

“Actually, Scratch That!”: A Tour into the Illocutionary Fabric of Retraction

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Retraction maneuvers are common currency and play a significant role in our discursive practices, as well as in our social and political lives. By expanding upon previous work (Caponetto 2020) and engaging with recent contributions to the topic (esp., Kukla and Steinberg 2021), I set out to unpack the illocutionary fabric of retraction. I construe retraction as a higher-order speech act whose definitional function is to cancel the normative update enacted by some previous, lower-order speech act. I identify and examine a set of general felicity conditions for retraction. The picture that emerges includes the following features. (i) Retraction operates on *felicitous* speech acts: since you cannot cancel what was never done, any attempt to retract an infelicitous act would result in an infelicitous retraction. (ii) One can only retract one’s own speech acts – as such, retracting involves *admitting responsibility or authorship*. (iii) Depending on the act to be retracted, a retraction may require that the audience *recognizes and accepts* the speaker’s attempt to retract. I conclude by stressing that retractions are often accompanied by reason-stating assertions, whose insincerity may affect the felicity of the retraction.

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1. Retraction: A Roundup of Examples

Just as we can do things with words, so too we can use words to take back what we did in speaking. Retraction maneuvers are commonplace. Here is a roundup of examples.

Example 1. November 2000. Al Gore concedes the US presidential election to George W. Bush, and then takes the concession back because of the tightening numbers in Florida.

Example 2. September 2011. Filmmaker Lars Von Trier apologizes for making controversial statements sympathizing with Hitler at the 2011 Cannes film festival, and then retracts his apology, saying that he was not sorry about his statements after all.

Example 3. November 2018. Amnesty International withdraws its highest honor, the Ambassador of Conscience, from the then Myanmar’s *de facto* leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, because of San Suu Kyi’s failure to speak out about military atrocities against the Rohingya population.

Example 4. April 2021. The European Super League project collapses as all six English football clubs retract their participation after pressure from fans and the government.¹

¹ Gore’s ‘unconcession’: <https://edition.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/11/07/election.president/>. Von Trier’s apology retraction: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/lars-von-trier-takes-back-238649/>. Amnesty International’s decision to withdraw award from San Suu Kyi: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2018/11/amnesty-withdraws-award-from-aung-san-suu-kyi/>. English clubs’ withdrawal from the Super League: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/apr/20/european-super-league-unravelling-as-manchester-city-and-chelsea-withdraw>. (Accessed on 13 December 2022.)

As these examples suggest, we can retract several different things. Assertions and assertion-like speech acts (such as Gore’s concession of election defeat) are clearly liable to be retracted, but we can also retract expressives (such as apologies), declarations (such as award conferrals), or commissives (such as participation in competition).

In spite of the major role that retraction occupies in our discursive and social practices, relatively little attention has been paid among speech act theorists to how retraction works, and existing debates around it nearly exclusively focus on assertion retraction.² Here, I explore the general illocutionary fabric of retraction. My goal is to provide a broad, unified picture of the speech act of retraction – that is, of the illocutionary category it belongs to, its felicity conditions, and the normative changes it effects.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I start by providing a quick overview of the speech act framework I endorse in my analysis (§2). I then move on to distinguish three strategies for undoing speech acts – namely, annulment, retraction, and amendment (Caponetto 2020) (§3). In §4, I zoom in on retraction. I construe retraction as a higher-order speech act whose definitional function is to cancel the normative update enacted by some previous lower-order speech act. I then identify and examine a set of general felicity conditions for retraction. In §5, I discuss Quill Kukla and Dan Steinberg (2021)’s analysis of retraction. Engaging with their view gives me the opportunity to say more on (in)sincere retractions and on how the retractor’s subsequent behavior may affect the felicity of their retraction.

2. A Normative Approach to Illocution

Suppose you are in a tough spot. I say that I will help you and this makes you feel relieved. J.L. Austin would give a three-fold analysis of this episode: (i) I (the speaker) said something meaningful (“I will help you”) to you (the hearer); (ii) I promised you something (that I would have helped you); and (iii) I made you feel relieved. Albeit performed at once, (i), (ii), and (iii) constitute three different sorts of speech acts – *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* acts, respectively (Austin 1962). Since retraction is an illocutionary act – an action performed *in* uttering words – in what follows I will mainly concentrate on illocution.

I endorse a normative, effect-centered, approach to illocution, largely inspired by Marina Sbisa’s work, according to which illocutionary acts essentially reshape the normative context by assigning or unassigning new normative statuses to certain relevant parties.³ For example, an order imposes an obligation upon the hearer and entitles the speaker to sanction them should they fail to fulfill it. A promise commits the speaker to a future course of action and makes it legitimate for the hearer to be aggrieved, should the speaker fail to honor their commitment. And an assertion commits the speaker to having reasons in favor of what was asserted, while entitling the hearer to request that they exhibit those reasons. (It also legitimizes the hearer to reassert its content on the speaker’s authority,⁴ and to criticize the speaker, should they exhibit weak supportive reasons or no supportive reason at all.)

For an illocutionary act to exert its normatively transformative power, it must satisfy certain felicity conditions. The fulfillment of some such conditions is necessary for an utterance to have illocutionary force and to bring about its characteristic normative upshot. An act that fails to meet such conditions is a misfire, a void illocution. Austin mentioned conditions on the appropriateness of persons and circumstances, and on the correctness and completeness of the invoked procedure. For example, an act of marrying is felicitous only if it is performed before an authorized minister and all parties utter the right formulae. Further felicity conditions are

² See, esp., Bach and Harnish (1979: 43), MacFarlane (2014: 108ff). A notable exception is Kukla and Steinberg (2021); I turn to their view below (§5).

