

## Ostensible invitations<sup>1</sup>

ELLEN A. ISAACS  
HERBERT H. CLARK

*Psychology Department  
Stanford University*

### ABSTRACT

People sometimes extend invitations they don't intend to be taken seriously. We call these ostensible invitations. From a collection of spontaneous examples, we argue that they require: a pretense of sincerity by the speaker; mutual recognition of the pretense by speaker and addressee; collusion on the pretense by the addressee; ambivalence by the speaker about its acceptance; and an off-record purpose by the speaker. We describe seven techniques speakers use in fulfilling these requirements. We also show that speakers try to achieve their off-record purpose by getting addressees to recognize the expectable effects of the invitation, the situation, and the fact that they chose to extend an ostensible invitation. Finally, we argue that ostensible invitations are part of a class of ostensible speech acts, and these in turn are related to other types of nonserious language use. (Speech acts, pragmatics, off record, pretense, nonserious language use)

Many invitations are only ostensibly invitations. When Mary says, "Let's do lunch sometime," she may appear to make an invitation, and when Justin replies, "Yes, let's," he may appear to accept. Suppose the two of them mutually recognize that neither of them intended what they said to be taken seriously. They are engaging in a pretense, mutually believing all the while that they are doing just that. The aim of the exchange is not to establish the invitation, but to accomplish some other, unstated purpose. We call Mary's invitation an *ostensible invitation* and Justin's response an *ostensible acceptance*. The claim is that these are both members of a family of ostensible speech acts that also includes ostensible compliments, offers, questions, apologies, assertions, and many others.

Traditional theories of speech acts (e.g., Austin 1962; Bach & Harnish 1979; Searle 1969) have no account for ostensible speech acts. In such theories, a speaker S invites a hearer H to an event only if "S requests H's presence and promises acceptance of his [or her] presence" (Bach & Harnish 1979:51). S is sincere in making such an invitation only if he or she wants

H's presence and intends to accept it. By this analysis, Mary's invitation is insincere (see also Wolfson 1981, 1989). She doesn't *really* want Justin to come to lunch, although she might accept a lunch date if it arose. Still, it isn't quite right to describe her invitation as insincere. It is not like a lie, an insincere assertion, which is meant to deceive, because Mary and Justin mutually believe they both recognize it for what it is – only ostensibly an invitation and actually something else. Traditional theories offer no account for mutually recognized pretense and its uses.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, are ostensible speech acts? What purpose do they serve? How do they work? In an attempt to answer these questions, we focus on ostensible invitations. We first consider their defining features – what it means to be an ostensible as opposed to a genuine invitation. Next, we describe the characteristic features of 156 invitations we collected. This gives us an idea of how ostensible invitations work – how they are designed and recognized. Then we consider what they are used for – what underlying purpose people have in extending ostensible as opposed to genuine invitations. Finally, we compare ostensible speech acts with other types of nonserious speech acts.

#### METHODS AND DATA

Ostensible invitations are rare in most situations, so it is difficult to collect more than the occasional example by combing ordinary conversations. It also seemed highly unnatural to elicit them in any experimental situation we could think of. So we collected our 156 examples secondhand in four ways.

One set of 104 examples was collected from 52 undergraduates taking a psycholinguistics class. They were asked to record an instance of one sincere and one insincere invitation or offer they witnessed and, when they could, also report the purpose behind the exchanges. They were asked to describe enough of the context to make the conversation comprehensible and to quote, as best they could, exactly what was said, including just before and just after the invitation. (Examples from another 9 students were excluded because they weren't invitations or offers, provided too little context, or described the conversations without quoting them.) The advantage of the examples collected this way is that they reflect a range of people observing spontaneous instances in a variety of naturalistic settings. The disadvantage is that the examples are surely inaccurate in many details and cannot be verified. Still, they struck the students who reported them as true to life.

A second set of 40 examples was gathered from face-to-face interviews with 10 undergraduates. Each student was asked to recall two sincere and two insincere invitations from their own experience. One was to involve a friend, and the other an acquaintance or stranger. The students were then asked to describe the context, to reenact the dialogue as best they could, and then to

#### OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS

explain why they believed the act had been sincere or not. These interviews were taperecorded, and the critical parts transcribed. The interviews were designed to give us more details of the incidents, especially on the issue of sincerity versus insincerity. Still, they were recollective and subject to inaccuracy of many types.

A third set of 10 examples was also gathered in face-to-face interviews, but from 10 pairs of friends at Stanford University. They were asked to recall a time when one had made an ostensible invitation to the other. After they had agreed on the incident but before they had discussed it in any detail, they were interviewed individually. They each gave their version of the context and reenacted the dialogue as best they could. Then they rated their confidence that they mutually believed the invitation wasn't intended to be taken seriously, with (1) being low confidence and (7) high. Finally, they described what they thought had been expressed through the invitation and rated their confidence that this interpretation had been mutually understood. With this method, we could verify that the invitations at issue had been mutually believed to be ostensible. We could also compare the two friends' interpretations of the purpose of the invitation. And because each participant recalled his or her own words, accuracy should be improved (Hjelmquist & Gidlund 1985; Ross & Sicolu 1979).

