

Ways of asserting. English assertive nouns between linguistics and the philosophy of language

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relationship between illocutions and the lexicon, in particular, illocutions and illocutionary nouns in their function of shell nouns. Theoretical insights from cognitive linguistics, supplemented by an empirical–conceptual approach to verbal communication, are used as a frame of reference. They share the idea that, though conceptualization does not lend itself to direct observation, it can be studied indirectly via language as there is a close relationship between linguistic and conceptual structure. In this vein, the semantics–pragmatics of illocutionary shell nouns is relevant to an understanding of illocutions and their categorization.

This study singles out one type of illocutionary noun: assertive nouns, i.e. nouns that name assertive speech acts (e.g., *assertion*, *allegation*, *argument*, *claim*, etc.), and presents a corpus-based study of them. It approaches assertive nouns by analyzing their behavioral profile, i.e. the complementation patterns they occur with, as they emerge in their occurrence in reporting or denoting and, in so doing, in characterizing specific discourse situation speakers' utterance acts as acts of *F*-ing.

The methodology used involves descriptive as well as exploratory statistics. As for descriptive statistics, reliance scores are calculated and a chi-square test added. As for exploratory statistics, a hierarchical cluster analysis is applied to the data. Results show that (i) constructional possibilities are part of the semantic–pragmatic meaning of the noun, and (ii) there is a correlation between semantic–pragmatic similarity and distributional similarity. At the same time they lend argument from linguistic patterns to what philosophy states about the commitment to belief, truth, and knowledge that define assertive speech acts, thus showing the potential that descriptive English research has for application across disciplinary boundaries.

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1. Introduction

This study focuses upon the relationship between illocutions and the lexicon, in particular, illocutions and illocutionary nouns in their function of shell nouns (Schmid, 2000).¹ Examples (1–4), with their respective constructional patterns, extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (henceforth COCA), are cases in point.

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¹ Vendler (1967, 1968) calls them “container nouns”. Winter (1992) uses the term “unspecific nouns”, Francis (1986) “anaphoric nouns”, Ivanič (1991) “carrier nouns”, and Conte (1996) “anaphoric encapsulators”. Within applied studies, Hinkel (2001, 2004) calls shell nouns “enumerative or catch-all nouns”, and Flowerdew (2003, 2006), Flowerdew and Forest (2014) “signaling nouns”. However, even within this more applied-oriented literature, the term “shell noun”, coined by Schmid (2000), is the one that is accepted and used (see Aktas and Cortes, 2008; Caldwell, 2009).

- (1) All this casts serious doubt about Obama’s assessment of the implications of Bin Laden’s death for the war on terror and his **assertion** that the present strategy has broken the Taliban’s momentum in the face of the abundant evidence to the contrary. [ACAD 2012]
N-that
- (2) “There are patents in the patent office describing certain flying aircraft not of conventional design”. One reader tells us. His **claim**: the patents link many people who have worked on special or secret projects. [MAG 1994]
Det-N
- (3) “Then several hundred feet later you suddenly accelerated, lost control of the car, and went off the road”. “Your **conjecture** is that I accelerated about the same time I dialed nine-one-one?” [FIC 1994]
N-BE-that
- (4) She said, matter-of-factly, “My daughter was paid to go to prison.” # Cynthia stopped writing and looked at Brixton. “That’s an unusual **allegation**, Mrs Watkins,” he said. [FIC 2011]
Pro-BE-N

Schmid’s studies (1997, 2000, 2001, 2007) are the best known on the subject of shell nouns, particularly as far as English is concerned. Schmid (2000) defines shell nouns as “an open-ended functionally defined class of abstract nouns that have, to varying degrees, the potential for being used as conceptual shells for complex, proposition-like pieces of information.” (Schmid, 2000:4). Nouns, therefore, are not shell nouns because of some inherent property; they have the potential to be used as shell nouns and some of them have this potential more than others.

Illocutionary shell nouns are metalinguistic in nature. The referents they metarepresent² are higher-order entities, namely utterance-acts. From the morphological point of view, in general, illocutionary shell nouns, though not all of them, are deverbal abstract nouns derived from speech act verbs.³ As such, they fall under the category of *nomina actionis*. More specifically, they are a sub-group of *nomina actionis* in that the action they name or refer to is the specific illocutionary force of the speech act verb they come from. The topic of *nomina actionis* has been widely studied in linguistics (see, among the others, Hopper and Thompson, 1985; Bierwisch, 1990; Gaeta, 2002), and is considered complex because it involves the transcategorization from a grammatical category (the Verb) to another grammatical category (the Noun). The main function of deverbal nominalization is of syntactic nature, i.e. that of operating – by predicate reifying – a recategorization. The feature of reification, refers to the fact that the predicate is conceptualized as an object and, as such, it can participate in the properties generally ascribed to nouns, such as, for example, the possibility to be pluralized.⁴ Moreover, there is a loss of illocutionary force, which is a gradual process consisting mainly in (i) the loss of deictic properties (e.g. tense markers), and (ii) the backgrounding of the actants.

In addition to belonging to the wide category of *nomina actionis*, from the semantic–pragmatic point of view, illocutionary shell nouns are a subset of linguistic shell nouns. They share the property of referring to a verbal action that the speaker performs when addressing someone with an intention that her utterance counts as *F*-ing, namely as having the illocutionary force of doing the act purported by the verb they are related to. As such, illocutionary nouns, whether or not in their function of shell nouns, qualify as concepts of communication because they are used to refer to acts of verbal communication. More precisely, they embody concepts endowed with certain properties, and these are the properties of the speech acts they name.

The present paper reports the results of the analysis carried out on a group of assertive shell nouns. This type of noun has been chosen because no prior research has focused on a fine-grained investigation of them – as well as of illocutionary shell nouns in general – and on the contribution that research of this type can give to the study of illocutions.⁵ Moreover, assertive shell nouns are particularly important because, though the argument for the unmarked status of informative speech acts is quite complex (cf. Givón, 1990), the speech acts they name are especially salient in discourse genres that represent the human-universal norm, and they predominate in terms of frequency (Givón, 1990:779; Green, 2013:387).

² Cf. Wilson (2000) for metarepresentation, and Noh (2000) for metarepresentation as representation by resemblance.

³ Not all illocutionary nouns are deverbal nouns derived from illocutionary verbs. Some nouns enter the English language before the corresponding verb. However, most of them are nominalizations of, or morphologically related to speech act verbs (cf. also Schmid, 2000:148).

⁴ In general, languages possess rather elaborate morphology to convert verbal roots into nouns, but no morphology whose sole function is to convert nominal roots into verbs. Hopper and Thompson (1985) explain this making reference to the fact that nominalizing means that events and actions – which are abstract – are conceptualized metaphorically as objects, i.e. as something concrete. This is done because human cognition can deal with concrete entities more easily than with abstractions.

⁵ Chapter VIII of Schmid (2000) is the only exception. However, the aim of Schmid’s study is to give a broad brush picture of the category of shell noun per se. Thus, it is the choice of this author not to delve into a finer-grained analysis of each individual category included in the research.

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