³ See, esp., Sbisa (1984, 2007, 2024). For an overview of Sbisa’s approach to illocution, see Caponetto and Labinaz (2023).

⁴ Brandom (1994: 174-175).

supplementary: their fulfillment makes the act *fully* felicitous, but should they not be satisfied, the act would still have its normative fallout. Speaker sincerity is supplementary in this sense: if I lie to you, my assertion that *p* will be defective (i.e. only partially felicitous), but it will still commit me to *p*.

Alongside their central normative effects, illocutionary acts have secondary normative outputs, which cut across all illocutionary categories. In particular, every illocution commits the speaker to subsequently behaving in a way that is appropriate to, or consistent with, the performed illocution. If I advise you to *φ* and then reproach you for *φ-ing*, my inconsistent behavior constitutes a breach of commitment and retroactively undermines the full felicity of my original illocution. After performing a speech act, the speaker must behave consistently with the normative effects that their performance discharged, lest their speech act turn out to be flawed. The ‘consistency condition’ is a *future* felicity condition: it is not a precondition on the context, but deals with what happens *after* the speaker has spoken.⁵ Austin enlists it as a supplementary felicity condition for illocution, on a par with the ‘sincerity condition’: its violation makes the act defective, but does not nullify it (Austin 1962: 15f).⁶

Before moving on, it is worth dispelling a potential misunderstanding. My ‘normative’ approach to illocution is not the same as the ‘norms-of-speech-acts’ view, and is importantly different from (so-called) ‘normative status materialism’. The ‘norms-of-speech-acts’ view has it that illocutionary act types are uniquely governed by certain norms. Assertion, for example, is widely taken to be governed by a knowledge norm (‘One must: assert *p* only if one knows *p*’).⁷ While in this perspective illocutionary act types are constitutively defined by the norms that govern them, in my view they are defined by the bundle of normative effects they uniquely enact. To (felicitously) perform a directive act *is* to give the hearer a reason to do what you told (requested, advised, ordered, etc.) them to do. And to (felicitously) perform an order in particular *is* to oblige the hearer to do as you said, and to acquire the requisite standing to sanction them if they fail to do so. ‘Normative status materialism’, too, takes illocutionary acts to be defined by the normative statuses that they assign to the parties. However, it also has it that normative statuses supervene on behavioral dispositions: there cannot be any difference in normative statuses without a corresponding difference in dispositions to behave (Kukla 2014: 443). This thesis is not the same as, and does not necessarily follow from, the claim that illocutionary acts are defined by their normative effects. One can thus hold the latter without committing oneself to the former – which is what I do here.⁸

3. Undoing Illocutions

Austin’s legacy is, in a motto, “Words do things”. To this, it should be added that words sometimes *undo* things – with words, we withdraw allegations, retract promises, void marriages. In previous work, I identified three main strategies for undoing speech acts:

⁵ For a broader discussion of ‘future’ felicity conditions, see Langton (2018).

⁶ Austin dubs the ‘sincerity condition’ and the ‘consistency condition’ *Γ.1* and *Γ.2*, respectively. They differ from conditions on the appropriateness of persons and circumstances and on the correctness and completeness of the invoked procedure (*A* and *B* conditions) in that their fulfillment is not necessary for the act to have its normative upshot. Hence, the use of Greek as opposed to Roman letters. See Austin (1962: 14-15).

⁷ See, e.g., Williamson (1996, 2000), Hawthorne (2004), Turri (2011). For an overview of the literature on the norm of assertion, see Pagin and Marsili (2021).

⁸ Part of why I do not commit myself to the supervenience thesis is that, if normative statuses covary with dispositions to behave, an utterance that brings about unintended changes in people’s behavioral dispositions may introduce unintended (and unpredictable) normative statuses and end up constituting an illocutionary act that has little or nothing to do with the act the speaker was trying to perform, and with the linguistic conventions they used. I take this to be problematic, and remain agnostic as to the relation between normative statuses and behavioral dispositions. (For a discussion of the implications of Kukla’s approach, see Bianchi 2021.)

annulment, retraction, and amendment (Caponetto 2020). Let us give a quick look at them in turn before zooming in on retraction.

Annulment is a declaration that an apparently felicitous illocutionary act was a misfire after all. It applies to fatally infelicitous acts that were mistakenly taken as felicitous and whose normative effects were deemed to be binding for a while due to the ignorance of the involved parties. Marriage annulment and annulment of conviction nicely exemplify the strategy. Suppose that, unbeknownst to the parties, a marriage ceremony is officiated by a fake priest. Such a marriage may pass as felicitous but is liable to be annulled, should the fraud come to light. Or, suppose that a conviction is issued in the defendant's absence. If the defendant did not attend court, say, because they were in a car accident or due to an error with the court date, then contrary to initial appearances their conviction may turn out to be null and void.

Annulment is an undoing strategy only loosely speaking. Since it operates on speech acts that were never really done, strictly speaking it does not undo anything. Rather, it brings to light that a certain act that passed as felicitous was in fact a misfire. In annulment cases, the target act is *recognized* as null; in retraction cases, by contrast, it is properly *made* null. Retraction is a means for canceling felicitous acts. (I will spell out what exactly gets canceled in retraction cases in the next section.) For example, Gore's un-concession canceled his previous felicitous concession (Example 1), and the six English clubs' withdrawals canceled their felicitous entry into the Super League (Example 4).

