An event semantic analysis of performative utterances

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In my talk, I will consider performative utterances like in (1).

(1) I (hereby) promise to bring beer.

Recent authors in philosophy propose to derive main characteristics of performative utterances like (1) from their self-referentiality (Jary 2007). It is an attractive feature of the analysis that it can explain the non-deniability of performatives and the non-appropriateness of true/false as epistemic categories.

However, Jary, echoing Bach and Harnish (1992), claims that self-referentiality can not possibly be derived from the semantic content of performative utterances. In my talk, I will falsify this position by proposing an event-semantic account of self-referentiality. The basic account allows to derive a range of elementary observations about explicit performatives like the syntactic position(s) for *hereby*, the effect of third person subjects in performative utterances, and the relation between performative and assertive uses of sentences like (1). Already in this range of data, the proposed analysis is demonstrably suberior to Jary (2007). In a second part, I will explore the potential of the approach in a wider set of data and demonstrate that the analysis does justice to minimal pairs like the following as well as marked attempts to deny acts like in (3).

(2) a. Most students hereby promise to never drink beer again. (performative use possible)
(2) b. Most students promise to never drink beer again.   (only as an assertion)

(3) # I hereby don't promise anything.

(2.a) marginally allows a performative use; e.g. if a representative of the studends announces a common vow to never drink. In such uses, we understand a specific reading for "most students" = a certain group of students who cover a majority of all students. The minimal contrasting (2.b) does not allow a performative use, it can only be used to describe a promise that has been established independently of the utterance. I will derive such subtle differences from the different ways in which the event argument of the matrix verb *promise* is instantiated in (2.a) and (2.b).
The analysis not only shows that an analysis of self-referentiality in terms of truth conditional semantics possible but even brings new data into focus and offers a coherent analysis for a wide range of observations.

Bach, Kent + Robert M. Harnish. 1992. How performatives really work. A reply to Searle. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 15: 93 - 110.
Jary, Mark. 2007. Are explicit performatives assertions? *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30: 207 - 234.