

# Action Verbs as Illocutionary Verbs on the Internet

Jon Camfield

The two utterances “I walk to the store” and “I promise to walk to the store” contain the same propositional content, but the second has also an illocutionary force (Searle) which places it into the category of illocutionary acts. I will show that given the correct context, the utterance “I walk to the store” also fits within the category of illocutionary acts, and therefore, action verbs such as ‘walk,’ ‘jump,’ and ‘sit’ can be performative verbs. The correct context for this is a purely text medium, where all the interaction, spoken utterances, movements and all other action is carried on through text. I am not arguing that Searle, Austin and Vendler have been incorrect in their theories, and indeed I shall use them to argue my points, rather that word usage changes these textual media, allowing, if not forcing, action verbs to be used performatively.

A general description of the medium is necessary to begin with as it is a foreign concept to most. I shall refer to this textual medium as a textual reality, a virtual reality expressed completely and only through text. Textual realities are unique to the Internet, and I will try to describe one in a manner appropriate for my later points. Imagine for a moment a large room with several blindfolded people inside the room. These people are told to interact with each other and with the room as if they were not blindfolded. The room is unfurnished at the outset, but the nature of this room is that if one of the blindfolded participants vocally announces to everyone in the room an intention to do something requiring an object, the object will instantly appear. For example, if one of the blindfoldees says “I sit down,” and proceeds to sit, there will be a chair. You now have a group of people announcing every significant action of theirs, such as “I walk across the room towards the North corner,” “I get a drink at the bar,” etcetera. The dialog produced might resemble something like this:

**Rose** sighs and curls up very small on the couch

**Gryph:** “Rose: if she's not ready to let it out, it's not going to come yet.  
we just have to give it time.”

**Pixel-** goes over and offers rose a hug

**EllakIt**e grumps.

**FaithH** goes over to Rose and offers her a lap to curl up in

**Gryph** steps up on the soapbox

**MaxCat** listens to Gryph.

This excerpt of conversation is from (surprise) a conversation in one of these textual realities. This textual reality is from IRC, or Internet Relay Chat, where people worldwide are able to talk and interact, through text, synchronously. It rather resembles a very large ‘party line’ with phones.

There is a duality in textual realities such as IRC that participants exploit to use action verbs as illocutionary verbs. Observing the above room of blindfolded people, no one would argue that their announcements performed any actions. It is as likely that they would say things such as “I’m walking northwest” or “I’m sitting down now,” using the gerund and clearly describing their actions, not performing them. In a textual reality, however, the common perception of the participants is that, separate from the human at the keyboard, the person, there is also a *persona* that exists solely in the textual (virtual) reality. This is the exploited duality, the separation and combination of the human at the keyboard and the *persona* in the textual reality. The human saying (typing) the utterance is not necessarily performing an illocutionary act, though he or she could be performing one of the traditional illocutionary acts such as promising, to which we will return. For the *persona*, however, the utterance of an action verb is an illocutionary act. Within the limited reality of the *personae*, there is no difference between the uttering and the doing of an action. Parallel to invalidly claiming that “I didn’t promise, I only said I promised,” one cannot cancel an action “only said” in a textual reality.

We must make two significant adjustments to our own perception of what speech acts are in purely textual realities, in the senses of what they consist of and to what they refer. To the first point, what speech acts consist of, we see that merely phonetic acts, utterances of sound without meaning, rarely occur. Due to the abbreviated nature of any medium where people are trying to communicate at the speed of spoken communication without the benefit of voice or body language, participants do not waste time typing in merely phonetic acts. They do occur as errors either in the system or as typographical

