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How to do more things with words

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Linguistic semantics and philosophy of language make a series of idealizations that have propelled development of formally explicit accounts of meaning. One central idealization is that it is coherent to focus on propositions that speakers express, and not on the actions that speakers perform. The last decade has seen three important developments. First, philosophers, in particular feminist philosophers, have recognized that speech acts are central to understanding how power relationships are maintained in society, and how many are effectively silenced. Second, a growing interest in non-assertoric speech acts has led to the development of new formal approaches. Third, there has been increasing recognition that speech acts may occur below the sentence level, so that a single declarative utterance can be the vehicle for multiple speech acts. We introduce the notion of *grammatical action*, a way of looking at grammar that centers on the actions that a speaker performs. Crucially, while it appears mysterious how one expression can be used to simultaneously mean multiple things, there is no mystery at all to using an expression to do several things. We show how the approach can conservatively maintain the insights of modern post-Montagovian compositional grammar, while at the same time offering insights into both subsentential speech acts (in which we include uses of expressives, politeness markers, and parentheticals), and at sentence level markers of speech acts, such as performatives. Finally, we challenge another standard idealization embodied in the strong requirements of the standard definition of Speaker Meaning, by exploring the ways in which communicative actions may be covert. Speakers may do things with words that they don't intend their full audience to recognize, and may even do things that they do not know they are doing. We argue that the combination of an action-based approach to communication, together with the idea that actions may be covert, is crucial to make sense of much ordinary and public language.