not form part of the speaker's thought, and which she does not want to convey. For a hearer with an expectation of optimal relevance rather than literal truthfulness, Q may well be the most economical way of conveying the speaker's meaning (Sperber and Wilson 1986a, 1986b).

To illustrate, consider the following metaphorical imperative:

(10) Build your own road through life.

In interpreting this utterance, the hearer's task is to identify a subset of its analytic and contextual implications which the speaker might reasonably have expected to make it relevant enough to be worth his attention, and which could not have been more economically conveyed by some other easily available utterance. By processing (10) in the context of his encyclopaedic knowledge of

road building, he might derive such implications as: ‘Do not follow the lead of others’, ‘Make up your own mind what to do and where to go’, ‘Plan your life’, ‘Aim at consistency and continuity’, ‘Be creative’, and so on. These are all implications that a speaker aiming at optimal relevance might have intended to convey. Other implications, for instance, ‘Buy a steamroller’, ‘Take a course in engineering’, and ‘Submit your plans to the Department of Transport’, are inconsistent with information given elsewhere in the utterance (e.g. the instruction to build a road through *life*), or with manifest assumptions about what the speaker might reasonably have intended to communicate in the circumstances.

In *Relevance*, we argued that a given utterance has no more than a single interpretation (or a small range of roughly equivalent interpretations) that a given hearer can take a rational speaker to have intended to convey. To be optimally relevant, an utterance must yield enough implications to be worth the hearer’s attention, and put the hearer to no gratuitous effort. Although many interpretations might yield enough implications to be worth the hearer’s attention, only the most accessible of these will yield these implications for no gratuitous effort. In deciding which implications the speaker intended to convey, the hearer should thus select the minimal (because most easily accessible) subset. In other words, he should take the utterance to be fully literal only if nothing less than full literalness will do. Thus, if a rational speaker aiming at optimal relevance could have intended to convey some, but not all, of the implications obtainable by processing (10) in an appropriate context, then that is how she should be understood.

In the first instance, then, every utterance is presented as a more or less literal interpretation of the thought of the speaker. But a thought itself may be descriptively or interpretively used: it may be entertained as a description of a state of affairs in an actual, possible, potential or desirable world, or as an interpretive representation of other thoughts that it resembles in content. For example, Mary may entertain the thought that Peter is unhappy, not as a description of the actual world, but as an interpretive representation of what he said or implied. She may indicate this explicitly by saying ‘Peter says he is unhappy’; or (in appropriate circumstances) she may say, simply, ‘Peter is unhappy’, expecting the hearer to understand that she is representing not what she takes to be Peter’s actual mental state, but what she takes him to have said or implied. In that case, her utterance would be *tacitly interpretive*.

Tacitly interpretive utterances can be used not only to report someone else’s utterances or thoughts, but also to express the speaker’s attitude – positive or negative, approving or disapproving – to the attributed thoughts. In *Relevance* (chapter 4, section 9), we described such utterances as *echoic*, and analysed verbal irony as a case of echoic interpretive use: the speaker echoes a thought which she attributes to some other person or group of people, while tacitly dissociating herself from it as ludicrously false or inappreciate.

To illustrate, consider the following exchange:

- (11) a. PETER: Can I open the window?
 b. MARY: Go ahead and let in some nice Arctic air.

Here, Mary's utterance would plausibly be understood as ironical. On that interpretation, she is not giving Peter permission to open the window. On the contrary, she is suggesting that it was ridiculous of him even to think of asking her permission. He could only have done so, she implies, if he thought she liked to be freezing cold. By caricaturing this attributed thought (that is, by offering a less-than-literal interpretation of it), Mary makes it clear that she dissociates herself from it and finds it ridiculous.

So far, we have considered two main types of interpretive utterance. An utterance may be a more or less literal interpretation of the speaker's thought, which may itself be an interpretation of a thought attributed to someone other than the speaker (or the speaker herself at another time). Utterances of example sentences in linguistic or philosophical discussion might be seen as illustrating a third type of interpretive use. The example token may be interpretively used to represent an utterance or thought type that it resembles in content. For instance, we used example (10) above to represent a certain type of imperative utterance or thought. This example, though interpretively used, was not used to attribute a thought or utterance to any actual person or type of person: it was used to represent a possible, or potential, but non-attributed, utterance or thought. In the [next section](#), we will argue that interrogative sentences belong to yet another category of interpretive use: they are specialised for representing not descriptive thoughts, nor attributed thoughts, nor possible or potential thoughts, but *desirable* thoughts.

