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Partial speech acts

Marina Terkourafi
Leiden University
m.terkourafi@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract Inspired by two examples from US political discourse, I propose that speech acts may be performed only partially, in order to steer things in a certain direction, without taking up the full set of commitments that would normally flow from performing an act. A speech act, when partially performed, is still felicitous in the sense that it has changed the world in some way but it has only some of the real-world consequences of its fully performed counterpart. That is why partial speech acts are different from infelicitous ones. Typically, in partial speech acts, the change in the world that the speaker aims to bring about (viz., the commitments created by the act) concerns relational aspects of the speech act such as manipulating face and power dynamics and not the (main) illocutionary point of the act. Politicians exploit this possibility to set and re-set power hierarchies (as in, to test how much they can 'get away with'). By offering a way of reconciling conflicting public and private commitments, partial speech acts allow us to realize ourselves as flesh-and-blood (not model) speakers with conflicting goals and offer a theoretical account of how this (conscious or subconscious) ambivalence of our social action lives on in discourse.

Keywords: illocutionary force, public commitments, private commitments, subjectivity, iteration, hearer's meaning

Invited article.

0. Introduction

Anyone who has tried to tag speech acts in a corpus is well aware that our current conceptualizations of speech acts are idealizations with little empirical buy-in when it comes to applying them to real-world data. Explicit performatives, on the one hand, are hardly ever the way speech acts are performed (though they are frequently used to report them), and in any case, like conventionalized IFIDs (illocutionary force indicating devices; Searle, 1969: 30), they are sure to miss more subtle realizations of speech acts relying purely on inference. Thinking in terms of felicity conditions, on the other hand, is not fool-proof either (not to mention unmanageable for any large amount of data), as it can yield conflicting results, with some felicity conditions for an act being met while others are not.

This messy picture is only to be expected, however, once we realize that the things people set out to do with words are also, often, equally messy. Not only are we, *qua* communicators, not all-knowledgeable about the conditions of the world we are

operating in, we are also unable to anticipate all possible results of our actions (and therefore design our utterances accordingly). Much less are we always consistent in the things that we want and think and it is not uncommon for us to be evasive, undecided or even agnostic about what our words mean, if challenged. Yet, this does not put us off communicating and trying to get things done – also through our words.

The aim of this article is to put forth a notion of partial speech acts which captures this ambivalence of human speech action. Without reducing it to ambiguity (calling for resolution, in which one of two possible illocutionary forces eventually wins) or infelicity (amounting to failure to perform an act), I hope to show that a good deal of our daily performative uses of language meet only some of the conditions that philosophical accounts predict – they are, in other words, "partial" in the sense of not being full performances of the corresponding speech acts – and that this is often a choice of the communicators, as it best meets their goals in the moment, which may be conflicting in themselves.

The motivation for this proposal is empirical: two incidents from US political discourse, a partial threat by White House representative Gene Sperling and a partial apology by congressman Ted Yoho, which help establish the reality of partial speech acts and the kinds of situations where they occur. After presenting these two incidents in section 1, in section 2 I sketch an analysis of partial speech acts focusing on why we need them. My claim is not that, in view of the existence of partial speech acts, speech act theory must be abandoned but rather that this new notion fills a theoretical gap, enhancing the theory's explanatory potential and extending its applicability to empirical data. The closing section 3 rounds off the discussion with a summary of the main conclusions and considers some implications of this analysis for our understanding of speech acts and of the speaking self.

1. An empirical motivation

The proposed account of partial speech acts is motivated by two recent examples from US political discourse. The advantage of these two incidents having occurred during our time of social media is that relatively private exchanges and the personal reactions of their protagonists are also available to us as data.

1.1 Gene Sperling's partial threat

During a phone call on 22 February 2013, under the second Obama administration, Gene Sperling, then director of the White House Economic Council, raised his voice at journalist Bob Woodward. Woodward is credited with having unveiled the Watergate scandal that brought down the Nixon administration in 1974, making him one of the most influential US investigative journalists of all time. Sperling subsequently sent the e-mail in (1) to Woodward, who responded to it the next day with the email in (2).[1]

(1) Bob:
I apologize for raising my voice in our conversation today. My bad. I do understand your problems with a couple of our statements in the fall—but feel on the other hand that you focus on a few specific trees that gives a very wrong perception of the forest. But perhaps we will just not see eye to eye here.

But I do truly believe you should rethink your comment about saying that Potus asking

[1] Source: https://www.politico.com/story/2013/02/exclusive-the-woodward-sperling-emails-revealed-088226; accessed 14 January 2025.

for revenues is moving the goal post. I know you may not believe this, but as a friend, I think you will regret staking out that claim. The idea that the sequester was to force both sides to go back to try at a big or grand bargain with a mix of entitlements and revenues (even if there were serious disagreements on composition) was part of the DNA of the thing from the start. It was an accepted part of the understanding—from the start. Really. It was assumed by the Rs on the Supercommittee that came right after: it was assumed in the November-December 2012 negotiations. There may have been big disagreements over rates and ratios— but that it was supposed to be replaced by entitlements and revenues of some form is not controversial. (Indeed, the discretionary savings amount from the Boehner- Obama negotiations were locked in in BCA: the sequester was just designed to force all back to table on entitlements and revenues.)

I agree there are more than one side to our first disagreement, but again think this latter issue is different. Not out to argue and argue on this latter point. Just my sincere advice. Your call obviously.