Two final ostensible invitations were tape recorded from spontaneous telephone conversations between the first author and two different friends. These, of course, were accurate, verbatim, and verifiable. They are, however, only two examples.

#### DEFINING PROPERTIES OF OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS

Ostensible invitations, our data suggest, constitute a coherent class of speech acts that are identifiable by a small number of properties. In setting out these properties, we refer to an example we elicited in an interview with a man and a woman who were dating.

It was early Friday evening, and Ross had a date with Cathy to study that night. Both of them knew that Ross had planned to drive to Berkeley on Saturday to see the University of California, Berkeley, play the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in football, but Ross had just got a call from a friend at Berkeley asking him to come up that night to go out with the guys who had arrived early from UCLA, and he had accepted. So Ross was calling Cathy to cancel the study plans.<sup>3</sup>

Ross: Cathy, Scott just called and told me that Brad and Dave and Rich and a lot of other guys from UCLA are going to be there tonight, so I guess we're going to go a night early. [He explains the plans for the night.] Do you want to come?

Cathy: That's all right. I'll pass.

Ross: Okay.

TABLE 1. *Defining properties of ostensible invitations*  
(A invited B to event E)

1. Pretense	A pretends to make a sincere invitation.
2. Mutual recognition	A and B mutually recognize A's pretense.
3. Collusion	B responds appropriately to A's pretense.
4. Ambivalence	When asked, "Do you really mean it?" A cannot sincerely answer either "yes" or "no."
5. Off-record purpose	A's main purpose is tacit.

As both Ross and Cathy told us, when Ross extended his invitation ("Do you want to come?"), he didn't intend Cathy to take it up, and he expected her to see that. Indeed, she did see that and declined ("That's all right. I'll pass"). So this is an ostensible invitation.

Ostensible invitations, we suggest, are distinguishable from other types of invitations in the following five ways, as listed in Table 1:

1. *Pretense*. In ostensible invitations, the inviter is only pretending to extend a sincere invitation. Ross only pretended he was sincerely inviting Cathy to go along that night.
2. *Mutual recognition*. Inviters intend their pretense to be recognized by them and their addressees and mutually believed to be so. We call this mutual recognition. Ross intended Cathy and himself to mutually believe they both recognize that he was only pretending to make a sincere invitation. Mutual recognition is important for several reasons. Without it, Cathy might genuinely accept the invitation, not realizing it was intended to be seen as merely a pretense. Or she might take it as obviously insincere, without realizing she was intended to see that, and she might feel insulted. Or if Ross made his invitation without expecting her to recognize the pretense, then it would be merely insincere, bearing the same relation to sincere invitations as lies bear to assertions. It would simply deceive. So mutual recognition is essential for distinguishing ostensible from genuine but insincere invitations.
3. *Collusion*. Invitees are intended to collude with inviters on the pretense by responding in kind – by accepting or declining the invitation as appropriate to the pretense. When Ross asks, "Do you want to come?" he expects an answer. If the pretense is to be carried off successfully, Cathy must reply as if the ostensible invitation were intended seriously. So she colludes with Ross by declining. Although the refusal is sincere, she might also offer ostensible excuses, or reasons why she supposedly couldn't make it. Or she may respond with an ostensible acceptance, which would extend the pretense.

4. *Ambivalence*. If inviters were asked, "Do you really mean what you say?" they could not honestly answer either "yes" or "no." When Ross invited Cathy, he expected her to see how inappropriate it would be for her to join him for a night out with the guys. But if she had asked him, "Do you sincerely mean it?" he would have been in a bind. "Yes" would have been a lie, because he didn't wholeheartedly want her to come. Yet "no" would not have been true either, because he also didn't wholeheartedly *not* want her to come. The essential point is this: he would have wanted her to accept the invitation if the situation had been different. The invitation was a way of showing his desire to be with her, ambivalent as it was. Ambivalence, as we shall see, helps distinguish ostensible speech acts from certain other nonserious speech acts.
5. *Off-record purpose*. Ostensible invitations are extended as a way of expressing certain intentions off record. A person who issues an utterance can be held accountable for certain interpretations of that utterance, and these are said to be *on record*. There are also certain plausible but not necessary implications of the utterance for which the speaker cannot be held accountable, and these are said to be *off record* (Brown & Levinson 1978). For example, speakers can place off record topics that are too delicate to put on record; they might do this as a way of testing the waters to see how their partners might react to a sensitive issue. With Ross and Cathy, the invitation and its declination were on record, but their ultimate purpose was accomplished off record. Ross was trying to let Cathy know that (a) he was breaking their date so that he could go out with the guys, and yet (b) he still would have liked to have been with her – he still enjoyed and wanted her company. With the ostensible invitation, he could make these two points without raising the awkward topic of whether she had taken offense or questioned his loyalty. And by declining, she showed she was willing to accept these two points without putting them on record and making an issue of them.