10.4 Characterising interrogative mood

The literature on interrogatives parallels the literature on imperatives: some people treat interrogative mood as a conventional indicator of force; others try to assign it some intrinsic semantic content that would interact with contextual assumptions and pragmatic principles to yield a more explanatory account. We will argue that most existing analyses are empirically inadequate.

Take the claim that interrogatives standardly or conventionally have the force of questions, where a question is defined as a request for information. As Bach and Harnish (1979: 40) put it,

Questions are special cases of requests, special in that what is requested is that the speaker provide the hearer with certain information.

This is perhaps the standard speech-act account of interrogatives. Let us assume that a speaker cannot appropriately request information that she already has, or

that she knows the hearer is unable to provide. Then even when non-serious, non-literal and embedded cases are left aside, the following look like clear counterexamples, in that a main-clause interrogative is literally and seriously used without the predicted force:

Rhetorical questions

Peter has made a New Year's resolution to give up smoking. As he lights up on New Year's Day, Mary says to him:

- (12) What was your New Year's resolution?

It is clear in the circumstances that Mary already knows the answer, and that her utterance is not a request for information. Intuitively, rhetorical questions of this type function as reminders, and do not call for any overt response.

Exam questions

Examiners usually know more about the subject than examinees, and it would be odd to treat exam questions as requests for information.

Guess questions

Mary hides a sweet in her hand, puts both hands behind her back, and says to Peter:

- (13) Which hand is it in?

Her utterance doubly fails to fit the standard speech-act account: the questioner already knows the answer, whereas the hearer doesn't and can at best make a guess. These cases bear obvious similarities to exam questions.

Surprise questions

Consider the following exchange:

- (14) a. PETER: The president has resigned.
b. MARY: Good heavens. Has he?

It seems inappropriate to describe Mary's utterance as a request for information which she was given only a few seconds ago. Intuitively, (14b) expresses Mary's surprise or incredulity at the information she has been given. As such, it is a counterexample to the standard speech-act account.

Expository questions

Often, a writer or speaker asks a question in order to arouse the audience's interest in an answer that she plans to give herself. At the beginning of this

chapter we asked two such expository questions. They are better seen as offers of information than as requests for information.

Self-addressed questions

When Mary says to herself ‘Now why did I say that?’ she is better seen as wondering why she said what she did than requesting information – which she could appropriately request from herself only if she simultaneously possessed and lacked it.

Speculative questions

When Mary thinks to herself, or asks Peter idly, ‘What is the best analysis of interrogative sentences?’ there is even less reason to analyse her utterance as a request for information. Mary may know that she does not know the answer; she may know that Peter does not know the answer; she may know that no-one knows the answer. On the speech-act account, there is no point in asking a question unless you think your hearer may be able to provide the answer. This rules out all speculative questions: that is, all questions which are of more than passing interest.

Martin Bell (1975), who discusses many of these examples, proposes a weakened speech-act account on which ‘standard’ questions are treated as requests to tell rather than to inform: the assumption being that one can appropriately request a hearer to tell one something one already knows. While this would deal with exam questions and guess questions, it does not handle rhetorical questions, surprise questions, expository questions, self-addressed questions or speculative questions.

John Lyons, in a more radical departure from the standard speech-act account, argues that interrogatives are conventionally used not to ask questions but to ‘pose’ them:

When we pose a question, we merely give expression to, or externalise, our doubt; and we can pose questions which we do not merely expect to remain unanswered, but which we know, or believe, to be unanswerable. (Lyons 1977: 755)

The problem with this proposal is that not all interrogative utterances are expressions of doubt (at least doubt about the correct answer). In exam questions, guess questions, surprise questions, expository questions, and many types of rhetorical question (e.g. (12) above), the speaker is in no doubt about the correct answer, and a different type of analysis is required.

All this suggests that interrogative mood cannot be satisfactorily analysed as a conventional indicator of force: interrogative sentences must instead be assigned some intrinsic semantic content that will lay an adequate foundation for an explanatory account of force.