My apologies again for raising my voice on the call with you. Feel bad about that and truly apologize.
Gene

(2) Gene:
You do not ever have to apologize to me. You get wound up because you are making your points and you believe them. This is all part of a serious discussion. I for one welcome a little heat; there should [be] more given the importance. I also welcome your personal advice. I am listening. I know you lived all this. My partial advantage is that I talked extensively with all involved. I am traveling and will try to reach you after 3 pm today.

Best, Bob

In an interview following this exchange,[2] Woodward is reported to have "repeated the last sentence ['You'll regret...'], making clear he saw it as a veiled threat". Yet, commentators were divided in their opinions: while some agreed with Woodward's assessment, others found it far-fetched and unsupported by the facts.[3] So the question lying before us is: does the phrase "as a friend, I think you will regret staking out that claim" from Sperling's email in (1) amount to a threat or not, or is something else going on?

Threats are commissive acts with a dissuading goal. Their goal is to dissuade the hearer H from carrying out an act undesirable to the speaker S by committing to perform an act undesirable to H should H go ahead with their plan. In this way, threats function anticipatorily to prevent the hearer from going ahead with their plan (in other words, an utterance of "You'll regret this" *after* H has already done something undesirable for S cannot count as a threat, since the utterance can no longer function as a deterrent). According to Christensen (2019), the following felicity conditions hold for threats:

(3) Felicity conditions for threats (from Christensen 2019: 122, table 2)
Propositional content condition: S predicates a future act A
Preparatory conditions:
a) (H believes that) S is able to cause A to happen
b) (S believes that) H does not wish A to happen

[2] https://www.politico.com/story/2013/02/woodward-at-war-088212?hp=f1; accessed 14 January 2025.
[3] Both opinions are reported in this article: https://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/robert-schlesinger/2013/02/28/did-the-obama-white-house-threaten-bob-woodward; accessed 14 January 2025.

Sincerity condition: S intends to (make H believe S will) cause A to happen
Essential condition: S's utterance counts as an attempt to intimidate H

Figuring out whether "you will regret staking out that claim" from Sperling's email counts as a threat in this case is less than straightforward. To begin with, the future act A that Sperling commits to remains unspecified. In other words, the propositional content condition for threats is not (straightforwardly) met. This, of course, is not a problem in itself, since threats can only be performed indirectly (Verschueren 1980), with this particular expression ("you will regret X") being quasi-conventionalized for threats in English.

Tackling the next two conditions is more problematic. Does Woodward believe that Sperling is able to make him regret "staking out that claim" (preparatory condition a)? This depends very much on who has power over whom. While institutional power may lie with the White House official, the press is its own "institution" and someone of Woodward's stature carries additional personal power based on their past achievements. Indeed, by Woodward's own admission during the subsequent interview, Sperling's utterance, addressed as it was to him, could not be perceived as a threat; however, addressed to a less seasoned reporter, things would have been different:[4]

(4) "But suppose there's a young reporter who's only had a couple of years — or 10 years'—experience and the White House is sending him an email saying, 'You're going to regret this.' You know, tremble, tremble. I don't think it's the way to operate."

While preparatory condition (a) may thus not be met in Woodward's case,[5] the sincerity condition is even more problematic to resolve. If Woodward will regret [staking out this claim], is that because of something that Sperling will do (sincerity condition met; counts as a threat) or simply because the claim itself is wrong, resulting in loss of reputation for the journalist (sincerity condition not met; counts as advice). Subsequently, in their emails, both Sperling and Woodward refer to Sperling's move as "sincere advice" (delivered "as a friend") and "personal advice" respectively, highlighting this possible interpretation. Moreover, whether the final, essential, condition is met, depends ultimately on how the sincerity condition is fixed: if Woodward's regret comes about as a result of subsequent action by Sperling, then this condition is met (Sperling's utterance aims to intimidate Woodward); however, if Woodward's regret comes about for independent reasons (because the claim itself is wrong, resulting in loss of reputation), then there is no attempt to intimidate, but simply to warn, the journalist.

What this analysis shows is that, in the end, whether Sperling's email contained a threat or not may be undecided. Woodward's response email suggests that it did not (he called it "personal advice"), although he later went to lengths to explain why under different circumstances this particular phrase could be perceived as a threat (see (4) above). Hearers can of course change their mind about what speech act has occurred. However, what is more likely to be happening in this case is that Woodward's later describing this phrase as a 'threat' has a dissuading goal in itself. What he is essentially trying to communicate through this description (and through giving an interview about this incident in the first place) is "Don't try to pull this on me!", throwing around his own weight as a veteran of White House reporting. By describing Sperling's utterance as a threat, Woodward preemptively counters any potential threat by Sperling, acquiescing to which would have been paramount to acknowledging Sperling's power over him, and

[4] https://www.politico.com/story/2013/02/woodward-at-war-088212?hp=f1; accessed 14 January 2025.
[5] Preparatory condition b is met by virtue of the lexical meaning of "regret".

claims power over him instead. Countering a threat with a threat is, of course, a kind of verbal 'arm wrestling' common in political circles.