errors of the participants, however. Most apparently phonetic acts, after analysis, connect with some meaning and are therefore phatic acts. Due to the loss of some extra-linguistic and all nonlinguistic parts of communication (tone and body language for example), participants go out of their way to express what would normally be conveyed through these channels, such as non-conversational implicature, through the actions of the personae and phatic acts. Rhetic acts naturally also occur, but here we encounter the second difficulty. Rhetic acts are phatic acts which refer to something, but in a purely textual reality, what do they refer to? The reference of rhetic acts here can be the text itself, some object that the human perceives beside his or her computer, or also some 'object' in the virtual reality that all the participants construct together. The references we concern ourselves primarily with are those which allow personae to perform illocutionary acts with action verbs, which are the last in the series--the 'imagined' objects within the virtual reality. These objects seem no more real than Pegasus or Odysseus, but neither are they any *less* real. To take a brief discursion into referring, it is better to say, in line with Frege and Strawson, that these utterances lack a truth value. I add to this that they lack a truth value only outside of their context. Within the textual reality of the Odyssey, there is a difference between what is true and what is not. Odysseus either did or did not sleep on the shore, and within the context a one can assign truth value. This truth value does not connect to the rest of the world, however, because outside of the fiction there is nothing referred to. To follow Russell and say that the personae do not directly denote anything when they refer seems incorrect for the same reason--I would not have used 'Odysseus' for an example if Homer had not written down the Odyssey. The personae, then, do have some object to refer to when they utter rhetic acts, if only within their textual reality. The nature of the existence of the persona itself remains unclear. Is a persona more real than a fictional character because of its link to a human being, or is it on the same level as, say, Hamlet, and a source of a paradox as fictional psychological, imagined, or parts of all three? A last ditch effort could link the existence of the persona to the sum of its utterances and its name as represented in the text located in computer memories worldwide, but this fails to capture the closeness of the persona to the person. This paper assumes that personae exist as much as the objects they refer to do. Both the personae and the objects are real within the context of their

textual reality. This is the most difficult assumption of the paper, and I will return to it at the end. I also initially assume that personae, not the humans at the keyboards, perform the speech and illocutionary acts, though they may link in with the human, though I will later challenge this assumption.

The persona, the virtual and fictional being, performs acts such as walking, drinking, or grinning by expressing them through only words within the context of the virtual world of the persona. The criteria of Zeno Vendler for performative verbs support this assertion. Vendler requires that that a verb fulfill two of his three criteria to be considered in performative form. The criteria are that to say “I ‘V,’” where V is the verb in question, is to V, by saying “I ‘V,’” the speaker ‘V’s, and to say “I hereby ‘V’” yields a meaningful and grammatical sentence. Participants in textual realities rarely, if at all use ‘hereby’ (in 1334 typewriter-sized pages of text, it was not used once). Moreover, it would not yield, inside or out of a textual reality, a sensible sentence to utter “I hereby walk to the other side of the room” when one could more quickly utter simply “I walk to the other side of the room” to the same effect. The other two Vendler criteria are fulfilled, which is all that is required. By saying “I walk (to the other side of the room)” is to walk, and the persona walks. This leads us to a full acceptance of action verbs as performative verbs.

This first view is, unfortunately, a naive way to look at personae. There is a puppetmaster, the human at the keyboard, for these puppet personae. So the persona, one could say, does not itself utter “I ‘V,’” but rather is only the avenue through which the human communicates. The human says (types) “I ‘V,’” but does not V. The persona Vs, but is not the origin of the utterance “I ‘V,’” This leads us to a logically weaker position which is more resistant to attacks. One can analyze the entire situation of the human typing and the persona performing as nothing more than the human issuing commands, a common illocutionary act in both Austin and Searle’s taxonomies. This recovers the standard position of action verbs not being illocutionary acts and describes events within textual realities. The command of the human at the keyboard is a normal illocutionary act, and the target of the command is, by its very nature, forced to comply and carry out

the command exactly as it is uttered, so the persona does not perform an illocutionary act but rather carry out a command.

However, this does not fully describe the situation of textual realities. The commands to the persona, if grammatically analyzed, would be commands to oneself. The actual grammar is “/me V.” The ‘/’ indicates to the computer that this is a command. It translates into English as “Computer, I command,” ‘me’ is name of the command, and ‘V’ is the action. A command translated into English would read “Computer, I command myself to ‘V.’” I argue that the keyboard, and the utterances of the human through it, cannot be analyzed as illocutionary acts if one is investigating the acts of the persona. The actions of the persona are too closely linked with the utterance of the human for them to be analyzed separately - neither the utterance nor the action of the persona would exist without the other, the human would not type in “/me walks” if there was not a persona which was going to walk in its textual reality. The text is the nervous system for the persona. One does not say “Arm, pick up the pen,” but rather one uses nerves transmitting electrical pulses, unconsciously, to perform that action. The keyboard of the human carries text signals, albeit consciously, to the persona. This seems like a very strong assertion, but the connection between the person and the persona should not be underestimated. For an actor, who in his role (his persona, if you will--perhaps he wears a mask), promises some future act, but outside of his role, does not perform it, we would not say that he has broken his promise, for he did not truly make it. However, in textual realities, promises the persona makes do apply to the human at the keyboard. One cannot say “My persona swore to, but my human did not” (Euripides, in Austin, 122). We see this here:

**WolfOne** breaks a promise to himself, right now

**KosherHam:** Uh, Wolfie, what promise...?

**WolfOne:** I promised myself two weeks ago I wouldn't listen to Metallica anymore

We must also remember that other participants in the conversation (within the textual reality) do not have any sense of the humans typing or giving commands. The only things evident to the other participants, and, indeed, in all records of the events, are the actions of the personae performed with action verbs. Further, it is possible to have programs which act freely, without constant human interference. These programs, then, have no

one typing their commands at a keyboard, and they can interact with the other personae using action verbs. What else could these action verbs be but illocutionary acts? Take for example, this fragment:

**Woscoe** hands Max a small herring.  
**MaxCat** sniffs the small herring.  
**MaxCat** thanks Woscoe, and eats the small herring.  
**Woscoe** sniffs at Kath's sandwich and wonders why he just has these herrings.  
**Woscoe** tosses Max a small herring.  
**MaxCat** catches the small herring.  
**MaxCat** thanks Woscoe, but he is still eating the small herring.  
**MaxCat** will save the small herring for later.  
**Kath** tosses Woscoe a turkey club sandwich.  
**Woscoe** grins and chows down.  
**MaxCat** finishes eating the small herring.  
**MaxCat** jumps from the floor onto Woscoe's lap and starts purring louder.  
**Woscoe** skritchies Max under the chin.  
**MaxCat** vibrates like a badly loaded washer.

It is not immediately obvious which character is the computer program and which the human. MaxCat is the program who has been made to respond (here, as a virtual cat) to other personae in a verisimilitudinous fashion, one that is believably real in the context of the textual reality. MaxCat is similar to the sign warning of danger that Austin discusses (125) which performs an illocutionary act, even though it is an inanimate object. This seems to prove that illocutionary acts are performable using action verbs in textual realities - not only is the utterance of the human inseparable from the persona actions, there are cases when there is no human utterance at all; all that exists is the action verb, which performs an act within the textual reality.

We unfortunately still have not entirely described the situations which we may find in textual realities, so we must continue to adapt our theory. We now must reduce the amount of illocutionary acts performed which we just finished arguing for, because there is contradictory evidence. In this fragment we see a persona reporting on the actions of the human:

**NJBill:** "Come of think of it, coffee is an excellent idea"

**NJBill** will BRB [*BRB* is an abbreviation of “be right back”]  
**Gryph** has already had his 2 cups  
**NJBill** is back, coffee in hand (well, in cup, actually)

This is a description of what the human is doing, and it is common practice in textual realities for the participants to communicate some of the actions of the human at the keyboard, especially when these activities effect their participation, such as anything involving being away from the keyboard (which has been abbreviated to “afk”). The form of the description is the same as the forms we have previously seen for the persona to performing illocutionary acts. Is it possible, then, that what we have interpreted as illocutionary acts before are nothing more than a condensed grammar which actually were nothing more than descriptions? This is a seductive view. It would explain the apparently illocutionary acts with action verbs as only a description, incorporate the normal view of illocutionary acts used as commands to the computer by the human, and allow for interaction between personae and their virtual environment. It would also explain samples of text such as this one below, where Dafydd does not perceive his utterance of “Dafydd blows a raspberry” as performing the action, and adds on two phatic acts (I include here the sideways ‘smiley- face’ [ :-p , :) ] as a phatic act as it consists of marks, conveys meaning, and is uttered with a meaning in mind)

**Dafydd** blows a raspberry at Geoff . :-p phthp phthp phthp phthp...  
**Geoff** would blow a raspberry back, but his tongue is ceramic. :)

The text produced, in this view, is a narrative produced by many authors simultaneously, a work of public fiction. Each participant is in control of one character (excepting unusual circumstances) of whom they pull the puppetstrings. This view also explains the lack of the use of the ‘hereby’ form of Vendler’s criteria--the personae are like characters in a book, whom the author is describing their actions for the reader. Book characters do not perform illocutionary acts when the author writes “Jones walks to the corner store on for a cup of coffee,” rather, the author is describing Jones’ actions. The author would not use “Jones hereby walks...” in such a description. Personae occasionally describe the actions of the humans at the keyboard because it is the human who is speaking, switching from describing the actions of his persona to describing his own actions. The conjecture that what we have argued for as illocutionary acts are only descriptions is also supported by the use of other personae in one persona’s description:

**Pixel** dashes back in, grabs Carol, twirls her around then leans over and  
kisses her throughly [sic]  
**XmasCarol** faints, overwhelmed by Pixel's kiss

Indeed, this view is powerful in the scope of what it explains more fully than the previous hypotheses presented.