Within truth-conditional frameworks, some analogue of truth conditions has been sought for interrogatives, as for imperatives. Hamblin (1973), for example,

treats interrogatives as denoting their sets of possible answers, and Karttunen (1977) treats them as denoting their sets of true answers. The main problem with this approach is that it provides no obvious explanation of the pragmatic differences among positive questions such as (15), negative questions such as (16) and alternative questions such as (17):

- (15) Did you see Susan?
 (16) Didn't you see Susan?
 (17) Did you or did you not see Susan?

Each of these questions has the possible answers 'Yes' and 'No', and a true answer to any one is a true answer to all. For Hamblin and Karttunen, (15)–(17) should thus be synonymous. Why is it, then, that while utterances of (15) are generally neutral in tone, the speaker of (16) suggests that she had expected the hearer to see Susan, and (17) sounds impatient or hectoring?⁴

Bolinger (1978) develops this point at length, with a wealth of convincing examples. He goes on to argue that indirect questions introduced by 'if' are not synonymous with those introduced by 'whether': the former are embedded versions of *yes-no* questions such as (15) and (16), while the latter are embedded versions of alternative questions such as (17). This indirectly supports the claim that *yes-no* questions are not synonymous with their alternative counterparts.

Bolinger concludes that *yes-no* questions such as (15) and (16) are semantically very similar to conditionals:

Both conditionals and YNQs [*yes-no* questions] are hypotheses. A conditional hypothesises that something is true and draws a conclusion from it. A YNQ hypothesises that something is true and confirmed, amended or disconfirmed by a hearer. (Bolinger 1978: 102)

While Bolinger's criticisms of existing approaches seem to us well founded, his own account is empirically inadequate. In the first place, if interrogatives are a type of hypothesis, they should have the illocutionary force of hypotheses. Yet typically, to make a hypothesis is to commit oneself, however tentatively or temporarily, to its truth, whereas to ask a *yes-no* question is not. Bolinger's account offers no explanation of why this might be so. Moreover, there are *yes-no* versions of rhetorical questions, guess questions, exam questions, expository questions and audienceless cases, and contrary to what Bolinger predicts, none of these is a request for confirmation, disconfirmation or amendment by a hearer. Nor is it obvious that Bolinger's account of *yes-no* questions can be generalised to handle *wh*-questions.

It seems, then, that there is no satisfactory existing analysis of interrogative mood. We believe there is a reason for this failure. Interrogatives do have some intrinsic semantic content in virtue of their interrogative form, but this content is not analysable in anything approaching truth-conditional terms. In the terms

outlined in the [last section](#), interrogatives are semantically specialised not for descriptive but for interpretive use. In the simplest, most intuitive terms, interrogatives are interpretively used to represent what the speaker regards as relevant answers.

On this account, interrogative utterances, like echoic utterances, are doubly interpretive: they interpretively represent a thought of the speaker's, which itself interpretively represents another utterance or thought. However, while echoic utterances are used to represent *attributed* thoughts, interrogative utterances are used to represent *desirable* thoughts.⁵

What makes a thought desirable? In *Relevance*, we argued that a thought is desirable only if it is relevant – that is, only if it is rich enough in cognitive effects (e.g. contextual implications) to be worth the individual's attention. To regard a certain thought as desirable to someone is thus to regard it as relevant enough to be worthy of his attention. The claim that interrogatives represent desirable thoughts thus amounts to the claim that they represent not possible answers, nor true answers, but *relevant* answers.

How does the hearer decide what answer the speaker would regard as relevant? In the case of *yes–no* questions, the solution is straightforward. A positive question expresses a positive proposition, a negative question expresses a negative proposition, and an alternative question expresses both a positive and a negative proposition. The easiest assumption for the hearer to make, and thus the assumption favoured by considerations of relevance, is that the speaker has chosen to express the very proposition she would regard as relevant if true. That is, a positive question such as (15) indicates that a positive answer would be, if anything, more relevant than a negative one, a negative question such as (16) suggests that a negative answer would be, if anything, more relevant than a positive one, and an alternative question such as (17) indicates that a positive and a negative answer would be equally relevant. Although we have not the space to show it here, this analysis should interact with considerations of relevance, and in particular with considerations of effort, to account for the pragmatic differences among utterances of (15)–(17).

Although *wh*-questions do not express complete propositions but merely incomplete logical forms, we claim that they are interpretively used to represent complete propositions that they resemble. Which complete propositions? The natural assumption, and hence the assumption favoured by considerations of relevance, is that they represent completions of the incomplete logical forms they express. In other words, the speaker of a *wh*-question expresses an incomplete logical form, and indicates that she would regard some completion of it as relevant if true.