Retraction *cancels* a given act, whereas amendment *alters* or *adjusts* it. Amendment can be propositional or illocutionary, according to whether the speaker adjusts what they *said* (their locutionary act) or what they *did* in speaking (their illocutionary act).⁹ Consider the following excerpt from the transcript of the O.J. Simpson trial:

Q: Okay. What happened when she ran out to you?

A: She – She clung on to me and then made several statements to me at that time.

Q: Now, you say that she ran to you and clung to you?

A: Well, she collapsed on me.¹⁰

The witness' closing utterance illustrates (what I call) *propositional amendment*. They give one version of events ("She clung on to me") and then adjust it ("Well, she collapsed on me"). Note that, although the witness amends the proposition expressed, their words continue to constitute an assertion. That is, the illocutionary force of their speech act remains the same.

A good example of *illocutionary amendment* can be found in one of the last scenes in the movie *Gone, Baby, Gone* (2007) by Ben Affleck. Captain Jack Doyle is speaking to private investigator Patrick Kenzie:

Capt. Doyle: [...] Now, I'm asking you for the sake of the child. I'm begging you. You think about it.

Doyle adjusts his initial request ("I'm asking you for the sake of the child") to a plea ("I'm begging you"). The propositional content of his speech act remains the same (Doyle is asking that Kenzie does not bring little Amanda back to her toxic household), but its illocutionary force is amended. Illocutionary amendment can be characterized as a mechanism to tamper with the degree of strength of one's illocutionary acts – a mechanism to weaken/strengthen

⁹ Clearly, speakers can simultaneously adjust both the locutionary content and the illocutionary force of some previous speech act.

¹⁰ The excerpt is extrapolated from the Tuesday 31 January 1995 sitting of *People of the State of California v. Orenthal James Simpson*. A full transcript of the sitting is retrievable at <http://simpson.walraven.org/jan31.html> (accessed on 13 December 2022).

their normative burden. In amending a request into a plea, one is giving the hearer a much stronger reason to do what was requested, which is implicitly portrayed as something urgent and of vital importance. Similarly, if I guess that *p* and then amend my guess into a full-blown assertion, I will have committed myself to *p* in a much stronger way.¹¹

With all this in place, we can now zoom in on retraction.

4. The Illocutionary Fabric of Retraction

4.1 Characterizing Retraction

I propose the following characterization of retraction:

Retraction is a higher-order speech act whose definitional function is to make the normative effects of some previous lower-order speech act no longer valid.

Some terms of my characterization need to be clarified.

First, retraction is a ‘higher-order speech act’: it is a speech act that operates on another speech act. Notice that a higher-order speech act is not simply *about* another speech act, nor is it a *response* to another speech act. If I apologize for saying something offensive, my apology is *about* a previous (offensive) speech act of mine, but it is not a higher-order speech act. And if I refuse a cup of tea, my refusal is a *response* to a previous offer of yours, but it is not a higher-order speech act.¹² For an act to be a higher-order one, it must *operate on* the act it targets by adjusting or canceling its normative effects.¹³ The lower-order speech act is typically a first-order one (e.g. a promise, an assertion, a proposal), but need not be. After all, one can retract a past retraction.

Second, in the previous section I claimed that retraction is a means for *canceling* a certain illocution. This does not mean that a retracted illocution gets scratched from the conversational record. In retraction cases, the original illocution was felicitously performed at the time of utterance, and its performance cannot be retroactively removed from the record. Also, and relatedly, it produced valid normative effects. Such effects cannot be simply erased from history, but can be rendered *no longer valid from then on*. Retraction is *retrospective* (it draws the normative effects of some past speech act to a close), but not *retroactive* (it cannot make it the case that those normative effects never entered into force).

Third, retraction ‘undoes’ the *normative* or *illocutionary* changes effected by the original speech act, not its *causal* or *perlocutionary* consequences. If I felicitously retract an assertion that *p*, I am *ipso facto* no longer committed to *p*, and you are *ipso facto* no longer entitled to request that I provide reasons in support of *p*. However, if my assertion made you angry or nervous, my (felicitous) retraction does not *ipso facto* make your anger disappear or your nerves ease off. Even though a retraction *can* contribute to remedy or even reverse the causal consequences of the act it targets, this is not something it automatically brings about, if felicitous. By contrast, once a retraction is felicitously accomplished, it will thereby reset the normative effects of the target illocution.

4.2 General Felicity Conditions of Retraction

To perform its definitional function, a retraction, like every speech act, must comply with certain felicity conditions. However, given the higher-order nature of retraction, such conditions are unstable – i.e. they vary with the type of illocution to be retracted. This is easily

¹¹ For an investigation into indirect strategies for amending speech acts, see Caponetto and Marsili (forthcoming).

¹² Elsewhere, I analyze refusals (and acceptances) as ‘second-turn illocutions’. See Caponetto (2023).

¹³ Amendment is, by the same token, a higher-order speech act. Annulment, by contrast, is not: it targets a past speech act but does not *operate on* its normative effects – for those effects were never truly enacted.

proven by a number of intuitive remarks on the circumstances in which particular illocutionary act types can (or cannot) be retracted.

For one, while promissory commitments vanish once the speaker has done what they committed themselves to doing, assertoric commitments are in principle endless. This poses a ‘time frame condition’ on promise retraction (‘You can only take back a promise *after* you made it and *before* you performed the course of action you promised to perform’)¹⁴ that does not seem to hold for assertion retraction.