However, what is more interesting for our purposes is the possibilities of interpretation that it opens up on Sperling's side. Does he see his utterance as a piece of advice or as a threat? As we saw above, the circumstances and the (linguistic) context offer support for both possibilities. Is this, then, a case of illocutionary force ambiguity, which listeners and commentators may resolve in different ways? It seems to me that the ambiguity story needs to be rejected, inasmuch as the felicity conditions do not fully align one or the other way: if a piece of advice, it is an awkward one at best, cast as it is as something that the hearer "will regret"; if a threat, it is a toothless one, inasmuch as the speaker does not unequivocally have power over the hearer (though he may have the power to bring about specific negative consequences, e.g., by suing the journalist for libel).[6]

Another possible analysis is that Sperling may be aiming to perform a hybrid kind of speech act that combines elements from both acts. This is another interpretation I think we should resist. Arguing for a new kind of act that is hybrid between threat and advice ossifies what is going on, making it possible to unambiguously intend, and be recognized as intending, this new type of act. This move removes the tension between performing and not performing a threat, when it is precisely this tension that led to the controversy over its interpretation reported in the press.[7]

Instead, I submit that Sperling's utterance gains its effectiveness precisely by "playing with fire": performing *and* not performing a threat. It is unlikely that Sperling, a native speaker of English, is unfamiliar with the conventionalized potential of "you will regret X," where X refers to a future act of the hearer, to perform a threat. Yet, by using this phrase, carefully couched in "as a friend", Sperling is undertaking only some of the commitments of a threat.[8] Specifically, while he does want to dissuade Woodward from making this claim in print, he does not believe that he is in a position of power over him to prevent him from doing that. Aware of this, he opts for a partial threat: highlighting the negative consequences that staking out such a claim would have for the journalist, without taking responsibility for bringing them about. It is this ambivalence of everyday action that the notion of partial speech acts aims to capture.

[6] Discussing illocutionary pluralism in a dyadic exchange, that is, cases where «a speaker [is] performing many different speech acts, which are all on a par and all of which are addressed to the very same hearer», Lewiński (2021: 700-702) highlights the possibility of «strategic illocutionary ambiguity». While much of what he writes about strategic ambiguity applies to Sperling's example here, it is the claim that in such cases the speaker «is more or less openly ambiguous about the multiple recognizable forces she intends to convey» that I find problematic in this case. For, to my mind, talk of ambiguity assumes that all of the relevant acts must be capable of being fully and felicitously performed, something which is not straightforwardly the case with Sperling's utterance.

[7] An alternative analysis is that, speaking personally "as a friend" Sperling is giving advice, leaving it open whether, speaking officially as a White House representative, he is (also) issuing a threat. This analysis, however, merely shifts the problem to what he is doing in his official role: does he or does he not, in this role, perform an additional act of threatening, next to the act of advice he is performing as a friend? Claiming that, under different roles (or Selves), he may be doing different things does not answer the question whether he is performing the threat or not.

[8] The relevant notion of commitment is taken from Geurts (2019). According to this, commitments are social relations, not psychological states. Specifically, a commitment is a three-place relation between two individuals, a and b, and a propositional content, p: a is committed to b to act in a way which is consistent with the truth of p, which in turn entitles b to act in a way which is consistent with the truth of p. Moreover, because commitments are normative, «a can be committed to act on p without suspecting that he is thus committed, and indeed without even entertaining the possibility that p» (Geurts 2019: 4). Partial speech acts challenge precisely this normativity. Whereas «by undertaking a commitment, a speaker *ipso facto* undertakes any further commitments flowing from it» (2019: 5), a speaker who performs a partial speech act selectively blocks some of these further commitments.

1.2 Ted Yoho's partial apology

In July 2020, Democrat Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez drew intense criticism by Republicans and conservative outlets over comments she made linking rising crime in New York City during the covid-19 pandemic to poverty.[9] On 20 July 2020, Republican congressman Ted Yoho confronted Ocasio-Cortez on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, DC, for making these comments, calling her "disgusting". "You are out of your freaking mind," Yoho reportedly told Ocasio-Cortez, and as he was walking away, he uttered the words "F*cking b*tch," according to reporters. Several congressmen strongly condemned Yoho over uttering these words and demanded an apology on the congresswoman's behalf. On 22 July, the congressman took the floor of the House of Representatives and delivered the following speech:[10]

(5) Transcript:

0:00 uh mr speaker I stand before you this
0:02 morning to address the strife I injected
0:04 into the already contentious congress
0:06 I have worked with many members in this
0:07 chamber over the past four terms
0:09 members on both sides of the aisle and
0:10 each of you know that I'm a man of my word
0:13 so let me take a moment to address this body
0:15 I rise to apologize for the abrupt <—
0:17 manner of the conversation I had with
0:19 my colleague from New York
0:21 it is true that we disagree on policies
0:23 and visions for America but that does not mean
0:25 we should be disrespectful
0:28 having been married for 45 years with two daughters
0:30 I'm very cognizant of my language
0:33 the offensive name calling
0:35 words attributed to me by the press were
0:36 never spoken to my colleagues
0:38 and if they were construed that way
0:40 I apologize for their misunderstanding <—
0:42 as my colleagues know I'm passionate
0:44 about those affected by poverty
0:47 my wife Carolyn and I started out
0:49 together at the age of 19 with nothing
0:51 we did odd jobs and we were on food stamps
0:58 I know the face of poverty and for a time it was mine
1:04 that is why I know people in this country can still
1:07 with all its faults rise up and succeed
1:10 and not be encouraged to break the law
1:13 I will commit to each of you that I will conduct myself
1:16 from a place of passion and understanding that policy and political
1:20 disagreement be vigorously debated with the knowledge that
1:25 we approach the problems facing our nation with the betterment
1:29 of the country in mind and the people we serve

[9] https://nypost.com/2020/07/12/aoc-blames-economy-not-nypd-cuts-for-city-crime/; accessed 14 January 2025.
[10] Transcript source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIsOuHBRCAw; accessed 14 January 2025.