We began the last section saying that we would only uncover some of the illocutionary acts as descriptions, but we ended up seeing all of the action verbs, once candidates to be illocutionary acts, turn out to be descriptions. However, the existence of descriptions is not contradictory position to the original argument, and we can recover it still. Vendler’s criteria require that only two of the three sentences must yield truthful and meaningful phrases. Certainly it is odd that the ‘hereby’ form is so completely unused, but it is also odd that we are considering action verbs candidates for illocutionary acts at all. It is likely an artifact of the generally abbreviated discourse that is inherent in textual realities. Moreover, descriptions are very passive events. Some, if not all, actions performed in the textual reality interact and even change the reality. True, this alone does not break away from the possibility that they could still be descriptions. Back to the book example, the descriptions the author gives to the reader can change the reader’s perception of the ‘reality’ within the book. However, when one includes that the events

can come off in unexpected and disadvantageous fashions for the performer, by no fault of the performer, we realize that it cannot be only description. The environment, whatever it may be, does not respond cooperatively to some utterances, it has not allowed the utterer to describe it. Events such as these would not happen if the participants were merely describing their world all the time. Instead, they are also interacting with it through illocutionary acts, which use action verbs.

Key in that last sentence is the use of ‘also.’ The argument for descriptions is such that it also was not fully negated. The best description of utterances of action verbs in textual realities employs both descriptions and illocutionary acts.

How does one distinguish between descriptions and illocutionary acts in textual realities if they both exist and take the same form? The participants are intuitively able to follow the switching between them because the participants are part of the textual reality. This intuition leads us to a rule to distinguish between the two. A basic distinction is to find to what an utterance involving an action verb involving the persona refers. If it is to some object outside of the textual reality (the human going for a cup of coffee and the like), then it is a description. Otherwise it is not a description and therefore a candidate for an illocutionary act, but is not necessarily one. It remains possible that it is the human merely describing the actions of the persona, not intending it to be performative, as in the above raspberry example. If an utterance interacts with the environment or other personae, it changes the textual reality as an illocutionary act in real life changes reality itself - it performs an act, and the utterance is therefore an illocutionary act. The earlier diversion into referring becomes important here to discuss this intuitive sense more technically. If the utterance is indisputable by other personae because it does not interact with them nor the shared textual reality, it has an automatic truth value of true *within that reality*. By merit of its lack of interaction, the utterance does not contradict anything, and only contributes to the environment passively. Utterances with automatically true truth values within the reality are descriptions of what the persona is doing. These do not happen often because very few utterances are so resistant to actions of other personae. If Jones uttered “I sit down in the chair,” Smith, interacting with Jones in a textual reality, could easily say “...but I remove the chair and you hit the floor,” and others would accept

this as what happened. Jones could have uttered “I’m sitting in the chair, smoking a cigar,” and Smith would be unable to pull the chair out from behind him, because Jones described his persona, not acted something out with it. Utterances with non-guaranteed truth values, true or false, and sentences with undetermined or mutable truth values which use action verbs, are illocutionary acts within the textual reality. Jones’ first utterances of “I sit down in the chair” had a truth value of true, until Smith changed it to false by removing the chair.

If one remains skeptical about letting action verbs come under the umbrella of illocutionary verbs, even in only textual realities, take comfort in the assumptions underlying this paper. Remember, that most of these illocutionary acts are on the same level as Pegasus and Odysseus. They are fictional, virtual constructs with some real-life implications under some circumstances. Some of these constructs partake of reality by being represented by data on computers that define what they are, and this data is changeable by actions within the environment of the textual reality. For this paper, I assumed a stance of accepting these various constructs as “real in the context,” and this view allows us to delineate between what is merely description and what is apparently an illocutionary act, but accepting this idea of “real in context” is certainly debatable. I hope to have shown at least two things. First, if we accept that the personae and their environment are real in their context, it is certain that we have cases of action verbs validly in performative form. Secondly, even if we reject reality in context, there remain cases where action verbs perform some function merely by being uttered. They change some aspect of the information as stored in a computer, about a textual reality. Still under the rejection of “real in context,” the action verb itself is not perhaps illocutionary, but an illocutionary act is nevertheless performed, the human is obliquely commanding the computer to change its data. The command is simply not immediately recognizable as such.

The most straightforward approach is to accept action verbs as valid verbs for illocutionary acts when in a strictly textual reality, such as on the Internet, but this does require accepting that there are truth values in this context that do not translate to the outside world. If this is too unpalatable, we still see a very unusual occurrence going on

when action verbs are spoken in apparently performative form, and an illocutionary act happens, but is separate from the action verb.