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## **Constructing witches and spells: Speech acts and activity types in Early Modern England**

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### **1. Introduction**

In this paper we consider speech act verbs in texts relating to the witch-hunt in Early Modern England. In particular, our aims are:

- to highlight the centrality of verbs referring to verbal activities in narratives of witchcraft in the Early Modern English period;
- to compare the meaning/speech act values of verbs relating to curses in witchcraft texts (notably *to curse*, *to wish ... that*, *to wish harm/evil*) with their main meanings/speech act values today;
- to show how the change in meaning of these verbs can only be adequately accounted for in terms of pragmatics, and particularly in terms of Speech Act Theory and Levinson's notion of activity type;
- to highlight some of the consequences that historical analysis has for current frameworks within pragmatics.

Our data covers the period 1593 to 1664 and is drawn from two types of texts: a) two learned treatises containing narratives of witchcraft events, and b) three sets of courtroom witness depositions (cf. bibliography).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Historical background

The period of the witch hunt in Europe spans a period that goes from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. The number of executions started soaring particularly after 1484, when a Papal Bull sanctioned as doctrine of the Catholic Church the existence of witchcraft, its basis on the pact with the Devil, and its status as heresy. In 1468 the Pope declared witchcraft *crimen exceptum*, thereby relaxing the criteria for the acceptance of evidence in court and removing any restriction on the use of torture during interrogations (Larner 1984: 44; Trevor-Roper 1967: 118). This gave new impetus and scope to the activities of the Inquisition, who were in charge of witchcraft prosecutions in Continental Europe, and who sentenced to death by fire tens of thousands of presumed witches (Barber 1979: 17).

As far as the phenomenon of witchcraft is concerned, England needs to be set apart from the rest of Europe (as well as from Scotland). The presence of an independent Church meant that the Pope's influence was limited, and, more importantly, that England had no Roman Law and no Inquisition. Probably as a consequence of all this, the witch hunt only started in England in the second half of the sixteenth century, and began to decline about one hundred years later. After an initial period when witches could be tried in both ecclesiastical and state courts, witchcraft prosecutions were dealt with exclusively by state tribunals, since ecclesiastical ones were dismissed as too lenient (MacFarlane 1970: 68, Notestein 1965: 30-1). Contrary to what happened on the Continent, the crime with which witches were initially charged was that of *maleficium*, i.e. causing harm to others by means of witchcraft, rather than the practice of witchcraft itself. More specifically, up until 1604 capital punishment applied only in cases of alleged murder by witchcraft. This changed under the reign of James I. James believed he had been the target of a witchcraft plot in 1590 (when he was James VI of Scotland), and was himself the author of a treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie*, which appeared in 1597 (Barber 1979: 5-6, Larner 1984: 8ff.). During his English reign, in 1604, a new Act extended the applicability of the death sentence to the conjuring of evil spirits, i.e. the practice of witchcraft itself (Barber 1979: 3-5, MacFarlane 1970: 14-15, Thomas 1971: 442-3). Some historians argue, however, that the accusation of witchcraft alone was seldom

the only reason for executions (e.g. Thomas 1971: 443), and point out that the number of sentences for witchcraft started to decline well before 1736, when witchcraft ceased to be a statutory offence (Thomas 1971: 459).

Due to England's independence from the Church of Rome, torture was never legal in the interrogation of witchcraft suspects, and condemned witches were hanged rather than burned. The pact with Satan figures less prominently in confessions and legal records than on the Continent, and there is little evidence of group practices such as the witches' sabbath (Harrison 1929: 8, Thomas 1971: 444). Nevertheless, witchcraft was treated as a special type of crime in England too, and, once an accusation had been made, it was almost impossible for suspects to prove their innocence. A whole range of phenomena counted as proof of witchcraft, including the ability to float in water, the presence on the suspect's body of a mark from which the Devil sucked blood, fondness for small animals (which could be the embodiment of evil spirits), giving a confession or refusing to confess (Thomas 1971: 551). It needs to be born in mind that, although torture was not legal as such, it was common practice to keep suspects awake for several days and nights in order to force them to confess (Thomas 1971: 517). In addition, there were practically no restrictions on who could testify in witchcraft trials. Acceptable witnesses included children and the relatives of the accusers themselves (Barber 1979: 10, Ewen 1929: 118).