1:32 I cannot apologize <—
1:34 for my passion
1:37 or for loving my god my family
1:41 and my country I yield back

In a tweet that appeared on the same day, Ocasio-Cortez rejected Yoho's apology (fig. 1):

Figure 1. Ocasio-Cortez's tweet rejecting Yoho's speech as an apology

Once again, the question lying before us is whether Yoho's speech in (5) amounts to an apology or not, or something else is going on altogether.
To begin with, in his speech, Yoho uses the verb "I apologize" three times (l. 8: "I rise to apologize"; l. 20: "if they were construed … I apologize for their misunderstanding"; l. 35: "I cannot apologize"). Using a performative verb in the first person singular present indicative active (with possible insertion of *hereby*) is Austin's (1962: 61-62) proposed heuristic for identifying a speech act. Why, then, does Ocasio-Cortez in her tweet reject (5) as "not an apology" (fig. 1)? To understand this, we need to consider the felicity conditions for apologies, as laid out by Ogiermann (2009):

(6) Felicity conditions for apologies (from Ogiermann, 2009: 49)
Propositional content condition: Refers to a past act A done by the Speaker
Preparatory condition: Speaker believes that A is an offence against Hearer
Sincerity condition: Speaker regrets doing A
Essential condition: Speaker's utterance counts as an apology for act A

In other words, apologies are expressive and anaphoric speech acts, referring to a past action of the speaker that somehow hurt the hearer and expressing regret for it. The goal is to restore the moral order by verbally compensating the hearer for the harm done.
Starting with the propositional content condition, although Yoho sets out to "apologize" (l. 8), it is not clear exactly what he is apologizing for. This is because the pronoun "their" in "their misunderstanding" (l. 20) is syntactically ambiguous between referring to the complement of "misunderstanding" (the words) or its subject (those doing the misunderstanding). If the latter, then indeed, as the congresswoman claimed in her tweet, Yoho does not take responsibility, since he apologizes not for his own actions but for those of others (their misunderstanding of his words). This is

problematic, as it is questionable whether someone can apologize for someone else's actions. Thus, while the preparatory condition is met (Yoho admits that "offensive name-calling" took place), it seems that the sincerity condition is not: it is hard to regret something one is not responsible for. This, in turn, has consequences for whether the essential condition is met or not.

This interpretation is strengthened by nonverbal cues produced by Yoho during his delivery of the speech. As can be seen in the video and the accompanying transcript in (5), the congressman is reading from a script and delivers the opening part of his speech containing the apology (first 20 lines) fast and without a pause. The next 10 lines (l. 21-30) referring to his personal experience of poverty, which is strictly speaking unrelated to the apology, are delivered much more slowly and punctuated with long pauses: it takes him 30 seconds to deliver these 10 lines as opposed to the 40 seconds it took him to deliver the opening 20 ones. Eventually, 60 of the total 100 seconds of his speech are spent talking about himself while only 40 were spent delivering the apology itself. As a result, despite his use of the explicit performative which, as shown also experimentally (Yuan & Lyu 2022), normally signals the strongest degree of speaker commitment, in the case of Yoho's speech, explicitly communicated content ("I apologize") can be discounted (as it is by Ocasio-Cortez) because several of the felicity conditions of the act are not met.

Nevertheless, Yoho's speech *was* reported as an apology in the press, with some commentators accepting it as such.[11] How can we explain this apparent discrepancy in perceptions about what went on? It seems to me that, despite its deficiencies, Yoho's speech does not fail as an apology on all counts. By delivering this speech, the congressman has done what he was asked to do. Crucially, he cannot be asked to apologize again. This means that an apology of sorts has taken place. But what kind of apology was it? I would like to argue that what we are dealing with here is a partial apology. By taking the floor to apologize in the first place and using the explicit performative to do so, Yoho undertakes a public commitment: he *sincerely* wants to repair the damage done to *his* face (although he does not try to repair the damage done to Ocasio-Cortez's face).[12] This is because an important (if not the ultimate) function of apologies is "remedial work," defined by Goffman (1971) as a sort of social activity occasioned by a real or apparent violation of a social rule, whose function is «to change the meaning that might otherwise be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable» (1971: 39). Re-instating himself as a decent member of congress and not a pariah following the outcry by his fellow congress members from both sides of the aisle is likely the primary (if not the only) reason why Yoho delivers this speech.[13] And this goal is achieved – at least as far as the House is concerned.[14] With this partial apology (*verbally* going through the moves while *nonverbally*

[11] Additional commentary found at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/07/22/rep-ted-yohos-apology-for-cursing-at-aoc-draws-sharp-criticism/; https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/21/politics/aoc-ted-yoho-confrontation/index.html; both links accessed 14 January 2025.

[12] It is because of the sincerity of his desire to restore his own face that I opt to for the term "partial apology" rather than "non-apology", a term frequently used to describe similar incidents in politics and public relations (Eisinger 2011).

[13] As the press reported, Yoho had a meeting with House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy to discuss the matter the next day, while Democrat House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said the decision to apologize was appropriate, adding: "I hope that Mr. Yoho feels that apology sincerely, and I hope all of us will take a lesson to think before we speak so harshly to one another".

[14] His apology did not do the trick for everyone: a few days later, *Bread for the World*, a Christian non-profit organization, asked Yoho to resign from its board over the incident and what they saw as his "non-apology" (reported in: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rep-ted-yoho-removed-from-board-of-

signaling that he is merely going through the moves), Yoho undertakes some of the commitments of an apology but not others. Specifically, by uttering the explicit performative, he undertakes the public commitment of having delivered an apology, while the fast pace of his delivery indicates he does not privately feel any regret about his actions. Crucially, while the public and private commitments are different, the fact that the speaker is undertaking one without undertaking the other is transparent and recognizable to his audience.[15] It is precisely in this simultaneous "doing-and-not-doing" of an act, which can generate controversy over whether the act has taken place or not, that the essence of partial speech acts lies.