On this account, interrogatives are the interpretive counterpart of imperatives, which are used to represent desirable states of affairs. As with imperatives, desirability introduces an element of indeterminacy, which must be pragmatically

resolved by making some assumption about who it is that, according to the speaker, would regard the thought in question as desirable. As always, the first assumption that yields an acceptable interpretation is the only such assumption, and is the one the hearer should choose.

Like imperatives, interrogatives fall into two broad pragmatic types, depending on how the semantic indeterminacy is resolved. With requests for information, exam questions, guess questions, surprise questions, self-addressed questions and speculative questions, the indeterminacy is resolved in favour of the speaker, who indicates that she would regard the answer as relevant to herself. Further contextual assumptions are needed to distinguish among the various subtypes of this broad type.

Consider the following exchange:

- (18) a. MARY: Where did I leave my keys?
b. PETER: In the kitchen drawer.

Suppose that Mary manifestly regards an answer to her question as desirable to herself, manifestly expects Peter to know the answer, and manifestly expects him to supply it. Then (18a) would have the force of a request for information. Suppose that while Mary manifestly regards an answer as desirable to herself, she is manifestly not addressing Peter. Then (18a) would have the force of a self-addressed question or speculation.

Still within the same broad pragmatic category of questions, suppose that Mary manifestly expects Peter to answer her question; but suppose, moreover, that she is manifestly in a better position than he is to know the answer – say, because she has just hidden the keys herself. Then (18a) would have the force of a request for an answer, but not a request for information. How can this be? Peter's answer (18b), like any utterance, expresses both a proposition and an attitude, and may be relevant in a variety of ways: for example, by providing evidence about the state of affairs it describes, or by providing evidence about Peter's beliefs about this state of affairs. If Mary's utterance had been a request for information, Peter's response would have been relevant in the first of these two ways; if, as we are imagining, Mary's utterance is a guess question, Peter's response might be relevant in the second way: by providing information about Peter's beliefs, his ability to predict Mary's actions, his willingness to cooperate with her, and so on. Exam questions might be dealt with along similar lines.⁶

With rhetorical and expository questions, the semantic indeterminacy is resolved in the hearer's favour: the speaker indicates that she regards the answer as relevant to him. Consider the following exchange:

- (19) a. PETER: Will they keep their promises?
b. MARY: Have politicians ever kept their promises?

Here, Mary's utterance could be a genuine request for information. Suppose, though, that Mary manifestly regards the answer as relevant to Peter rather than to herself, manifestly knows the answer herself, and is manifestly prepared to give it. Then (19b) would have the force of an expository question or offer of information. Suppose, instead, that though she manifestly regards the answer as relevant to Peter, she also manifestly expects him to know it already, or to be in a position to work it out for himself without being told. Then (19b) would be a rhetorical question with the force of a reminder. Expository questions and rhetorical questions thus fit naturally into the framework.

In this section, we have tried to show that existing analyses of interrogative mood are empirically inadequate, and to present an alternative account that lays an adequate semantic foundation for the prediction of illocutionary force. Fundamental to our account have been the notions of interpretive representation and of a desirable (i.e. relevant) thought. Notice that our semantic analysis of interrogatives parallels our semantic analysis of imperatives in two important respects: first, it makes no direct reference to terms from the theory of force; and second, it relies heavily on semantic indeterminacy and the claim that such indeterminacy is resolved during the process of pragmatic interpretation.

On this account, the pragmatic force of an interrogative utterance is determined, on the one hand, by the fact that the speaker has represented a certain thought as desirable to someone, and on the other, by manifest contextual assumptions. How are contextual assumptions selected and semantic indeterminacies resolved? Here we have appealed to a single, general pragmatic principle, based on a notion of optimal relevance, and argued that in resolving semantic and contextual indeterminacies, a rational hearer should select the first interpretation (if any) that a rational speaker aiming at optimal relevance might have intended to convey. This completes our sketch of the semantics and pragmatics of imperatives and interrogatives.

10.5 Conclusion

The account just sketched is far from complete: we have ignored embedded cases, jokes, fantasies and fictions, threats and pseudo-imperatives, surprise questions and other types of echoic question, and 'minor sentence types' (e.g. exclamative, optative, hortative). However, we hope to have shown that an approach along these lines is both feasible and generalisable. In this last section, we consider its implications for analyses based on mood.