A second observation in favor of the instability of the felicity conditions of retraction is that, while a promise retractor must arguably provide *reasons* why they cannot honor their commitment, an order retractor does not generally have to: an order can simply be taken back via an exercise of speaker authority. This does not mean that the addressee may not have every reason to feel disappointed at an order retraction. Suppose my boss orders me to hand-copy a great number of documents, and when I am almost done, they retract the order. Given the time and energy consumed, I may legitimately feel disappointed, and perhaps even aggrieved, at their retraction – especially, if it suggests that the hand-copying activity was unnecessary from the very beginning. That said, just as an authoritative speaker can impose new obligations upon their subordinates by simply ordering them to ϕ , so too they can generally cancel those obligations by retracting the orders they gave.

Notice, moreover, that retracting (as well as performing) an institutional speech act has special, institution-based felicity conditions. For instance, one can withdraw one’s membership to certain societies only in writing (by sending a letter to the steering committee).

These scattered considerations suggest that we cannot provide a unique set of necessary and sufficient conditions for retraction. We can, however, identify a minimal set of felicity conditions that are common to all retractions, no matter the type of act they target. Call such conditions *general felicity conditions* of retraction.¹⁵

In uttering U at time t_n , a speaker S felicitously and non-defectively retracts a speech act A only if the following conditions hold:

1. A was performed at $t < t_n$.

You can only take back something after you did it. Retractions are always retractions of some past speech act. The condition accounts for both *synchronic* retractions (i.e. retractions performed in the same conversational turn as the target act: “I’ll be there... Actually, scratch that! I can’t”) and *diachronic* retractions (i.e. retractions performed in some subsequent turn), in that both are future, relative to t .

2. A was (fully or partially) felicitous.

You can only take back something that was *actually* done. You can retract fully felicitous acts as well defective (or partially felicitous) acts. For example, you can retract a lie, even though a lie is a defective assertion. What you cannot do is to retract an infelicitous or void act. The condition captures the difference between retraction and annulment: while the latter sets out that the normative effects of a speech act were never really in force, the former draws the normative effects of a felicitous illocution to a close.

One might object that every illocutionary act can, in principle, turn out to be null and void should some fatal flaws be discovered, and that infelicitous acts are retractable, too, as long as they have not (yet) been recognized as such. Suppose a fake police officer orders me

¹⁴ An analogous condition holds for order retractions (and retractions of directives more generally): ‘You can only take back an order *after* you issued it and *before* the addressee performed the course of action you ordered them to perform’.

¹⁵ The analysis that follows expands upon and slightly revises the analysis offered in Caponetto (2020).

to hand my license and registration. I do not realize that they are a fraud, and think that their words oblige me to hand my license and registration. The fake police officer's utterance constitutes an annulable order: an infelicitous speech act whose normative effects I erroneously deem to have been discharged. Now, suppose that the fake police officer 'retracts' the order as I reach for my wallet. The essential function of retraction is to end the normative effects engendered by some previous illocution. Since the fake police officer's act did not validly engender any normative effect, their 'retraction' would be an annulable act itself: an infelicitous act that I mistake for a felicitous one. More generally, 'retractions' of annulable acts are annulable acts themselves: it may always come up that the original act was fatally infelicitous and that the retraction purporting to end its normative effects was therefore mistargeted. This explains why my proposal narrows the domain of felicitous retraction to retractions of felicitous (i.e. non-annulable) speech acts.

3. *A was performed by S.*

You can only take back your own speech acts. There are some seeming counterexamples to this condition. Suppose your eight-year-old son says something inappropriate to a distant acquaintance of yours. You promptly jump in, "He takes it back". Are you retracting your son's speech act? I don't think so. Despite your utterance has the surface grammar of a retraction, you are not retracting on your son's behalf but inviting him to do so. It is no coincidence that a tag question would make your utterance sound more natural: "He takes it back. *Don't you, Alex?*". By nodding, or simply failing to object, your son at once accepts your invitation to retract and (implicitly) retracts his statement.

Condition 3. also appears to be in tension with *collective speech act retractions*. When the act to be retracted was performed on behalf of a collective actor (a Church, a political party, an NGO, and so on), the retractor must speak on behalf of the same collective *but can be a different speaker than the original one*. For example, the Ambassador of Conscience award was withdrawn from San Suu Kyi in 2018 (Example 3) in a letter signed by then Secretary General of Amnesty International, Kumi Naidoo, even though Naidoo was not in office when San Suu Kyi was conferred the award in 2009.¹⁶ While cases of this sort may appear to violate condition 3., I think they do comply with it, for the ultimate speaker is, both in the context of performance and the context of retraction, the collective actor (e.g. Amnesty International) on behalf of which the different individual speakers in question speak.¹⁷

The last potential counterexample I would like to discuss is given by the practice of retraction in academic publishing. Suppose the Editorial Board at a Journal retracts a paper they published for plagiarism. Is the Board retracting a speech act performed by the author? Again, I don't think so. Publishing a paper is different from authoring it: the author commits to the truth of their scientific claims and to the integrity of their research; the publisher commits to integrity only. When a publisher retracts a published paper upon ascertaining that it did not really meet integrity standards, they retract *their own* speech act of publication – not the paper-constituting claims, to which the author remains committed even once the paper gets retracted by the publisher.¹⁸

It follows from condition 3. that retracting involves *admitting responsibility or authorship*. Since one can only retract one's own speech acts, in retracting one *ipso facto* takes

¹⁶ A copy of the letter of withdrawal is retrievable at <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Letter-from-Kumi-Naidoo-to-Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-EMBARGOED-13-Nov.pdf> (accessed on 29 May 2023).

¹⁷ In Caponetto (2020), I allowed for some authoritative third parties to retract speech acts. Since all 'third-party' retractions I had in mind were retractions of collective speech acts by some spokesperson, and these can be reinterpreted as 'first-person' retractions, I here limit retractions to 'first-person' cases.