1.3 Infelicitous or partial?

Examples such as the ones discussed in the last two sections are far from uncommon, especially in political discourse. Both Gene Sperling's partial threat and Ted Yoho's partial apology could be considered infelicitous speech acts, inasmuch as they do not meet all of the felicity conditions of the corresponding speech acts. Yet both changed the world in some way – it is not as if they never occurred. Moreover, both acts changed the world in ways not unrelated to the full performance of the corresponding speech acts (a threat and an apology, respectively), witness the fact that these acts are named in reports of the incidents.

While we have no vocabulary to talk about changes to the world brought about by infelicitous speech acts, a more promising path lies, in my view, in considering the *types of changes* that these acts have brought about. According to Sbisà (2001), speech acts, when felicitously performed, alter the rights and obligations of interactants thereby constraining their future courses of action. Such a conception of illocutionary force

> allows for degrees of strength. What the speaker has done (the effect of the illocutionary act) is no longer bound to mirror a discrete intention of the speaker. Rather, since there are aspects of the interpersonal relationship that are settled on the basis of intersubjective agreement, the conventional effects of speech acts may be considered as affecting [these aspects of the interpersonal relationship], and as playing a role in their adjustment and fine tuning (Sbisà 2001: 1797; emphasis added).

This composite conception of the illocutionary potential of an act, where part of it has to do with how the act affects the relationship between the interactants, allows speakers to bring about only some of the consequences of a speech act, while leaving others unrealized. Continuing with this line of thought, I would like to argue that a speech act, when partially performed, is still felicitous (in the sense that it has changed the world in some way) but aims to achieve only some of the real-world consequences of its fully performed version.

Typically, the change in the world that the speaker aims to bring about (viz., the social and private commitments that they undertake) through their partial speech act concerns relational aspects affected by the act and not the (main) illocutionary point of the full speech act.[16] In the case of Sperling's partial threat, Sperling's utterance is an attempt to

christian- charity-over-his-comments-about-rep-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/2020/07/25/31037546-ceaa-11ea-91f1-28aca4d833a0_story.html; accessed 14 January 2025).

[15] The possibility of a clash between public (or, as he calls them, social) and private commitments is explicitly discussed by Geurts (2019: 24-25).

[16] This makes partial speech acts similar to Isaacs & Clark's (1990) "ostensible speech acts". For instance, their ostensive invitations are meant to constitute the listener's (and the speaker's) face but are not meant

claim power over Woodward on the grounds of having epistemic authority on the matter of the sequester. Sperling is not so much interested in scaring the journalist as in making him give up his claim because he has been misinformed.[17] The journalist, in turn, rejects this latter claim by stating that he had "talked extensively with all involved," thereby also implicitly pushing back against Sperling's accompanying claim to power over him.

Coming to Yoho's partial apology, Yoho offers only rudimentary compensation for the (verbal) harm done to Ocasio-Cortez. Yet, in apologies, repairing the damage that the recipient has suffered (to their face or other, including material, aspects of the self) is only the vehicle for ultimately repairing the damage to the speaker's own face. By delivering the apology he was asked for, Yoho focuses exclusively on this ultimate goal (repairing the damage to his own positive face), while also avoiding damage to his negative face (freedom of action) by eschewing responsibility for any wrongdoing. A consequence of this analysis is that relational aspects and face manipulation, in particular, can be the (sole) reason for performing a speech act, such that a speech act may be performed purely for the sake of altering one's standing relative to another, without any interest in bringing about the main illocutionary point of the act itself.[18]

2. Partial speech acts: A theoretical sketch

Despite being frequent in political discourse, partial speech acts are not the exclusive purview of these high-stakes situations alone. Rather, they can occur in mundane situations as well. This section outlines different scenarios in which partial speech acts may occur, in order to help us zoom into what it is that they all share which makes partial speech acts a satisfactory solution in these cases: the possibility to perform speech acts without a fixed prior intention by the speaker.

2.1 Why do we need partial speech acts?

It is not unusual for a speaker to be internally conflicted about whether they want to do an act or not, or about what act they want to do. Sometimes we say things because circumstances require it, projecting a social persona that is expected and approved of but different from our private self, whose future course of action may, crucially, not be committed by our words. For instance, upon meeting someone for the first time, it is customary (at least in some settings in English) to say "Pleased to meet you" when on particular occasions this may not be the case at all. In such cases, it is possible to undertake a public commitment (to be courteous) without undertaking a private one (to see the new acquaintance again in the future). While such utterances are often dismissed as merely phatic communication or insincere, a more adequate analysis recognises that there are two different commitments involved, one of which – our wish to be perceived as socially competent by using the formula – *is* sincere.

Yet at other times, we may wish to stay open-ended regarding our commitments in

to be accepted. While ostensible speech acts share with partial speech acts this aspect of being performed primarily for their relational (face) import, the two are still different, in that ostensible speech acts do not normally generate the kind of controversy that accompanies partial speech acts as to whether the act has been performed or not. Ostensible speech acts seem to be much more conventionalized regarding when and where in the discourse they occur, such that they are expected at certain moments in the interaction.

[17] This, of course, is a challenge to the journalist's professional identity and thereby constitutes a separate threat to the journalist's positive face.