We have argued for a direct semantic link between linguistic form and representations of propositional attitude. Imperative sentences (or rather, such characteristic features as imperative verb inflection, negative marking and imperative particles such as 'please') are linked to representations of potentiality and desirability. Interrogative sentences (or rather such characteristic features as interrogative

word order, intonation and interrogative particles) are also linked to representations of desirability, in this case desirability of a thought rather than a state of affairs. Are we claiming, then, to have a satisfactory analysis of the semantic moods?

Not really – because we see no reason to assume that semantic moods exist. As we understand it, there is an implicit assumption behind mood-based approaches that we would want to question. The assumption is that the moods are unanalysable and mutually exclusive semantic categories: that every sentence belongs to one and only one mood, which is not itself decomposable into more elementary moods.

It is easy to think of grounds for questioning this assumption. For instance, many languages have two types of interrogative sentence: those with an indicative verb, which expect an indicative answer, and those with a subjunctive verb, which expect a subjunctive answer. The Omotic languages of Southern Ethiopia have both indicative and imperative interrogatives – that is, interrogatives with an imperative verb, which expect an imperative answer. In each case, the meaning of the interrogative is a function of the meaning of the interrogative marker, on the one hand, and of indicative, subjunctive or imperative verb form, on the other. On the assumption that every syntactic sentence type determines a distinct and unanalysable mood, it would be surprising if a hearer encountering, say, an imperative interrogative for the first time was able to understand it. On our account, a hearer who already understood imperatives, on the one hand, and indicative interrogatives, on the other, should automatically understand imperative questions. This claim could be easily tested.

More seriously, what we see as the fundamental distinction between interpretive and descriptive use cross-cuts any distinction among sentence types, and hence any distinction among semantic moods. As we have shown, every utterance – whatever its syntactic or semantic type – is in the first instance a more or less literal interpretation of a thought of the speaker's. This fact is not linguistically encoded in any way. Nor is the distinction between literal and less-than-literal interpretation. Although there are one or two linguistic indicators of loose use (e.g. hedges, or the use of 'oh' in 'There were, oh, a thousand people there'), it is in general left to the hearer, on the basis of considerations of relevance, to decide how faithful a representation has been attempted.

Similarly, any utterance, of any syntactic or semantic type, can be used as a second-order interpretation, and the fact is not normally linguistically encoded. Though there are linguistic indicators of echoic use (e.g. the 'hearsay' particles used in many languages, or the French reportative conditional), it is in general left to the hearer, on the basis of considerations of relevance, to decide whether a second-order interpretation is involved and if so, of what type.

Interrogatives, we have argued, do encode the fact that they are second-order interpretations of a certain type. But this does not prevent them from being used echoically too. Consider (20):

(20) John sighed. Would she never speak?

The question in (20) is a case of free indirect speech. As such, it is triply interpretive: it is a more or less literal interpretation of a thought of the speaker's or writer's, which is itself an echoic interpretation of a thought attributed to John, which is in turn an interpretation of a desirable thought, namely, the answer to the question. Of these facts, only the last is linguistically encoded, and as this example makes clear, the encoding is indeterminate in two important respects: as to who regards the answer as desirable, and to whom.

The picture that emerges is both more complex and more highly structured than standard mood-based analyses would suggest. The echoic question in (20) is used to represent not a single propositional attitude but a stack of attitudes, each embedding or being embedded in another. An echoic imperative or declarative may involve a comparable array: it can, for example, be used in the appropriate circumstances to represent the speaker's view of what Bill suggested that Jenny regarded as an actual, potential or desirable state of affairs. Moreover, the elementary attitudes that make up these complex arrays are not tied to any single sentence type: any sentence may be used as a faithful representation of the speaker's thought, or of an attributed thought, or of a possible but non-attributed thought. In *Relevance*, we argued that even the subtype of attitude encoded by interrogatives is shared in essential respects by exclamatives (Sperber and Wilson 1986a: 253–54).

If we are right, then the linguistic form of a non-declarative utterance vastly underdetermines the way it is understood. In this, as in every other aspect of interpretation, considerations of relevance play a vital constraining and enriching role. The greater the contribution of pragmatics, the less has to be attributed to linguistic semantics. Our claim is that the characteristic linguistic features of declarative, imperative or interrogative form merely encode a rather abstract property of the intended interpretation: the direction in which the relevance of the utterance is to be sought.