¹⁸ I thank Filippo Ferrari for suggesting that I discuss this case.

responsibility for the original speech act – one claims it as one’s own (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 237). This suggests that discursive moves of the form ‘I never said that’ or ‘I never did that’ do not fall within the category of retraction, although they are sometimes described as such. A couple of examples to illustrate.

Example 5. February 2014. Donald Trump is quoted in the *Irish Times* as having told a reporter, “Wind farms are a disaster for Scotland, like Pan AM 103 [the 1988 bombing of a US-bound flight]”. After public outrage, he later tweets, “I never equated wind farms to the Pan Am Lockerbie disaster. Never said it, a total misquote”.¹⁹

Example 6. *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz, 1950). Playwright Lloyd Richards tries to reassure his wife Karen that he did not promise Eve Harrington the lead part in his next play: “I didn’t promise Eve anything”, he says. “Just said I thought she’d be fine for the part”.

Although there’s a sense in which both Trump and Lloyd ‘go back on their words’, neither is retracting. Their moves do not aim to cancel something they said or did, but to convince the audience that they never said or did it. As such, they are *deniability statements* (or denials, for short): attempts to invoke (more or less plausible) deniability.²⁰ Although retractions and denials share surface similarities, their pragmatic structures are significantly different. The former imply admitting responsibility; the latter are attempts to avoid taking responsibility. Since one cannot retract something one never did, retraction puts deniability out of commission.²¹

4. *U is addressed to, and recognized by, the relevant audience.*

You can take back a speech act only if you make it clear *to the relevant audience* that you are retracting. The relevant audience generally coincides with the audience of the original speech act. If I promised to pick you up at the airport tonight, I cannot retract my promise when I am alone on my couch, by just telling myself, “I won’t do it”. Nor can I retract it by telling a third party that I am doing so. My retraction needs to be addressed to, and recognized by, you.

Illocutionary acts introduce normative states of affairs that are essentially *relational*: they impact on what we owe to one another. This is obvious in the case of ‘second-personal’ acts: if I successfully order you to ϕ , then you will acquire an obligation *to me* to ϕ ; and if I accept your invitation to come to your birthday party, then I will be committed *to you* to coming. But it also holds for assertives and ‘impersonal’ acts more generally. After all, when I assert that p , I acquire a commitment *to other people* (to my immediate audience – and arguably, my remote audiences, i.e. those who have been told that p on my authority) to provide reasons in favor of p , if queried. It ensues that, when I retract an illocutionary act, I will at least have to make it clear to the original audience of my utterance that I am retracting.²²

¹⁹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/retail-and-services/one-more-thing-trump-s-view-provokes-outrage-1.1690621>; <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/435181315441582080?lang=en> (accessed on 3 February 2023).

²⁰ On deniability and deniability statements, see, i.a., Dinges and Zakkou (2023) and Paterson (2023).

²¹ Admitting responsibility is not the same as admitting fault, and retracting a speech act does not necessarily amount to conceding that one was at fault in making it (MacFarlane 2014: 110). Suppose Tom promised you that he will come over for dinner tonight. You assert that Tom will come over for dinner tonight. However, in the afternoon, you receive a phone call: Tom’s car broke down and he is no longer coming over for dinner. You retract your assertion, but you are not conceding that you were at fault in making it. You had strong reasons for making it, and no one can criticize you for having done so.

²² Condition 4. is cashed out in terms of ‘relevant audience’ to capture cases in which the original audience of a speech act is difficult to delimit, and virtually impossible to address in retracting. Suppose that a philosopher

Depending on the lower-order speech act it operates upon, the procedure for retraction may include not only *uptake* but also *acceptance* by the audience. An old-fashioned example to prove the point. Imagine that a knight has taken a solemn oath of lifelong loyalty to the Queen and they now want to take it back. Assuming that a solemn oath of this sort is in fact retractable, it would not be sufficient that the Queen recognizes that, in saying so and so, the knight intends to retract their oath. For their retraction to be felicitous, the Queen would also have to *accept* it, thereby releasing the knight from the oath. A less old-fashioned example: termination by agreement is often one way for the parties to a contract to ‘retract’ it (i.e. to end its normative effects). Since the procedure requires agreement, it is not enough that one party makes it clear to the other party that they want to terminate the contract. They must also get the other party’s consent or acceptance to termination. When a retraction requires acceptance in addition to uptake, the audience has the option to *reject* it and thus make it misfire.²³

5. *The normative effects of A were in force at t_{n-1} .*

You can only take back a speech act whose normative effects are still in force. A speech act that has been taken back already, or has already exhausted its normative effects, cannot be retracted. For instance, you cannot retract an order if the addressee has already carried out the activity you ordered them to carry out. The illocutionary point of an order is to impose an obligation upon the hearer: once the hearer fulfills that obligation, the normative effects of the order vanish.²⁴

6. *The normative effects of A can be made no longer valid.*

You can only take back a speech act whose normative effects can be made undone. This is closely related to condition 5.: you cannot retract a speech act that you have already taken back, because its normative effects cannot be made undone twice. It adds something new, though. In particular, it makes room for the possibility that certain speech acts are simply unretractable. A Catholic marriage, for example, can only be dissolved if it is proven that it has not been consummated.²⁵ A consummated marriage is indissoluble in the eyes of the Catholic Church: its normative effects cannot be made undone. Moving from institutional to ordinary speech acts, what would it mean for a speaker to take back, say, a greeting? To greet someone is to indicate recognition (and to make it appropriate and expected that they greet us in turn) – and once recognition has been indicated, there doesn’t seem to be much one can do to undo it.²⁶

makes a certain claim in a published paper and that after a while they change their mind and want to retract the claim. Their ‘original audience’ (which arguably includes all those who have read the paper) is difficult to delimit, and virtually impossible to address in retracting. For our philosopher to felicitously retract, I submit, they must address the ‘relevant audience’: that is, the philosophical community. The assertoric commitment they undertook in claiming that *p* in a scientific paper is primarily a commitment to a certain community of scholars. It follows that our philosopher cannot retract their claim while chitchatting with a friend in a bar. For their retraction to be felicitous, it must be given in a scientific venue (e.g. a paper, a book) – that is, it must be channeled in such a way that it can reach the target community.