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that, although the English witch hunt occurred on a smaller scale than in the rest of Europe, the death toll is estimated to be over 1,000 victims - for the vast majority women, old and poor (Thomas 1971: 450). Although in most cases English witches were prosecuted as single individuals, there were a few instances of witchcraft 'outbreaks', where a number of related cases were taken to court together or within a short period of time. The most notable cases occurred in Essex in 1582, in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk in 1645-7, and in Lancashire in 1612 and 1633 (Thomas 1971: 451). Historians disagree as to what might have caused the surge of the witch hunt in England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, especially considering that the beliefs on which witchcraft was based had a very long history. Some blame it on the doctrine of the Satanic pact which spread from Continental Europe (see Thomas 1971: 456); others attribute it to increasing tensions in rural villages, resulting from the rise of a more individualistic commercial economy (MacFarlane 1970: 197); still others trace it to the fact that the Reformation had undermined the validity of traditional defences and remedies against black magic (such as holy water and the sign of the cross), so that the prosecution and execution of presumed witches became the only sure way of eliminating the threat they were believed to pose (Thomas 1971: 493 ff.). There is also disagreement as to whether the impetus for legal

prosecutions was imposed from above by the judiciary and the intellectual/ruling classes (Larner 1984, Notestein 1965), or came from below as an expression of the needs of the general population (Thomas 1971: 458 ff.).

There is little dispute, however, on two aspects of the witch hunt which are relevant to this paper: firstly, that the whole phenomenon was based on the belief that the words of certain people in certain circumstances had the power to harm others, and secondly that the triggers for most witchcraft accusations in England are to be found in the daily lives of rural village communities. It is to these aspects that we turn to next.

### 3. Witches and witches' curses

The narratives of witchcraft episodes contained in our data provide a vivid picture of the circumstances which gave rise to witchcraft accusations in Early Modern England. Below are three typical examples from the witness depositions relating to the prosecution of the Pendle witches in Lancashire in 1612:

- [1] The said Examinee vpon her oath saith, that vpon a time the said Isabel Robey asked her milke, and shee denied to giue her any : And afterwards shee met the said Isabel, whereupon this Examinee waxed afraid of her, and was then presently sick, and so pained that shee could not stand, and the next day after this Examinee going to Warrington, was suddenly pinched on her Thigh as shee thought, with foure fingers & a Thumbe twice together, and thereupon was sicke, in so much as shee could not get home but on horse-backe, yet soone after shee did mend. (*Pendle witches*, 1612, p.157)
- [2] And hee further saith, That in Lent last one Iohn Duckworth of the Lawnde, promised this Examinee an old shirt : and within a fortnight after, this Examinee went to the said Duckworthes house, and demanded the said old shirt ; but the said Duckworth denied him thereof. And going out of the said house, the said Spirit Dandy appeared vnto this Examinee, and said, Thou didst touch the said Duckworth ; whereunto this Examinee answered, he did not touch him : yes (said the Spirit againe) thou didst touch him, and therefore I haue power of him : whereupon this Examinee ioyned with the said Spirit, and then wished the said Spirit to kill the said Duckworth : and within one weeke, then next after, Duckworth died. (*Pendle witches*, 1612, p.68-9)

- [3] And she this Examine further saith, That about six or seven yeares agoe, the said *Chattox* did fall out with one *Hugh Moore* of Pendle, as aforesaid, about certaine cattell of the said *Moore*s, which the said *Moore* did charge the said *Chattox* to haue bewitched: for which the said *Chattox* did curse and worry the said *Moore*, and said she would be reuenged of the said *Moore*: whereupon the said *Moore* presently fell sicke, and languished about halfe a yeare, and then died. Which *Moore* vpon his death-bed said, that the said *Chattox* had bewitched him to death. (*Pendle witches*, 1612, p.47)

As these examples show, a striking feature of witchcraft narratives is that the type of activity in which participants were most frequently involved was verbal in nature. The ‘plots’ of these stories are punctuated by verbs indicating speech acts or verbal activities, such as *ask*, *deny*, *beg*, *charge*, *fall out*, *curse* and *wish*. Witchcraft events were usually triggered by an argument between the supposed witch and a neighbour over fairly trivial matters, such as the borrowing of food, utensils or money, the ownership of farm animals, or a previous exchange of insults between the members of their families (MacFarlane 1970: 173-4, Thomas 1871: 547, 554). In some cases, as in the third example, an informal accusation of witchcraft paradoxically led to an argument on which the formal accusation was eventually based (see Thomas 1971: 526). The argument then typically leads to a situation in which the participant who feels to have been somehow wronged utters words which were (immediately or subsequently) interpreted as a curse - an act of witchcraft.

