Chapter 3

THE STRUCTURE OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

The ground has now been prepared for a full dress analysis of the illocutionary act. I shall take promising as my initial quarry, because as illocutionary acts go, it is fairly formal and well articulated; like a mountainous terrain, it exhibits its geographical features starkly. But we shall see that it has more than local interest, and many of the lessons to be learned from it are of general application.

In order to give an analysis of the illocutionary act of promising I shall ask what conditions are necessary and sufficient for the act of promising to have been successfully and non-defectively performed in the utterance of a given sentence. I shall attempt to answer this question by stating these conditions as a set of propositions such that the conjunction of the members of the set entails the proposition that a speaker made a successful and non-defective promise, and the proposition that the speaker made such a promise entails this conjunction. Thus each condition will be a necessary condition for the successful and non-defective performance of the act of promising, and taken collectively the set of conditions will be a sufficient condition for such a performance. There are various kinds of possible defects of illocutionary acts but not all of these defects are sufficient to vitiate the act in its entirety. In some cases, a condition may indeed be intrinsic to the notion of the act in question and not satisfied in a given case, and yet the act will have been performed nonetheless. In such cases I say the act was "defective". My notion of a defect in an illocutionary act is closely related to Austin's notion of an "infelicity".[1] Not all of the conditions are logically independent of each other. Sometimes it is worthwhile to state a condition separately even though it is, strictly speaking, entailed by another.

If we get such a set of conditions we can extract from them a set of rules for the use of the illocutionary force indicating device. The

[1] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962), especially lectures II, III, IV.

method here is analogous to discovering the rules of chess by asking oneself what are the necessary and sufficient conditions under which one can be said to have correctly moved a knight or castled or checkmated a player, etc. We are in the position of someone who has learned to play chess without ever having the rules formulated and who wants such a formulation. We learned how to play the game of illocutionary acts, but in general it was done without an explicit formulation of the rules, and the first step in getting such a formulation is to set out the conditions for the performance of a particular illocutionary act. Our inquiry will therefore serve a double philosophical purpose. By stating a set of conditions for the performance of a particular illocutionary act we shall have offered an explication of that notion and shall also have paved the way for the second step, the formulation of the rules.

So described, my enterprise must seem to have a somewhat archaic and period flavor. One of the most important insights of recent work in the philosophy of language is that most non-technical concepts in ordinary language lack absolutely strict rules. The concepts of *game*, or *chair*, or *promise* do not have absolutely knockdown necessary and sufficient conditions, such that unless they are satisfied something cannot be a game or a chair or a promise, and given that they are satisfied in a given case that case must be, cannot but be, a game or a chair or a promise. But this insight into the looseness of our concepts, and its attendant jargon of "family resemblance"[1] should not lead us into a rejection of the very enterprise of philosophical analysis; rather the conclusion to be drawn is that certain forms of analysis, especially analysis into necessary and sufficient conditions, are likely to involve (in varying degrees) idealization of the concept analyzed. In the present case, our analysis will be directed at the center of the concept of promising. I am ignoring marginal, fringe, and partially defective promises. This approach has the consequence that counter-examples can be produced of ordinary uses of the word "promise" which do not fit the analysis. Some of these counter-examples I shall discuss. Their existence does not 'refute' the analysis, rather they require an explanation of why and how they depart from the paradigm cases of promise making.

Furthermore, in the analysis I confine my discussion to full blown explicit promises and ignore promises made by elliptical

[1] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953), paras. 66, 67.

turns of phrase, hints, metaphors, etc. I also ignore promises made in the course of uttering sentences which contain elements irrelevant to the making of the promise. I am also dealing only with categorical promises and ignoring hypothetical promises, for if we get an account of categorical promises it can easily be extended to deal with hypothetical ones. In short, I am going to deal only with a simple and idealized case. This method, one of constructing idealized models, is analogous to the sort of theory construction that goes on in most sciences, e.g., the construction of economic models, or accounts of the solar system which treat planets as points. Without abstraction and idealization there is no systematization.

Another difficulty with the analysis arises from my desire to state the conditions without certain forms of circularity. I want to give a list of conditions for the performance of a certain illocutionary act, which do not themselves mention the performance of any illocutionary acts. I need to satisfy this condition in order to offer a model for explicating illocutionary acts in general; otherwise I should simply be showing the relation between different illocutionary acts. However, although there will be no reference to illocutionary acts, certain institutional concepts, such as e.g. "obligation", will appear in the analysans as well as in the analysandum; I am not attempting to reduce institutional facts to brute facts; and thus there is no reductionist motivation in the analysis. Rather, I want to analyze certain statements of institutional facts, statements of the form "*X* made a promise", into statements containing such notions as intentions, rules, and states of affairs specified by the rules. Sometimes those states of affairs will themselves involve institutional facts.[1]

In the presentation of the conditions I shall first consider the case of a sincere promise and then show how to modify the conditions to allow for insincere promises. As our inquiry is semantical rather than syntactical, I shall simply assume the existence of grammatically well-formed sentences.

[1] Alston in effect tries to analyze illocutionary acts using only brute notions (except the notion of a rule). As he points out, his analysis is unsuccessful. I suggest that it could not be successful without involving institutional notions. Cf. W. P. Alston, 'Linguistic Acts', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1964).