²³ A similar point is made by Vermaire (2020: 3965). See also Bussière et al. (this volume).

²⁴ Analogous considerations apply to promises: you cannot retract a promise if you have already performed the course of action you committed yourself to performing.

²⁵ The Catholic Church Canon Law takes a non-consummated marriage to be dissoluble. Dissolution is not tantamount to annulment. In annulling a marriage, one declares that it never truly existed; in dissolving a marriage, one declares that it no longer exists. As such, dissolution can be cashed out as a way to ‘retract’ a marriage.

²⁶ Some scholars have suggested that slurring speech acts change permissibility norms to the detriment of target groups in sneaky ways, which are later extremely difficult, sometimes even impossible, to reverse. This might suggest that, at least in certain circumstances, slurring acts are unretractable. See, esp., McGowan (2009, 2019), Simpson (2013), Lepoutre (2021). See also Kukla and Steinberg (2021: 223-224).

7. *S wants to undo A and believes that U can undo A.*

This is the *general sincerity condition for retraction*. A widely accepted hypothesis in speech act theory is that, whenever the sincerity condition of an illocutionary act specifies some psychological state, in performing that act the speaker expresses (or purports to have) that psychological state. For example, the sincerity condition for promising is that the speaker intends to carry out the activity represented in the proposition. As a result, in promising to ϕ , I express an intention to ϕ , whether or not in fact I have it (i.e. whether or not my promise is sincere). This explains why an utterance of “I promise to ϕ , but I do not intend to ϕ ” would have a Moore-paradoxical feeling.²⁷ While I can always perform an insincere promise, I cannot make a promise and simultaneously deny its sincerity condition without absurdity – for, in promising, I express the psychological state specified by that condition (Searle 1969: 62ff).

On the basis of this hypothesis, in retracting an illocutionary act, a speaker thereby expresses (or purports to have) a desire to reset its normative effects and a belief that their utterance can reset them. This predicts that, and explains why, it would be patently absurd for me, for example, to retract an order I gave you while saying that I don’t want to release you from the obligation it imposed upon you, or that I don’t believe that my utterance can release you from that obligation.²⁸

Condition 7. casts retraction as a *declarative illocution* (or a declaration), i.e. an illocution that changes the world by saying so (Searle 1975; see also Searle and Vanderveken 1975: 56ff). In felicitously performing a declaration, the speaker makes its propositional content come true by solely expressing it. When, in the right circumstances, an authorized minister says, “I declare you husband and wife”, the addressees thereby become husband and wife. And when my boss calls me into her office and says, “You’re fired”, I am thereby fired. In a similar way, when one performs a felicitous retraction, the target speech act is thereby retracted (or canceled, in the semi-technical sense given above).

8. *S’s subsequent behavior is consistent with U.*

Retraction, like any illocutionary act, complies with a *consistency condition* requiring the speaker to later behave in ways that are consistent with the performed retraction. A speaker who retracted an order and then punished the addressee for failing to do what they were originally ordered to do would be an ‘inconsistent retractor’. Similarly, a speaker who retracted an assertion that p and then went on to presuppose that p by asserting that q would be engaging in inconsistent behavior.

A retraction that does not fulfill conditions 1.-6. is a void illocution: a merely purported retraction that fails to cancel the normative effects of the act it targets. Conditions 7. and 8. are generally additional or supplementary: a retraction that does not fulfill them cannot be fully felicitous but can carry out its normative function nonetheless.

5. Kukla and Steinberg

Kukla and Steinberg have recently provided one of the very few thorough examinations of retraction in the speech act literature. A felicitous retraction, they claim, “must be of a speech act that was successfully performed by the retractor” and “undoes the central output of the original speech act” (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 226). Their first point squares with my

²⁷ Moore (1942). See Woods (2018) and Caponetto and Marsili (forthcoming) for discussions of Moore-paradoxical utterances occurring in non-assertoric discourse.

²⁸ In retracting an order, the speaker does not necessarily express that they no longer want the hearer to do what they were ordered to do. I could indeed say without absurdity, “Order canceled: I would still like you to ϕ , but you are no longer obliged to ϕ ”. This generalizes to other types of retraction: in retracting, one does not necessarily express that one no longer has the psychological state associated with the lower-order speech act one is retracting.

conditions 1.-3.; their second point partly echoes the definition I advanced in §4.1. Although I take their analysis to be largely compatible with mine, they make some claims I don't agree with, or agree with only if properly qualified.

5.1 On 'Relinquishing'

One of Kukla and Steinberg's core theses is that, in retracting, one 'relinquishes' one's claim on one's entitlement to perform the original speech act (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 226).²⁹ The thesis requires some unpacking.