[18] In specific cases, constituting face may be the main illocutionary point (as in, the *raison d'être*) of the speech act itself (this is the case, for instance, with white lies, according to Terkourafi, 2023).

order to see how things will pan out. Such ambivalence is frequent when we are not sure how we stand vis-à-vis a person or a group, as it minimally constrains our future course of action and allows maximum room for manoeuvre. Unlike the situation above in which the public and private selves part ways, here it is our private self that is internally (as yet) undecided. An innocuous example of this would be the coffee exchange from Sperber & Wilson (1986: 34), in which Peter asks Mary whether she wants coffee, to which she replies "Coffee would keep me awake". In Jaszczolt's (1999: 77) reanalysis of this example, rather than expressing a fixed intention of Mary, which Peter needs to figure out by supplying the appropriate context, Mary may be neutral between having and not having coffee and relying on Peter's further reaction to eventually supply her with the coffee or not.

A final set of scenarios is when speakers, aware that they cannot anticipate all the consequences of how their words will be taken, use this to their advantage, inviting addressees to co-shape with them the full import of their utterances. Terkourafi (2014) outlines a number of situations when this happens. In some cases, relying on the indeterminacy of implicatures (Grice 1975: 58), speakers may knowingly make statements which are open-ended not only because it saves them the effort of spelling everything out, but also because they are counting on the listener to amplify what they mean by adding aspects they themselves may have forgotten. Thus, one partner may say to another "I'll be late tonight" to which the other may reply "Okay, I'll make dinner and take the trash out", to which the first one may in turn respond "Oh yeah, that's right, thank you love!". In such cases, it is as if the second speaker picks up the thread of the first speaker's thoughts and unfolds it in directions of their own (yet no less ratified by the initiator). Such interpretations assume considerable common ground between interlocutors.

Another possibility is plausible deniability. In the example just given, rather than offering to take the trash out, the second speaker may say "Well, I'm not taking the trash out again!", to which the first one may retort "I never asked you to do that!". Precisely because taking the trash out is the second speaker's contribution to this exchange, even if developed by unfolding the thread of the first speaker's thoughts, the first speaker can deny having ever (publicly) committed to it, even if they (privately) did. Performing their request partially leaving open what further commitments flow from it allows them to do that.

It is also possible for a speaker to be unclear about specific aspects of what they are trying to achieve with their utterance. Using for convenience the formula *F(p)* which separates illocutionary force from propositional content (Searle 1968: 420-421), we can capture the relevant indeterminacy as follows. On the one hand, speakers may wish to communicate a determinate *F*[orce] without a determinate *(p)*[ropositional content]. An example can be seen in (7):

(7) A ((has set the oil in the frying pan on fire)): "Do something!"
B: ((throws water on it, fire spreads))
A: "Not that!"

In (7), A is issuing a directive to B in the most direct way (through the imperative), yet they do not spell out a specific action that B should undertake. Since B complied with the directive and tried to be cooperative, it is hard to say that the responsibility for the fire spreading lies entirely with B. B merely worked out A's partial order: just not in the right way.

On the other hand, speakers may also wish to communicate a determinate *(p)* without committing to a determinate *F*. A real-life example is given in (8):

(8) A: "Will you come with me to the movies?"
B: "Is this an invitation or a demand?"

In (8), it is clear what A is asking B to do, however, B is questioning the illocutionary force that this *(p)* is couched in. Invitations and demands assume different power hierarchies between interactants, with an invitation possible to issue (and refuse) between equals, whereas a demand carries with it a flavour of unwanted imposition by someone in a position of power. While A may remain agnostic between these two possibilities, B's putting them on the table communicates something about how B sees the relational aspects of the exchange that A may not have been aware of before.

2.2 Speech acts without an antecedent subjectivity

All of the above situations eschew an analysis in terms of classic speech act theory, because they work despite the fact that there isn't a determinate set of changes to the world that the speaker sets out to bring about by means of their utterance. Crucially, this ambivalence is alive in the speaker's discourse and does not simply arise from the perlocutionary effects brought about by their utterance.[19] What the above situations illustrate is that the responsibility for shaping the 'recognized' intention attributed to a speaker's utterance may in effect be shared between the speaker and their listeners, who provide input of their own that completes the partial speech act the speaker set out to perform. This leads us to consider, as Leezenberg (2015, drawing on Butler 1997) puts it,

> speech acts as embodied actions that are *not guided by an antecedently and independently given subjectivity or intentionality of the speaker*, but by what Derrida calls "iteration"; that is, by a logic of quotation in new contexts which inevitably and systematically exceed the speaker's intentions (Leezenberg 2015: 223; emphasis added).

Unlike Austin's «total speech situation» (1962: 147), which ultimately determines the type of speech act that has taken place, Derrida's (1972) notion of iteration allows only partial commitment to the effects of a speech act because it relies on the idea that contexts are not totalizable (1972: 18). Instead, contexts can be open-ended in several ways. Any aspect of reality that initially went unnoticed can later become part of the context that shapes our understanding of what speech act has taken place, altering the commitments we consider language users to have undertaken (Halion 1992: 169). Moreover, because iteration depends not on rules but on usage, there is no closed set of rules that are necessary and sufficient for the performance of a speech act.[20] Rather, the ways in which an utterance can be repeated are infinite. How an utterance may be reused is constrained only by the experience and imagination of the speaker – new ways can always be invented, in the way of Wittgenstein's family resemblances (Halion 1992: 164). Because speakers do that consciously but also subconsciously, different layers of the speaker's self may pull in different directions. As Halion points out, «Derrida calls into question the unity of the subject that intends, believes and desires» (1992: 170). Taken jointly, Derrida's claims about iteration and the fact that contexts are not totalizable mean that speakers cannot fully control not just how others will take their utterances but what their utterances mean in the first place: «The writer cannot control

[19] The latter is what Lewiński (2021: 693) calls "perlocutionary pluralism".
[20] A commitment approach to speech acts similarly eschews speech act essentialism (Geurts, 2019: fn. 5).

language to make it say only what he [sic] intends – if indeed he can still be said to have intended anything definite» (Halion 1992: 166).