Our proposal, then, is that ostensible invitations have two layers. At the top layer, Ross makes an invitation, and Cathy declines it. At the bottom layer, Ross and Cathy take collusive actions toward each other with the mutual recognition that the top layer is a pretense. It is the discrepancy between the two layers that gives Ross's and Cathy's actions their functions. What gets put on record, via the pretense, is that Ross would like Cathy to go but that she can't manage it. Off record, though, he breaks their date while assuring her he still enjoys her company, and she assures him she is not offended. The feature general to ostensible invitations is that Ross shows his ambivalence about her accepting the invitation, and she shows her recognition of that ambivalence.

Our view of ostensible invitations differs slightly from Wolfson's (1981,

TABLE 2. *Seven features of ostensible invitations  
(A invites B to event E)*

- 
- 
1. A makes B's presence at E implausible.
  2. A extends invitation only after it has been solicited.
  3. A doesn't motivate invitation beyond social courtesy.
  4. A doesn't persist or insist on the invitation.
  5. A is vague about arrangements for event E.
  6. A hedges the invitation.
  7. A delivers the invitation with inappropriate cues.
- 
- 

1989), who has described what she calls *ambiguous invitations*. She rightly pointed out that the two parties must collaborate to establish the function of these invitations. But our claim is that because they are designed so that addressees will recognize the pretense, ostensible invitations are not intended to be ambiguous. Collaboration is required to confirm mutual belief in the pretense and if possible to make the off-record purpose mutually understood. Until this happens, they may appear ambiguous to the analyst, but in most cases they would not be to the addressee. Of course, sometimes speakers may purposely leave their intentions ambiguous, and if the addressee should take it as a pretense, this would look just like an ostensible invitation. But these are derivative cases. Speakers can do this only because there are such things as ostensible invitations in which the pretense is intended to be recognized.

#### ESTABLISHING INVITATIONS AS OSTENSIBLE

How do speakers make it clear that an invitation is ostensible? They must not only pretend to be sincere, but make sure the pretense is mutually recognized for what it is: an attempt to show their ambivalence. Our sample of invitations suggests seven interrelated features that speakers can exploit in this process, although this list may be incomplete (see Table 2). These features are ones that appear predominantly in insincere as opposed to genuine invitations. The percentages and statistical tests we report were based on the 72 insincere and 72 genuine invitations collected from the class and the individual interviews; the other types of examples we collected were not included here because there were no genuine invitations to compare them with. (See the Appendix for a breakdown of the data by feature.)

The basic idea in designing an ostensible invitation is to make its pretense at sincerity obvious enough that the addressee will recognize that it was intended to be seen as obvious. Suppose that a female speaker A is inviting a male hearer B to event E. A has many ways of making the pretense mutually obvious (see the Appendix).

## OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS

1. *A makes B's presence at event E implausible.* For any speech act to work, certain preparatory conditions must hold (Searle 1969, 1975). With invitations, A must believe B would like to be present at event E, and A must be able to provide what she offers. If these conditions are violated, then B would have grounds for believing the invitation is insincere. If the violation is obvious to both of them, then B should believe the invitation is ostensible. For example, if A invites B to a party when they mutually believe that B has other unbreakable plans, B would have some reason to believe the invitation was ostensible.

An example from our corpus illustrates such a violation. Barbara was going to dinner at Diane's dorm. She invited her roommate, Felicia, to join her, even though they mutually knew that Felicia did not get along with Diane's roommate, Debbie. When Felicia asked if Debbie would be there, Barbara hedged and said, "I don't know," which, she later said, indicated that Debbie probably would be there. Since it was mutually believed that Felicia wouldn't want to eat dinner with Debbie, but Barbara had extended the invitation anyway, Felicia decided the invitation must be an ostensible one. In our corpus, the preparatory conditions were defective in 44 percent (32) of the insincere invitations, but in only 7 percent (5) of the genuine ones,  $F(1, 71) = 31.43, p < .001$ . In six of these insincere invitations, A knew B either had other plans B would be unlikely to break or didn't have the means to get to the event. In another 16, A knew B would have little interest in coming (just as Ross knew Cathy wouldn't want to go out with the guys). And in 10 others, A couldn't practically provide what had been offered.

Many everyday invitations are introduced by so-called preinvitations (Atkinson & Drew 1984; Levinson 1983) or leads (Wolfson 1981, 1989), as in Sherri's first utterance in this fragment of an example:

Sherri: Elaine, are you going to stay here and study?  
Elaine: Well, I wasn't planning to, but-  
Sherri: Do you want to come along?

Ordinarily, preinvitations (like, "Are you busy Thursday night?" or "What are you doing tonight?") are used to establish preparatory conditions favorable for making the invitation (like "Then would you like to go to a movie?"). Preinvitations were reported in 14 of the ostensible invitations and 7 of the genuine ones. In the genuine invitations, they were used in the ordinary way to establish a favorable condition for the invitation. But in the ostensible invitations, as in Sherri's, they seemed instead to establish unfavorable conditions - to highlight the fact that the person *was* busy at that time - and yet the invitation was issued anyway. That is, in these cases, A explicitly established that the preparatory conditions were likely to be defective.

