Indirect speech acts, verum focus and conventionality

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The judgement that a particular use of a linguistic unit is creative presupposes that one is able to determine what a non-creative, conventional use would be. This also holds of grammatical units. Here, sentence types and focus marking in German are studied. In Searle's (1975) original analysis of cases like *Can you pass me the salt, please?* two speech acts are carried out at once, a question and a request, whereby the indirectly communicated request to get the salt passed is the primary illocution, and the literally expressed question about the addressee's ability to perform the requested task is the secondary illocution.

It is rarely discussed in the literature on indirect speech acts that this view of the matter implies that the sentence type of polar question is not conventionally associated with the illocution of a request, and that the illocution of asking a question is its core literal meaning. Otherwise, there would not be any indirectness here. Given that such cases look like the standard way of formulating a polite request, this background assumption appears not very justified. After all, the issue of creativity vs. conventionality is an empirical one and a standard way of doing something with words is an implausible candidate for a creative use. Things are different with indirect requests (here, to close the window) like *It's getting cold.*

I claim that only the latter, not the former case is creative use. The empirical argument in favour of this claim lies in the specific use of verum focus in such utterances in order to insist, which is felicitous in the former, but not in the latter case ("Now, CAN you pass me the salt, please?" vs. "It IS getting cold").

In order to account for this contrast, my proposal uses alternative semantics for verum focus. It also implies a reconsideration of the theory of verum focus. I will propose that the alternative set in cases of insisting with verum focus contains alternative perlocutions rather than denotations. Such cases thus instantiate a third major type of using focus, besides expression and denotation focus (Krifka 2006).

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