If speakers cannot make language mean *only* what they intend, however, that does not mean that language can mean anything. Since, unlike thinking which can be done in private, meaning is something we do with others in mind, there will have to be something about the situation that will make it «at least just possible» (Halion 1992: 167) for those others to attribute a particular meaning to the speaker's utterance. A mark that is at least just possibly accessible by the audience is a publicly accessible mark of how the speaker is using an utterance that involves some stage-setting, that is, some modification of the context of utterance (Halion 1992: 168). In the case of partial speech acts, for the speaker's utterance to be recognized as partially performing a speech act, two things must be at least just possible. First, the utterance as it is produced in context must provide a publicly accessible mark making it possible for an audience to construe it as performing that speech act. And second, the possibility of their utterance being so construed must occur to the speaker themself. That does not necessarily mean that the speaker endorses this construal (indeed, they might sincerely feel that it is "putting words in their mouth", when they themself are unsure about how they meant it) but they must find it reasonable and be able to see why their utterance could be construed in this way.[21]

To return to the two incidents that motivated this analysis, the wording of Sperling's partial threat as something that Woodward "will regret" is the publicly accessible mark of the illocutionary force of threat that was indeed given by Woodward as a reason for construing it this way. Given his native speaker status, it is unlikely that Sperling could not have anticipated this himself, and that is probably why he referred to his action as "advice" twice in order to anticipatorily defuse this potential. Nevertheless, this wasn't purely disinterested advice on his behalf. Sperling had an interest in dissuading the journalist from publishing his story, although it is unlikely he would stand behind this interpretation publicly (and perhaps privately as well).

In the case of Yoho's partial apology, the words "I apologize" featured twice are again the publicly accessible mark making it possible for the audience to construe it as an apology. And while this time this interpretation would likely also be the one publicly endorsed by the speaker, other aspects of his utterance (syntactic ambiguity, nonverbal delivery) signalled his awareness that *qua* full-fledged apology his act was deficient in several ways. What these two examples show is that someone who performs a partial speech act may or may not wish to be recognized as doing so. While in some cases speakers may be clear about the commitments that they are undertaking and those that they are not, at other times they wish to play on this ambivalence and not be clear about which commitments they are undertaking (indeed, that may not be clear to themselves either).

2.3 The boundaries of speaker's and hearer's meanings

Sketching the boundaries of meaning from the speaker's side, in the above analysis I claimed that, in virtue of the possibility of iteration that makes their meaning more a matter of the history of their use than of the speaker's intention, utterances carry more meaning than what their speakers may have injected in them. That does not mean,

[21] Not fully endorsing an interpretation is another way of saying that speakers cannot be held accountable for making it available (since they do not consider themselves committed to behave a certain way in its aftermath). This makes partial speech acts different from the idea of speaker meaning as accountability (Haugh 2013).

however, that hearers are unconstrained in the possible interpretations they can derive from them. In an attempt to explore the boundaries of meaning from the hearer's side, motivated by the analysis of an extended excerpt from social media discourse in which multiple participants argued over the meaning of each other's posts, Mosegaard Hansen and Terkourafi (2023) outline seven sources of information that hearers may use to arrive at an interpretation of a speaker's utterance. These are:

1. H's framing(s) of (different parts of) the speech event
2. H's assumptions about the conventional meanings of words and phrases
3. the sequential placement of the utterance within the discourse
4. H's perception of S's identities
5. H's social relationship with S
6. H's social relationships with third parties
7. H's assumptions regarding S's intentions (if any)

Crucially, these sources represent the hearer's perspective, meaning that the speaker can at best make assumptions about them (at worse, the speaker may not be aware that the hearer is taking them into account at all). Hearers may moreover lend different weights to these sources or consider only a subset of them, and it is a matter for future research to determine to what extent these sources of information are independent of one another. What is more likely is that on different occasions some take priority over others but not such that they can be hierarchically ranked once and for all; rather, their weighting is potentially mutually regulated in intricate ways. For instance, in some types of discourses (where by 'discourse' I mean a certain framing of a speech event), the conventional meaning of words and phrases (source 2) may be awarded more weight than in others;[22] while in other cases, the conventional meaning of words and phrases may be lent less weight or depend upon H's perception of S's identity or the relationship between them (sources 4 and 5).[23]

Because these seven sources represent the input that hearers bring to the interpretation table, speakers do not fully control what their language means.[24] However, hearers cannot derive just *any* meaning they like from a speaker's utterance. They must be able to justify how they derived it. In other words, hearers are also accountable for their meanings. The selfsame possibility of identifying a set of sources for hearer's meaning shows that hearer's meaning is not unconstrained. We can see how this works again with respect to the two examples presented at the outset.

In the case of Sperling's utterance, its perception as a threat by some and not as a threat by others depended on the hearer's political affiliation (and, in Woodward's hypothetical account in (4), on the hearer's seniority). Republican outlets (and Woodward himself, in his hypothetical account) reported it as a threat, while other commentators rejected this interpretation. In this way, sources 2, 4, 5 (and in Woodward's case also source 6: his own relationship with his readers) are relevant to this interpretation. However, the circumstances of Sperling's own utterance leave that open – and that is what makes it a partial speech act. In the case of Yoho's speech, its perception as an apology by some

[22] A type of discourse where conventional meaning is awarded more weight is courtroom discourse. A well- known example of this is the Bronston case (Solan & Tiersma 2005).