2. *A invites B only after B has solicited the invitation.* B can solicit invitations in two ways: through the context or directly. To solicit an invita-

tion through the context, B can take advantage of the rule that, in this culture, it is considered impolite to exclude some members of a group. So B can ordinarily expect an invitation to an event when B becomes aware, as a bystander, that others are planning to attend the event. Assuming it isn't mutually understood why the person has been excluded, B can solicit an invitation by asking questions that highlight B's exclusion. In this example, a group of students in a dormitory were about to leave for a movie. Dan, standing nearby, heard the conversation but was not considered part of the group.

Peter: Guys, let's get going! We're gonna miss the preview before "Pee Wee's Big Adventure."

Dan: Where are you guys going? I mean, are you guys going somewhere?

Peter: Yeah, I'm going to University [Avenue] to check out the Pee Wee Herman flick.

Dan: Is everyone else going, too?

Peter: Well, not everyone. Paul, Phil, and Matt are.

Dan: I've heard it's great! I'd like to see it sometime. Anyway . . .

Peter: Well, uh, do you want to . . . uh, if *you* want to *you* can come. I mean it really doesn't matter.

B can also solicit an invitation directly. Invitations are usually extended when A can anticipate B's desires. But B can explicitly request an invitation when B believes that A can't or won't anticipate B's desires. In this example from our corpus, Joe, who is left-handed, was in his room playing the guitar with the door open. Cliff walked in and listened.

Cliff: That's cool, Joey. [Joe plays a while.] Is that a different guitar or did you just string it backwards for your left hand?

Joe: No, we just strung it backwards.

Cliff: Lemme try it. [He does.] Well, I'm taking flamenco guitar now, so my right-hand nails are longer for picking. This is weird trying to use them to hold down the strings.

Joe: Yeah.

Cliff: Well, Joey, you got some pretty good music up here. You ought to teach me sometime.

Joe: All right.

Cliff: Okay.

In our sample, 69 percent of the insincere invitations were issued when B overheard others talking about or preparing for an event, and 6 percent more were issued after an explicit request, for a total of 75 percent. Only 19 percent of the genuine invitations were solicited, and these were always solicited indirectly. The difference was reliable,  $F(1,71) = 52.99$ ,  $p < .001$ .

3. *A doesn't motivate the invitation beyond social courtesy.* If A wants B to accept A's invitation, A will usually give some reason, some inducement, to accept. This is especially important if the invitation is extended only after being solicited. A may justify the invitation by saying why B should accept or by elaborating on it to make it more attractive. In our sample, 82 percent of the insincere invitations were not motivated beyond social courtesy, which compared with only 47 percent of the genuine invitations,  $F(1,71) = 21.76$ ,  $p < .001$ .



## OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS

4. *A doesn't persist or insist on the invitation.* For genuine invitations, it is often polite for A to issue an invitation several times before B accepts. A might first issue a complete invitation; B might decline; A might give further reasons why B should accept; B might decline again; A might try a third time; and only then would B accept. So A can show B that the invitation is merely ostensible by accepting B's first polite declination and not giving B another chance to accept. In 39 of the insincere invitations, B hesitated or declined the first invitation and, on 32 of those times, A didn't issue a second one. But of the 23 times B refused a genuine invitation, A failed to pursue the invitation only 6 times, reliably less often than for insincere invitations, 82 percent to 26 percent of the time,  $F(1,60) = 26.71, p < .001$ .

5. *A is vague about arrangements.* A must specify the time and place of the event E that B is being invited to, unless they are established by the situation (Wolfson 1981, 1989). A common feature of insincere invitations is that A leaves such logistics vague. "Sometime" clearly is not sufficient to ensure that two people will be at the same place at the same time. If A offers no other arrangements, B has some reason to believe the invitation was insincere, and if the arrangements are clearly required, B should believe the invitation is ostensible. In our sample, arrangements were not specified by the context for 16 ostensible and 40 genuine invitations. (This discrepancy exists because so many of the ostensible invitations were invitations to "come along" to an event whose arrangements B had overheard.) A gave no further details in 11 of the 16 insincere invitations, as compared with only 3 of the 40 genuine invitations, 69 percent to 8 percent,  $F(1,54) = 37.27, p < .001$ .

6. *A hedges the invitation to B.* A can also show that her heart isn't really in it by hedging an invitation with expressions such as "well," "I guess," and "I mean." Note the hedges in the insincere invitation cited earlier, "*Well, uh, do you want to . . . uh, if you want you can come. I mean it really doesn't matter*" (italics added). Although our examples are recreated conversations and unlikely to be completely accurate, they should still capture people's intuitions about how insincere invitations ought to sound. We counted the times A was quoted as using the words "well," "I guess," "I mean," "maybe," or "if you want." There were one or more of these hedges in 42 percent of the insincere invitations, but in only 19 percent of the genuine ones,  $F(1,71) = 7.33, p < .008$ .