A preliminary thing to note is that any illocutionary act abides by a 'speaker entitlement condition' requiring that the speaker occupy the right position to invoke the illocutionary procedure in question. I can order someone to do something only if I have authority over them; I can accept a job offer only if I got one; I can retract a speech act only if I was the original speaker; and so on and so forth. Sometimes speaker entitlement takes the form of speaker authority; other times it takes on a thinner, more nuanced, appearance. But the general principle holds still: for a speaker to perform an illocutionary act, they must be entitled to do so – although in practice this entitlement may come by default with being a participant in a conversation. This being the case, when one performs an illocutionary act, one (implicitly) claims one's entitlement to perform it. Imagine I am a GP and John is my secretary. I order John to reschedule a certain appointment. In doing so, I am (implicitly) claiming that I am entitled, or have the authority, to give him that order.

Kukla and Steinberg maintain that, in retracting an illocutionary act, one thereby relinquishes, or gives up, one's claim on one's entitlement to perform it. Imagine that, shortly after ordering John to reschedule the appointment, I retract the order. In Kukla and Steinberg's perspective, I am thereby (implicitly) suspending the entitlement claim I made in issuing the order. I think this is right. Even though I may retain that entitlement, and may indeed claim it again at t_{n+1} ("Change of plans again, John. Please, do reschedule my appointment with Ms. Fine: I can't see her tomorrow"), for the time being I am no longer claiming it. Otherwise put, for the time being, I am no longer availing myself of it.³⁰

Note that relinquishing one's claim on one's entitlement is *not* the same as relinquishing one's entitlement. Retracting involves the former, but not necessarily the latter. In certain passages, Kukla and Steinberg seem to erroneously conflate the two. This is one such passage: "What makes the undoing of a speech act a retraction is the publicly convincing relinquishment of one's entitlement to it" (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 228). Clearly, when I walk up to John and retract the order I gave him, I do not give up my entitlement to perform it, as proven by the fact that I remain in a position to issue the same order again later on.

Interestingly, Kukla and Steinberg's discussion also points to *something else* a retractor relinquishes, in addition to their claim on their entitlement to the original speech act. They write:

Imagine that I am a professor in the audience of a colloquium, and I raise my hand and ask a question. [...] I notice that a young graduate student who rarely speaks was also trying to ask a question. I might retract my question so that she can have a turn instead. Here I express my relinquishment of my entitlement *to have my question answered* [...] (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 228, italics mine).

Even though they do not analyze it this way, this example nicely illustrates that, in retracting a speech act, one relinquishes any rights one has acquired in virtue of its performance. In asking

²⁹ See Brandom (2008: 192) on 'relinquishing' one's commitment to a claim as a strategy to repair commitment incompatibility, i.e. a possible way out when one finds oneself with incompatible commitments.

³⁰ See also Kukla (this volume).

a question, I acquire a right, or at least a legitimate expectation, to receive an answer. In retracting, I give up that right – as well as the secondary right to complain in case my question remains unanswered. Similarly, in ordering John to reschedule my appointment with Ms. Fine, I impose a positive obligation upon him and acquire a correlated right I didn't have before, i.e. the right that he reschedule my appointment with Ms. Fine. In retracting, I give up that right – as well as the secondary right to sanction him in case he does not reschedule the appointment.³¹ This is perfectly aligned with the analysis I carried out in the previous section. Retraction cancels the normative effects of a past illocution, including any rights it ascribed to the speaker. In retracting, one wipes out, and *a fortiori* relinquishes, the rights one acquired as a result of one's original illocutionary performance.

Pulling the strings, Kukla and Steinberg argue that, in retracting, one relinquishes one's claim on one's entitlement to perform the original speech act. With this, I agree. I have stressed, however, that a retractor primarily relinquishes something different – namely, any rights that their original act has ascribed to them. Kukla and Steinberg derive two important consequences from their thesis. To these, I now turn.

5.2 On Public Recognition and Uptake

Retraction involves relinquishing one's claim on an entitlement. The first consequence that Kukla and Steinberg draw from this is that retraction requires uptake. Their line of reasoning is as follows. One can successfully relinquish one's claim on an entitlement only if others recognize that one is doing so, and others can recognize that one is doing so only if one retracts (i.e. expresses one's relinquishment) publicly. Therefore, "one cannot retract to oneself in private". A retraction is felicitous only if "it receives public recognition and uptake" (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 229).

This roughly squares with my condition 4. Even though I agree that uptake is necessary for retraction, I don't think that the audience must give uptake to a retractor's relinquishment of their claim to their entitlement to the original act. If I retract an order and things go smoothly, my addressee will recognize that my words release them from a certain obligation and that I no longer have a right to their fulfilling it. They will recognize that I am relinquishing a right I acquired in virtue of my original performance. But they may well fail to recognize – or recognize in a very attenuated sense – that I am also relinquishing my claim on the authority to give them the order in question. For uptake to be achieved, the addressee must recognize that the retractor's words undo (or are an attempt to undo) the primary normative output of the target illocution. That the retractor is also implicitly suspending their entitlement claim can be retrieved by reflection, but is not necessarily fully recognized by the audience at the time of retraction. Hearer recognition of the implications of a speech act may be (and typically is) considerably less conscious and less explicit than hearer recognition of its central normative outputs – and intuitively, this does not undermine its felicity.

5.3 On Inconsistent Behavior

The second consequence that Kukla and Steinberg derive from their core thesis is that "retraction won't stick if the speaker continues a pattern of action [...] that only makes sense if they are claiming their original entitlement" (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 229). The point can be couched in terms of my 'consistency condition': retracting requires the speaker to subsequently behave in ways that are consistent with the performed retraction.³² To substantiate their claim, the authors ask us to imagine the following case:

³¹ The distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' rights comes from private law. See, e.g., Nolan and Robertson (2011).

³² See § 4.2, condition 8.