[23] For some examples, see Mosegaard Hansen & Terkourafi (2023) and for an experimental demonstration, see Weissman (forthcoming).

[24] In other words, hearers bring their own agendas into the interaction and that is why there can be no disinterested cooperation akin to Attardo's (1997) «locutionary cooperation» (sharing the goal of understanding and being understood). On this view, even locutionary understanding is colored by interlocutors' extra-linguistic goals.

and not by others depended on the sources of meaning that different hearers prioritized. Those accepting it as an apology are likely to have done so more because of its occurring in the relevant "slot" on the congressional floor and because of (specific aspects of) its wording (sources 1, 2, and 3). Those rejecting it (Ocasio-Cortez and *Bread for the World*), on the other hand, paid more attention to their own relationship with the speaker and their perception of the speaker's identity (based on the speaker's former behaviour) (sources 4 and 5), as well as, Ocasio-Cortez's case, other aspects of his wording (sources 2 and 3). What is important is that Yoho's verbal choices and his nonverbal delivery left that open – leading some of his observers to accept it as an apology and others not. This mixed result was made possible by the partial nature of his speech act.

3. Summary and conclusions

The claim that speaker's and hearer's meanings may diverge is not new. It is part and parcel of the inferential model of communication (Grice 1975; Sperber & Wilson 1986) that has prevailed in linguistic pragmatics for at least the past half century. However, this divergence is usually viewed as a matter of the speaker having meant one thing and the hearer having understood another. In other words, a complete input is replaced by a complete output. My goal in this article has been to raise the possibility that the input itself may be incomplete, and that this incompleteness may serve the speaker's goals best in some circumstances.

While propositional indeterminacy has been treated extensively in the literature,[25] the type of illocutionary indeterminacy I have in mind here is hardly ever discussed.[26] Instead, the idea has been that either the speaker has a particular speech act in mind which they set out (but may fail for various reasons) to perform, or, in more CA-type accounts which remain agnostic about what the speaker set out to do, that the speaker is performing whatever act the packaging of their utterance supports that they perform. The possibility that the speaker may set out to perform a speech act only in part has not been previously considered. Yet, this is exactly what happens in the examples by White House representative Gene Sperling and congressman Ted Yoho which prompted this analysis, and which earned them the press coverage that they received.

I argued that this is possible because, treating speech acts as commitments that speakers undertake (rights and obligations about how they and others should behave in the aftermath of the speech act), speakers may choose to undertake only some of these commitments without undertaking others, knowingly leaving it open whether they carried out a particular speech act or not. This happens frequently when speakers are conflicted between public and private commitments such that they cannot undertake both at the same time. In such cases, politicians, especially, try to "have their cake and eat it", so to speak. Partial speech acts offer a way of doing that.[27]

This analysis entails that, rather than treated as conceptual primes, speech acts are broken down to their component parts but those component parts (theorized as commitments) are neither necessary nor sufficient for the utterance to count as a certain kind of act; indeed, the utterance may function as a certain kind of act even if only some

[25] For an overview of the main issues, see Carston (2002: 15-42).

[26] This possibility is raised by Lewiński (2021: 699) under the guise of «illocutionary underdetermination», in which «the speaker herself is not in full command of the illocutionary forces of her utterance and so further conversational work needs to be done to determine at least one force». However, as his focus is on illocutionary plurality, he does not develop this idea further.

[27] A promising theoretical framework for formalizing these ideas is that of Geurts (2019) and I have indicated in footnotes some areas where the ideas in the two articles are compatible. However, a full account of partial speech acts within Geurts' framework remains to be worked out in future research.

of them are present. This happens because listeners inevitably contribute to the verbal input produced by the speaker in context from their own perspective and, using information from a number of sources, flesh it out into a full speech act. In other words, the full speech acts that we 'routinely' encounter in daily discourse are not the product of the speaker's subjectivity alone.

A first, theoretical consequence of this move is that the full speech act (where participants undertake all of the relevant commitments) is an idealization, built from the many partial occurrences of a speech act that actually occur in the real world. Real-world occurrences of speech acts are necessarily partial if we take seriously Derrida's (1972) notion of iteration, which implies that there is no closed set of conditions a speech act ought to meet. Rather, utterances perceived as realizing the "same speech act" are linked to each other via a network of family resemblances that can be extended in different directions (via new commitments) limited only by what participants are willing to accept as the "same speech act". Yet full speech acts as idealizations are necessary for two reasons. First, they allow us to systematize what people do with words, avoiding unnecessary proliferation of speech acts every time an act that doesn't quite fit the mould occurs. Second, they keep us from ossifying partial speech acts into (conventionalized) partial performance. Rather than separate acts recognizable in their own right, partial speech acts are opportunistic, *in situ* exploitations of idealized speech acts that gain their significance precisely by referencing the full speech acts that they resemble.

A second, rather more philosophical consequence of this move is that speech acts can be (indeed, necessarily are, given the previous paragraph) performed without an antecedently and independently given subjectivity or intentionality of the speaker. In this way, partial speech acts can serve to *constitute* the speaker as a partial (or conflicted) subject – something that arguably resonates with speakers' experience of themselves and of others in interaction. It is well known that, both developmentally and interactionally, notions of Self do not emerge without reference to Other. Partial speech acts help explicate how that works – at least at the level of the illocution – as others complete what they perceive from us and project it back to us through their behaviour. Thus the selves we perform back to them in turn are only partially constituted by us. As speakers, it turns out, we only half-do things with our words.

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