7. *A delivers the invitation with inappropriate cues.* People who are ambivalent might be expected to hesitate, avoid eye gaze, mumble, speak rapidly, and evince other nonverbal signs that they aren't fully committed to the invitation. In fact, insincere invitations were reconstructed with many of these features. For example, Peter's ostensible invitation, "Well, uh, do you

want to . . . uh, if you want to you can come," contains two uhs, one pause, and one repair. Using only those cues spontaneously mentioned by the students, we counted gaze avoidance, uhs, pauses, mumbling or rapid speech, inappropriate body posture, and inappropriate intonation as instances of inappropriate cues. There were one or more of these cues in 61 percent of the insincere invitations, but in only 1 percent of the genuine ones,  $F(1,71) = 42.60, p < .001$ .

These seven features, of course, aren't independent of each other. Making an event implausible and leaving the arrangements vague both work because the preparatory conditions for the invitation don't hold. Failing to motivate beyond social courtesy, failing to persist, and hedging all show A's lack of commitment to the invitation. And so does an inappropriate delivery. Once any of these features is defective, B has reason to suspect the invitation is insincere. If the defective feature seems obvious enough that A would have to expect that they would mutually recognize it, B has reason to believe the invitation is ostensible.

#### INTERPRETING OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS

A can use the techniques just noted to get B to see that the invitation is merely a pretense. But how does A expect B to work out the real purpose? The interpretation of ostensible invitations, we suggest, hangs crucially on three elements: (1) the expectable effects of an invitation on B, (2) the situation, and (3) A's choice of an ostensible invitation in that situation.

Most illocutionary acts lead to certain reactions in addressees. A warning may frighten B, a question may get B to provide certain information, and an order may get B to do what was ordered. These reactions are traditionally called *perlocutionary effects* or *perlocutions* (see Austin 1962; Davis 1979). Invitations have two expectable perlocutions:

- P1. B comes to believe that A wants B to attend event E.
- P2. B comes to feel that A likes or approves of B to an extent consistent with P1.

Suppose A invites B to dinner. Ordinarily, that will lead B to believe that A wants B to come to dinner and to feel that A likes or approves of B enough to want B to come to dinner.

With ostensible invitations, the situation generally makes P1 impossible. It gives B reason to believe that A doesn't really want B to attend event E. But whereas the situation blocks P1, it doesn't preclude P2. Suppose B wasn't able to accept A's invitation because of a prior engagement. Still, B should feel that A likes or approves of B enough to make the invitation. In fact, since there is always some chance B will take A up on the invitation, A shows enough sincerity to be willing to take that risk rather than taking the safer route of conveying the intentions explicitly. So when Ross invites Cathy with "Do you want to come?" the situation makes P1 unlikely – she doesn't be-

lieve he really wants her to go along. Yet the fact that he issued the invitation gives her reason to think he is still trying to elicit P<sub>2</sub>. She can feel that Ross likes her well enough to invite her, even if it meant he may actually have to follow up on it. In brief, with ostensible invitations, A generally arranges for P<sub>1</sub> to be blocked while allowing P<sub>2</sub> to stand.

But speakers can effect P<sub>2</sub> in other ways. Ross could have told Cathy, "I'd love for you to come along if things were different, but you shouldn't," or "I like you well enough to invite you along, but I don't really want you to come." With either utterance, Ross would have put it on record that he was trying to block P<sub>1</sub> and effect P<sub>2</sub>. Now, putting an issue on record has two consequences. First, it makes the issue the current topic of the discourse, and B is encouraged to take it up in B's next utterance. And second, A becomes publicly accountable for the issue. A cannot deny having taken a stand on it. So when Ross chose an ostensible invitation to block P<sub>1</sub> and effect P<sub>2</sub>, he kept these two issues off record. This way, neither of them became the current topic, and he couldn't be held accountable for them.

Why keep these two issues off record? Generally, it is to avoid hurting feelings. If Ross went on record that he didn't want Cathy to go along to Berkeley, that might threaten Cathy's self-esteem or face (Brown & Levinson 1978). It might be face-threatening for Ross to state publicly how much he likes Cathy. It is also clumsy for Cathy to deny being offended, because mentioning it at all presupposes it was a reasonable thing to feel. All this is much better left off record, and an ideal way for Ross to do this is via the ostensible invitation. Asserting P<sub>2</sub> should, of course, be face-threatening in a great many situations, and that should make ostensible invitations widely useful. Indeed, many of our invitations were extended when they were socially expected, where their absence would have offended the excluded member. Ostensible invitations seem patently designed as face-saving devices.

For most of our ostensible invitations, B felt pleased at the gesture, but it is also possible to feel hurt or insulted. In one example, Sharon invited her boyfriend's roommate, Norm, to dinner mostly to tease him for being so shy and studious. It was mutually known that it would be out of character for him to want to go, and Sharon drew on that defect to convey the ostensibility of her invitation. Yet instead of feeling welcomed, Norm, being shy and socially uncomfortable, may well feel hurt that she would flippantly issue an invitation that she so clearly wouldn't want to be taken up. In this case, P<sub>1</sub> and P<sub>2</sub> are quite different.

*P<sub>1</sub>'*. B comes to believe that A does not want B to attend event E.