3.1 *How to promise: a complicated way*

Given that a speaker *S* utters a sentence *T* in the presence of a hearer *H*, then, in the literal utterance of *T*, *S* sincerely and non-defectively promises that *p* to *H* if and only if the following conditions 1–9 obtain:

1. *Normal input and output conditions obtain.*

I use the terms "input" and "output" to cover the large and indefinite range of conditions under which any kind of serious and literal[1] linguistic communication is possible. "Output" covers the conditions for intelligible speaking and "input" covers the conditions of understanding. Together they include such things as that the speaker and hearer both know how to speak the language; both are conscious of what they are doing; they have no physical impediments to communication, such as deafness, aphasia, or laryngitis; and they are not acting in a play or telling jokes, etc. It should be noted that this condition excludes *both* impediments to communication such as deafness and also parasitic forms of communication such as telling jokes or acting in a play.

2. *S expresses the proposition that p in the utterance of T.*

This condition isolates the proposition from the rest of the speech act and enables us to concentrate on the peculiarities of promising as a kind of illocutionary act in the rest of the analysis.

3. *In expressing that p, S predicates a future act A of S.*

In the case of promising the scope of the illocutionary force indicating device includes certain features of the proposition. In a promise an act must be predicated of the speaker and it cannot be a past act. I cannot promise to have done something, and I cannot promise that someone else will do something (although I can promise to see that he will do it). The notion of an act, as I am construing it for the present purposes, includes refraining from acts, performing series of acts, and may also include states and conditions: I may promise not to do something, I may promise to do somethings repeatedly or sequentially, and I may promise to be or remain in a certain state or condition. I call conditions 2 and 3 the propositional content conditions. Strictly speaking, since expressions and not acts are predicated of objects, this condition should be formulated as follows: In expressing that *P*, *S* predicates

[1] I contrast "serious" utterances with play acting, teaching a language, reciting poems, practicing pronunciation, etc., and I contrast "literal" with metaphorical, sarcastic, etc.

an expression of *S*, the meaning of which expression is such that if the expression is true of the object it is true that the object will perform a future act *A*.[1] But that is rather longwinded, so I have resorted to the above metonymy.

4. *H would prefer S's doing A to his not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A.*

One crucial distinction between promises on the one hand and threats on the other is that a promise is a pledge to do something *for* you, not *to* you; but a threat is a pledge to do something *to* you, not *for* you. A promise is defective if the thing promised is something the promisee does not want done; and it is further defective if the promisor does not believe the promisee wants it done, since a non-defective promise must be intended as a promise and not as a threat or warning. Furthermore, a promise, unlike an invitation, normally requires some sort of occasion or situation that calls for the promise. A crucial feature of such occasions or situations seems to be that the promisee wishes (needs, desires, etc.) that something be done, and the promisor is aware of this wish (need, desire, etc.). I think both halves of this double condition are necessary in order to avoid fairly obvious counter-examples.[2]

One can, however, think of apparent counter-examples to this condition as stated. Suppose I say to a lazy student, "If you don't hand in your paper on time I promise you I will give you a failing grade in the course". Is this utterance a promise? I am inclined to think not; we would more naturally describe it as a warning or possibly even a threat. But why, then, is it possible to use the locution "I promise" in such a case? I think we use it here because "I promise" and "I hereby promise" are among the strongest illocutionary force indicating devices for *commitment* provided by the English language. For that reason we often use these expressions in the performance of speech acts which are not strictly speaking promises, but in which we wish to emphasize the degree of our commitment. To illustrate this, consider another apparent counter-example to the analysis along different lines. Sometimes one hears people say "I promise" when making an emphatic assertion. Suppose, for example, I accuse you of having stolen the money. I say, "You stole that money, didn't you?". You reply,

[1] Cf. the discussion of predication in chapter 2.
[2] For an interesting discussion of this condition, see Jerome Schneewind, 'A note on promising', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3 (April 1966), pp. 33–5.

"No, I didn't, I promise you I didn't". Did you make a promise in this case? I find it very unnatural to describe your utterance as a promise. This utterance would be more aptly described as an emphatic denial, and we can explain the occurrence of the illocutionary force indicating device "I promise" as derivative from genuine promises and serving here as an expression adding emphasis to your denial.

In general, the point stated in condition 4 is that if a purported promise is to be non-defective, the thing promised must be something the hearer wants done, or considers to be in his interest, or would prefer being done to not being done, etc.; and the speaker must be aware of or believe or know, etc., that this is the case. I think a more elegant and exact formulation of this condition would probably require the introduction of technical terminology of the welfare economics sort.

5. *It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.*

This condition is an instance of a general condition on many different kinds of illocutionary acts to the effect that the act must have a point. For example, if I make a request to someone to do something which it is obvious that he is already doing or is about to do quite independently of the request, then my request is pointless and to that extent defective. In an actual speech situation, listeners, knowing the rules for performing illocutionary acts, will assume that this condition is satisfied. Suppose, for example, that in the course of a public speech I say to a member of my audience, "Look here, Smith, pay attention to what I am saying". In interpreting this utterance, the audience will have to assume that Smith has not been paying attention, or at any rate that it is not obvious that he has been paying attention, that the question of his not paying attention has arisen in some way, because a condition for making non-defective request is that it is not obvious that the hearer is doing or about to do the thing requested.

Similarly with promises. It is out of order for me to promise to do something that it is obvious to all concerned that I am going to do anyhow. If I do make such a promise, the only way my audience can interpret my utterance is to assume that I believe that it is not obvious that I am going to do the thing promised. A happily married man who promises his wife he will not desert her in the next week is likely to provide more anxiety than comfort.