

Disinvitations: *You're not invited to my birthday party*

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Abstract

This paper examines the speech act of disinvitations, the act of rescinding an invitation or an anticipated invitation. Naturally occurring, authentic disinvitations are analyzed to determine the structure of disinvitations providing a second-order analysis; online discussion posts concerning disinvitations provide first-order accounts of attitudes toward disinvitations, outcomes, and the conditions under which they can be performed. An additional online survey supplements the unsolicited data providing additional examples, disinvitation reconstructions, and reactions to and interpretations of disinvitations. First-order discussions characterize disinvitations as highly undesirable, and advice postings admonish would-be disinviters to avoid the act. Nevertheless, the meeting of certain speech community norms allows disinvitations to be performed appropriately with sufficient relational work.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the speech act of disinvitations, outlining both their structure and the conditions under which they can be performed. A disinvitation occurs when a speaker (S) makes a statement that the hearer (H) is not, or is no longer, invited to an event that H expects to attend. Disinvitations may be as short as the one I overheard one child say to another—*You're not invited to my birthday party!*—or they may be elaborated.

In Example (1) a representative of the *Huffington Post* disinvites reporter Nate Thayer from a TV interview. Thayer had been invited to do the interview on the topic of the media's use of unpaid reporters; when Thayer indicated that he would also discuss *Huffington Post's* use of unpaid reporters, the producer checked with superiors. After doing so, the producer texted Thayer the disinvitation in (1). (Note that all written examples contain the original spelling; the head act is underlined.) An abbreviation indicates the website, with full addresses listed in Appendix B.

- (1) Thanks much for making time to talk. Sorry this one isn't going to happen, but I'll reach out again for others stories. I'll just say good luck. [observer.com]

This is a particularly short disinvitation, consistent with being sent by text, but it undertakes relational work and reveals the basic components of the more elaborated disinvitations discussed in the following sections.

The present paper draws on two research traditions. I will undertake a traditional second-order analysis of disinvitations, providing a speech act-theoretic account of disinvitations and a description of the disinvitation speech act set. Following the work of Eelen (2001), Locher and Watts (2005), and Schneider (2011), I will then present an analysis of

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first-order metapragmatic comments from online discussion posts and a survey to provide a speaker-based perspective of the performance of disinvitations. Finally, the first-order accounts will be used to inform the second-order analysis for an integrated relational and rational account.

Disinvitations pose a challenge to the pragmatic skills of the disinviters, given that they seek to rescind a previous invitation and thus take away proffered benefits to the invitee. Online discussion posts to disinvitation inquiries capture the conflict in performing disinvitations: “No one yet has invented a way to be polite while being rude. You cannot avoid being rude if you do this, terrible thing to do” [yahooanswers.com] and “There’s no polite or graceful way. . . because it’s an inherently impolite and graceless thing to do” [askmetafilter.com]. Given the inherent difficulty of aligning disinvitations with politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) or intentional impoliteness (in the sense of Culpeper, 2010), I will view the performance of disinvitations through the lens of relational work. Relational work is “the ‘work’ individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others” (Locher and Watts, 2005:10) which “comprises the entire continuum of verbal behavior from direct, impolite, rude or aggressive interaction through to polite interaction, encompassing both appropriate and inappropriate forms of social behavior” (p. 11). I will attempt to show that there are speech community guidelines for performing disinvitations that address the issue of relational work, which—if observed—may help interlocutors maintain their relationship, but do not transform disinvitations into polite utterances.

This investigation of disinvitations begins with a brief review of speech-act accounts of invitations which are traditional second-order accounts. Disinvitations are related to invitations not only by withdrawing the proffered benefits of invitations, but also by having the potential to cancel their desired perlocutionary effects.

1.1. Invitations

Invitations have been characterized as directives (Searle, 1976, 1979; Vanderveken, 1990). Like all directives, invitations attempt to get the hearer, H, to do something. Invitations are generally good for the hearer, which Vanderveken captures as a preparatory condition: “it is something that the hearer will be happy about and that is perceived to be good for him” (p. 191).

While the traditional speech-act categorization of an invitation as a directive emphasizes what H will do, an alternate analysis proposed by Hancher (1979) includes not only what H will do, but also what S is required to do. Hancher observes that “an invitation is not only a directive but a commissive: it commits the speaker to a certain course of behaviour” (p. 6). Thus, Hancher assigns invitations to a hybrid class of commissive directives. Isaacs and Clark (1990) capture the commissive nature of the invitation in the following: “A must believe B would like to be present at Event E, and A must be able to provide what she offers” (p. 499).¹

As Hancher notes, “the directive aspects of offering and inviting can be hidden, for either speaker or hearer (or both), behind the appearances of generosity of commitment on the speaker’s part.” This observation finds resonance in other analyses. Although García (2007, 2008) categorizes invitations as a type of request and thus face-threatening, she also entertains the possibility that invitations may be face-boosting; her empirical cross-cultural comparisons accord well with Hancher’s assessment of invitations as commissive directives and suggest that some cultures may orient more to one aspect of the invitation than the other. From a conversation analytic perspective, Schegloff (2007) claims that offers (commissives) are preferred over requests (directives) as first pair parts, suggesting a possible motivation for Hancher’s observation. Isaacs and Clark (1990), working with reports of invitations, identified two perlocutionary effects: “B comes to believe that A wants B to attend event E” and “B comes to feel that A likes or approves of B” (p. 502). Similarly, García (1999) later observed that invitations express “approval and liking of the interlocutor” (p. 401).

The earliest empirical studies of authentic invitations (Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson et al., 1983) identified the essential components of sincere invitations as reference to a time and/or mention of a place or activity and a request for a response. Although there are very few key components required for a sincere invitation, cross-cultural empirical accounts show that invitation negotiations can be quite extended both in natural conversation (Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson et al., 1983, for English; Eslami, 2005 for Persian) and role plays (García, 1999, 2007, 2008 for national varieties of Spanish; Bella, 2009, for Greek).

1.2. Disinvitations

Disinvitations withdraw or cancel the invitation they refer to. Consider Vanderveken’s (1990:210) characterization of “cancel” as a starting point: “To cancel an order or an authorization or any other speech act is to declare it to be no longer in effect. There is a preparatory condition to the effect that an act had been made and is in effect, and a propositional content condition that this is terminated.” In the case of the disinvitation, the invitation is cancelled. As the data presented below will show, in the case of disinvitations there is a modification to Vanderveken’s preparatory condition for cancellations that allows for expected or anticipated invitations to also be cancelled. Invitations may be reasonably expected in the case of family membership or established friendships, reciprocal invitations, or previous participation in similar events, consistent with

¹ Isaacs and Clark (1990) use “A” for the speaker (the potential inviter) and “B” for the hearer (the potential invitee).

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