*P<sub>2</sub>'*. B comes to feel that A dislikes or disapproves of B to an extent consistent with *P<sub>1</sub>'*.

Given Norm's reaction, and the fact that Sharon could have anticipated it, Sharon's choice of an ostensible invitation highlights her belief that he is socially inept.

In many of our examples, additional off-record implications emerge as a

consequence of  $P_2$  or  $P_2'$  in the particular circumstances. When Barbara invites Felicia knowing she won't want to come if Debbie is there, it is a natural consequence of  $P_2$  – that Barbara likes and approves of Felicia – that she also accepts her distaste for Debbie even if she doesn't share in it. This is the relevant issue, and conveying acceptance of Felicia also conveys acceptance of the reason she will decline. And when Sharon conveys  $P_2'$  – that she disapproves of Norm – she indicates she disapproves of his reason for declining, that is, his shy, studious nature. In some cases, then, a  $P_3$  or  $P_3'$  may emerge.

$P_3$ . B comes to feel A accepts or approves of the circumstance that makes the invitation defective.

$P_3'$ . B comes to feel A does not accept or approve of the circumstance that makes the invitation defective.

#### OSTENSIBLE SPEECH ACTS

Ostensible invitations are only one type of ostensible illocutionary act, which also includes ostensible apologies, offers, questions, assertions, compliments, congratulations, and others. These form a class because they all have the five properties shown in Table 1: pretense, mutual recognition, collusion, ambivalence, and off-record purpose. They differ in their characteristic purposes. Let us consider a few examples.

1. *Ostensible apologies.* Suppose an army officer orders a private to apologize to her for some minor infraction. When the private says, "I apologize," they may both know he is not truly sorry for the act. The purpose of the apology is to establish the private's respect for the officer's authority. The officer must collude by acknowledging the apology. And if asked, "Do you really mean it?" the private cannot truthfully say "yes" but he also can't say "no" without undercutting his intention of showing respect for the authority structure.

2. *Ostensible questions and assertions.* Greetings are often achieved in part via ostensible questions and answers about health. Consider this exchange from the beginning of a face-to-face conversation (from Svartvik & Quirk 1980):<sup>4</sup>

A: \*good morning\*

B: \*good morning Miss\* Detch how are you

A: \*\*fine thank you\*\*

B: \*\*would you like to\*\* take the comfortable chair

When B asks, "How are you" and A answers, "Fine thank you," B is only ostensibly asking about A's health and A is only ostensibly reporting on it. This is corroborated in several ways. First, B doesn't even wait for A's answer ("fine thank you") before starting in on his offer "Would you like to

take the comfortable chair." He isn't genuinely interested in her answer and doesn't even expect her to give one. Second, A says not just "fine" but "thank you." She explicitly recognizes B's off-record intention to show appreciation. So if B were asked, "Do you really mean that?" for his question, he couldn't sincerely say either "yes" or "no." The off-record purpose of exchanges like A and B's is to acknowledge each other, show appreciation for each other, establish their willingness to talk, establish their status relations, and so on (Brown & Levinson 1978; Sacks 1975).

Certain illocutionary acts in singles bars seem to be ostensible, too. Opening lines such as "Do you come here often?" or "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" are often not asked seriously. Rarely does the speaker A genuinely want to know the answer or believe she has met the addressee B before. These questions are mutually recognized for the pretenses they are. They are ways by which A can broach off record whether B is willing to enter into an interaction with her. If Karen asks Mike, "Haven't we met before" and he answers bluntly, "No, we haven't," his reply is intended not to inform her, but to indicate off record that he isn't interested. Karen doesn't truthfully want to know if they have met before, yet she does want to know whether he wants to meet her now.

Ostensible speech acts in such conversations aren't limited to the opening lines. Two people may speak ostensibly about topics as a way of negotiating a sexual encounter. Suppose Will and Susan are discussing their astrological signs. Will might say, "You must be a Scorpio because you seem mysterious and exciting and willing to take risks," to which Susan might reply, "I like taking risks when there's something worth taking a risk for." Will doesn't necessarily believe Susan is a Scorpio, and she may or may not like taking risks. But they use this pretense to challenge each other to prove they're worth taking a chance on. The point is, the two of them mutually believe they recognize the pretense. Also, Will exhibits an ambivalence. He cannot truthfully say he believes she is a Scorpio, yet he can't really say he doesn't think so. Susan colludes by responding in line with his pretense to show that she recognizes it. If she calls him on it with "You don't know anything about me" or even "get lost!" he is left with his remark exposed as insincere or else he can try to convince her he was sincere. And off record, Will is trying to find out whether she has these qualities.

3. *Ostensible compliments.* Just before Lance goes on a date, he asks his friend Janice, "How do I look?" Without particularly liking his outfit, she replies, "You look terrific." Since this is the socially appropriate answer, both take it as a pretense. If Lance wanted to know Janice's true feelings, he would have to ask, "Are you sure? Tell me the truth." Janice is ambivalent about her compliment. She doesn't really think he looks terrific, but she does want him to feel good, which is the point of her compliment. Lance must col-

lude by acknowledging the compliment, as with “Thanks,” or else the pretense is destroyed. Off record, Janice conveys her support and confidence in him without having to make the issue explicit.