Some tech mogul makes news by mentioning in an interview that women don't make good programmers [...]. Under pressure, they claim to retract the assertion, and say "One should never make assumptions about people's abilities just based on gender; I was wrong to generalize the way I did". They have now tried to undo the assertion [...]. But imagine also that they continue to hire only male programmers [...]. They are manifesting in their behavior their claimed entitlement to the original assertion, in which case their retraction fails" (Kukla and Steinberg 2021: 230).

According to Kukla and Steinberg, the tech mogul's inconsistent behavior would make their retraction retroactively misfire – their utterance would fail to count as a retraction. Note that, if the mogul's retraction misfired because of their subsequent behavior, then they would continue to be obliged to respond to challenges, and others would retain an entitlement to demand their reasons in support of the assertion that women don't make good programmers. I think this is disputable. Suppose that, in a press conference some time after the retraction, a reporter asks the mogul, "What's your evidence that women don't make good programmers?". The challenge would be inappropriate: the mogul could easily and legitimately reply that they have taken back that assertion, and thus are under no obligation to provide reasons in its favor.

Recall at this point that Austin treats the 'consistency condition' for illocution in close relation to the 'sincerity condition'.³³ Arguably, this is because inconsistent behavior on the speaker's part often suggests insincerity. Imagine that your teenage daughter has a history test tomorrow and that she promises that she will study for the test. When you come home from work, however, you find out that she spent the whole afternoon playing video games. You will likely conclude that her promise was insincere – that she never really intended to sit down and study for the test. Or, to bring in an Austinian example, imagine that I bid you welcome and then behave churlishly (Austin 1962: 44). Since to welcome someone is to express pleasure at their arrival and to commit oneself to treating them hospitably, my churlish behavior suggests that I bid you welcome insincerely. Insincere illocutions are defective illocutions. When inconsistent behavior casts a veil of insincerity over a speaker's illocution, it retroactively renders that illocution defective.³⁴

As we saw, the general sincerity condition of retraction involves a desire to undo the normative upshot of the target act and a belief that one can undo it.³⁵ That being the case, there is seldom any motivation for making an insincere retraction. Virtually, anyone who retracts a speech act and speaks seriously (e.g. is not play-acting or joking) wants to release oneself and/or others from its normative outputs and believes that one can do so. What about the tech mogul, then? Doesn't their subsequent behavior reveal that their retraction was insincere? No, it does not. It reveals that the *statement accompanying their retraction* ("I was wrong to generalize the way I did") was insincere.

Retractions often come with an explanation. We agreed that you'll pick up the kids from music practice today. I later give you a call and say, "Don't worry, I'll pick up the kids. *My afternoon meeting got canceled*". While, in principle, I could have just said, "Don't worry, I'll pick up the kids", and omit any explanation, sometimes a retractor is not only expected but required to provide one. For example, when Amnesty International withdrew the Ambassador of Conscience award from San Suu Kyi, they had to explain why (Example 3). Since retractions

³³ Both are classified as Γ conditions. See fn. 6.

³⁴ Behavioral inconsistency comes in many forms and some such forms may not suggest insincerity. Suppose I offer you a cup of tea. You refuse. After a while, you say, "I would have expected a perfect host like you to offer a guest a cup of tea". Assuming that you are not making fun of me, your (barely intelligible) behavior seems to suggest that you did not get my offer and refused absentmindedly rather than insincerely.

³⁵ See §4.2, condition 7.

often come (and sometimes must come) with reasons, and reasons for retraction typically take the form of assertions or statements, retractions often come with commitments to truth.

With this in mind, let's go back to the sexist tech mogul. They retract their assertion and offer a reason for retraction: they have realized that they were wrong to generalize the way they did, which is the same as saying that they no longer believe their original generic assertion ("Women don't make good programmers") to be true. The mogul's subsequent behavior casts a veil of insincerity on the reason-stating assertion accompanying their retraction. If they no longer believe that women make bad programmers, why do they continue to hire only male programmers? The pattern of behavior they adopt makes their statement ("I was wrong to generalize the way I did") retroactively defective. Since their retraction was grounded on that statement, it also undermines the full felicity of their retraction. But it does not seem to make it misfire, as proven by the fact that asking the mogul for evidence in favor of their original generic assertion would remain largely inappropriate.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to provide a broad characterization of the illocutionary nature of retraction. I argued that a retraction is a higher-order speech act whose definitional function is to reset the central commitments, obligations, authorizations, etc., engendered by some lower-order speech act. More precisely, a retractor undoes the normative upshot of a speech act that they themselves performed in the past. A number of conditions must be in place for a retraction to be felicitous and non-defective. I called these *general felicity conditions* of retraction. I maintained that retraction operates on *felicitous* speech acts: since you cannot cancel what was never done, any attempt to retract an infelicitous act would result in an infelicitous retraction. This accounts for the difference between retraction and annulment. I also claimed that one can only retract one's own speech acts. As such, retracting involves admitting responsibility or authorship, and hence deniability statements cannot be cast in terms of retraction, although both can be roughly described as ways to go back on one's words. I pointed out that, depending on the act to be retracted, the uptake condition may need to be paired with an acceptance condition. I concluded by stressing that retractions are often accompanied by reason-stating assertions, whose insincerity may have repercussions on the felicity of the retraction.³⁶

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³⁶ I am grateful to Claudia Bianchi and Marina Sbisà for their feedback on earlier versions of this chapter. Thanks also to the participants in the *Theoretical and Empirical Challenges to Retraction Workshop* (Warsaw 2021), the *LanCog Seminar in Analytic Philosophy* (Lisbon 2021), and the *Philosophy Postdoc Seminar* (Cambridge 2022) for very helpful discussions on retraction and its ilk.

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