4. *Ostensible congratulations.* Suppose Eric and Chris, two serious but friendly rivals, competed in a race and Eric won. Suppose that after the race, Chris congratulates Eric. Since congratulations indicate gladness for the recipient (Bach & Harnish 1979), they will mutually understand that the gesture is a pretense. Chris is ambivalent because he isn’t entirely glad Eric won over him, but he still feels happy for Eric as his friend, independent of how it affects him. Eric must collude by accepting the congratulations or risk offending Chris and appearing ungracious. Off record, Chris conveys his respect for Eric’s ability and demonstrates that he is not resentful.

Many illocutionary acts, therefore, appear to be ostensible. They are mutually recognized as a pretense; they require collusion; speakers cannot truthfully and publicly admit to either believing or not believing what they have said; and they are done for off-record purposes. Many of these ostensible speech acts, indeed, are types of rituals, or gestures, that are used for politeness just as ostensible invitations are used. Greetings, invitations, offers, and apologies are often conventionalized interactions, which seems to facilitate collusion. If a ritual is initiated in a patently defective situation, the participants, recognizing it as ostensible, are encouraged to play their parts and collude in the pretense.

#### NONSERIOUS LANGUAGE USE

Ostensible speech acts are what Goffman (1974) called a nonserious use of language, making them akin to irony, sarcasm, facetiousness, teasing, play acting, and others. It is easy to describe their relation to these other types of nonserious language with the five features listed in Table 1. All nonserious uses of language are forms of mutually recognized pretense (properties 1 and 2), and many of them countenance collusion and have off-record purposes (properties 3 and 5). But only ostensible speech acts have what we have called ambivalence (property 4). Let us see how.

Play acting is one nonserious use of spoken language. When Gielgud and Evans played Hamlet and Ophelia on stage, they were openly pretending to speak and behave as if they were Hamlet and Ophelia. When Gielgud uttered, “Get thee to a nunnery,” he wasn’t asking Evans to leave. He was engaging in the pretense that he was Hamlet asking Ophelia to leave. The pretense was mutually believed to be recognized not just by him and Evans, but by the two of them and the audience, who were themselves engaging in the pretense that Gielgud and Evans were Hamlet and Ophelia. Play acting clearly has properties 1 and 2. The audience, however, doesn’t really collude

with the two actors, nor do the actors have off-record purposes toward the audience. So play acting just as clearly lacks properties 3 and 5. It also lacks ambivalence.

Irony is another form of mutually recognized pretense (Clark & Gerrig 1984; Fowler 1965; Grice 1978; pace Sperber & Wilson 1981, 1986). Take this example of irony in a recorded telephone conversation. Paul has just made a half-serious claim and Julie has playfully attacked it on several fronts. After her final argument, Paul says:

Paul: Weeeell, yeah but.

Julie: "Yeah but." That's a good argument. You oughta try that when you're giving a talk. ehehh

Paul: Huhuh. And it'll work, too. heheheheh

According to the analysis offered by Clark and Gerrig (1984), Julie is openly pretending to be a naive person praising an obviously unconvincing argument and recommending to another naive person that he use it in an academic setting. But she expects Paul to recognize the pretense and to see that she is making fun, say, of a person who would be convinced by such a flimsy argument. Indeed, the recognition must be mutual. If it isn't, the irony is faulty. So irony involves a mutually recognized pretense (properties 1 and 2) and has an off-record purpose (property 5). Here, it is to indicate that Julie doesn't even buy the half of the argument Paul is taking seriously. The addressee may or may not collude on the pretense (property 3). In this case, Paul did by asserting, "And it'll work, too." But irony does not have the property we have called ambivalence (property 4). If asked, "Do you really mean it." Julie would have no qualms about saying "No, of course not." This is also true of sarcasm and facetiousness.

Teasing is another case of mutually recognized pretense. In the following example, Rick Berglund and Lynn had sent each other a series of electronic mail messages, and now they were on the telephone trying to establish which was the last one they mutually knew about.

Lynn: Why didn't you call me earlier? . . . Or send me a message, or something.

Rick: I assumed that i- i- I mean I was the one that sent the last message here.

Lynn: No. You di- you weren't. But I I didn't realize that until later. It got returned cause I sent it to Berglung. Hhhhhehh.

Rick: Oh G(hahah)od. Huhuhuh. Why did you send it to him?

Lynn: Eheheh. Cause I was in a rush.

Rick: Ehehehehhh.

Rick teased Lynn for making the typo Berglung in the address of her message, and Lynn recognized this, as shown by her laugh. She responded by pretending to take him seriously with a "po-faced receipt" of the tease (Drew 1987). She actually answered why she sent the message to Berglung even though she knew he didn't think she did it on purpose.

As the example illustrates, teasing has properties 1, 2, and 5, and sometimes 3. Rick was pretending to ask Lynn why she sent a message to a nonex-

istent person, and his pretense was mutually recognized. She went along with the pretense, appearing to take it seriously. And, finally, Rick's main purpose was to make fun of Lynn's ineptitude. If, however, Rick were asked, "Do you really mean it?" he should be willing to admit, "No, I don't."

In summary, ostensible speech acts are a type of nonserious language use – a form of mutually recognized pretense – that also includes play acting, irony, sarcasm, facetiousness, and teasing. They differ from the rest in what we have called ambivalence. When asked "Do you really mean it?" the speaker cannot wholeheartedly answer either "yes" or "no." Ostensible invitations are just one example of this type of speech act. There are also ostensible apologies, ostensible assertions, ostensible questions, ostensible compliments, and probably others. Nonserious language use is common enough in ordinary discourse that no theory of language use can be complete without an account of it.

## NOTES

1. We thank Susan E. Brennan, Eve V. Clark, Dell Hymes, and Michael F. Schober for suggestions on the manuscript. The research was supported in part by a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship and by Grant BNS 87-09812 from the National Science Foundation.
2. So-called nonserious language use has been explicitly or tacitly excluded from most philosophical, linguistic, and psychological accounts of language. In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin (1962) said, "Language in such circumstances [e.g., play acting, practice] is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use . . . All this we are *excluding* from consideration" (Austin's emphases, 22). Austin's descendants, with few exceptions, have followed suit.
3. All dialogues are taken from our corpus unless otherwise noted.
4. Adjacent pairs of asterisks indicate overlapping speech.

## REFERENCES

- Atkinson, J.M., & Drew, P. (1984). *Order in court: The organization of verbal interaction in judicial settings*. London: Macmillan.
- Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bach, K., & Harnish, R.M. (1979). *Linguistic communication and speech acts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. Goody (ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 56–311.
- Clark, H.H., & Gerrig, R.J. (1984). On the pretense theory of irony. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 113:121–26.
- David, S. (1979). Perlocutions. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 3:225–243.
- Drew, P. (1987). Po-faced receipts of teases. *Linguistics* 25:219–53.
- Fowler, H.W. (1965). *A dictionary of modern English usage*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Grice, H.P. (1978). Some further notes on logic and conversation. In P. Cole (ed.), *Syntax and semantics 9: Pragmatics*. New York: Academic. 113–127.
- Hjelmquist, E., & Gidlund, A. (1985). Free recall of conversation. *Text* 5:169–85.
- Levinson, S.C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS

- Ross, M., & Sicol, F. (1979). Egocentric biases in availability and attribution. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37:322-36.
- Sacks, H. (1975). Everyone has to lie. In M. Sanches & B. Blount (eds.), *Sociocultural dimensions of language use*. New York: Academic. 57-80.
- Searle, J.R. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1975). Indirect speech acts. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (eds.). *Syntax and semantics, Vol. 3: Speech acts*. New York: Seminar. 59-82.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1981). Irony and the use-mention distinction. In P. Cole (ed.), *Radical pragmatics*. New York: Academic. 295-318.
- Svartvik, J., & Quirk, R. (1980). *A corpus of English conversation*. Lund, Sweden: Gleerup.
- Wolfson, N. (1981). Invitations, compliments, and the competence of the native speaker. *International Journal of Psycholinguistics* 24:7-22.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1989). *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. Cambridge, MA: Newbury House.

APPENDIX

*Number of occurrences of seven features in genuine and ostensible invitations (A invites B to event E)*

Feature	Course		Interviews		Totals	
	Genuine	Ostensible	Genuine	Ostensible	Genuine	Ostensible
1. A makes event E implausible	4	25	1	7	5	32
a. B can't come	1	4	1	2	2	6
b. B isn't interested	3	12	0	4	3	16
c. A can't provide	0	9	0	1	0	10
A makes E plausible	48	27	19	13	67	40
2. B solicits invitation	9	42	5	12	14	54
a. By context	6	25	1	5	7	30
b. Indirectly	3	14	4	6	7	20
c. Directly	0	3	0	1	0	4
B doesn't solicit invitation	43	10	15	8	58	18
3. A doesn't motivate invitation	24	43	10	16	34	59
A motivates invitation	28	9	10	4	38	13
4. B hesitates or refuses	19	32	4	7	23	39
a. A doesn't persist	4	28	2	4	6	32
b. A does persist	15	4	2	3	17	7
5. A makes arrangements	28	8	12	8	40	16
a. A leaves arrangements vague	2	7	1	4	3	11
b. A makes arrangements specific	26	1	11	4	37	5
6. A hedges invitation	8	30	6	9	14	39
a. "Well"	4	9	6	7	10	16
b. "I guess"/"I mean"/"maybe"	0	7	0	2	0	9
c. "If you want"	4	14	0	2	4	16
7. A uses inappropriate cues	0	31	1	3	1	34
a. Gaze avoidance	0	1	0	0	0	1
b. Pausing	0	18	1	3	1	21
c. Mumbling	0	3	0	0	0	3
d. Posture	0	2	0	0	0	2
e. Intonation	0	7	0	0	0	7