Not everybody, however, was equally vulnerable to the accusation of using witchcraft to take revenge on their neighbours. Our data confirms the unanimous claim of historians and commentators that those accused of witchcraft in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mostly conformed to a very specific stereotype. Typically, the ‘witch’ was a woman; she was older and poorer than the ‘victim’, led a relatively marginalised life, often relied on begging for her daily subsistence and had a reputation for moaning and grumbling (Barber 1979: 8-9; Figs 1978: 61; Harrison 1929: 8, 12; MacFarlane 1970: 150, 159ff., 172; Thomas 1971: 509). In England witches were also believed to entertain evil spirits (imps) in the forms of small animals, such as dogs, cats, or toads (Barber 1979: 10, Ewen 1929: 72, Thomas 1971: 525). When someone resembling this description reacted angrily to some wrong she had suffered from a better off neighbour, her words could be interpreted as a witch’s curse and be subsequently used against her in court. Historians largely agree that in some cases the utterance in question was indeed intended as a malevolent curse aimed at harming others, while in other cases a simple expression of anger was *interpreted* as an act of witchcraft by

the addressee and by the court in which the speaker was tried (Barber 1979: 13, Thomas 1971: 523). As MacFarlane puts it:

What seems clear is that it was not the content of the remark which mattered, but rather the context in which it was spoken and the interpretation put on it. (MacFarlane 1970: 172)

The verbs most frequently used in witchcraft narratives to refer to this central speech act are *to curse* and *to wish ... that* or *to wish harm/evil*. *To curse* is used in example (3) above and *to wish* in example (2) Further examples are given below:

- [4] Goody Smith Hen. Sanford wit. after 3 nights watchinge. She confessed to him y<sup>l</sup> she had cursed 2 childeren of Parkers and that they languished immediatly an did giue the~ apples and wish they might doe him hurt and died w<sup>th</sup>:in one quarter of a yeare (*Suffolk Witches*, 1645, p. 293)
- [5] The first who tasted of the gall of her bitterness was *John Orkton* [. . .] who [. . .] happened for some misdemeanors committed by him to strike the sonne of this *Mary Smith* [. . .] who hearing his complaint, cam foorth into the street cursing and banning him therefore [. . .] and wished in the most earnest and bittern manner, that his fingers might rotte off; (Roberts, 1616, p. 48)
- [6] Further that wished her cosen Hobart harme and he fell lame and so continued till he died w<sup>ch</sup> was w<sup>th</sup>:in 3 days after she was questioned. (*Suffolk Witches*, 1645, p. 293)

Clearly, the meaning of *to curse* and *to wish* in the witchcraft context is different from their main meaning today, as can be seen from the following example of *to curse* from the British National Corpus (BNC):

- [7] I looked out of the wind-shaken carriage, where people were moaning and cursing and making vows to start going by bus

Today, *to curse* mostly refers to the expression of anger or frustration, which may or may not be directed against another person (see also the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* 1987). When it is, the speaker expresses the desire that something negative happens to the target, but often not entirely in earnest, as in the following example from the BNC:

- [8] For about the hundredth time I cursed whatever kleptomaniac curmudgeon had walked off the train with my bag. “May the scarf unravel and do an Isadora Duncan on the wretch.”

*To wish (that)* can also be used as a speech act verb in this latter sense, as in the following example, also from the BNC:

- [9] But there was also a growing disaffection among the younger poets and critics: he had ceased to be a poet and had become an institution, and the only thing to do with an institution is to attempt to pull it down. He was compared with Aristides the Just, and there were those who wished a similar fate for him.

In the Early Modern English period, it was also possible, as we will show later, to use the verbs *to curse* and *to wish* in the ‘modern’ sense of simply expressing a desire that something negative happens to the target. In the witchcraft context, however, these verbs were used to refer to a speech act which was believed to result inevitably in some misfortune falling on the target. This was due to a set of beliefs where the words of particular people in particular circumstances had the power to harm others. Many scholars see in this fact a fundamental premise to the existence of witchcraft and the witch hunt.

Witchcraft beliefs in fact presuppose a world in which the thoughts and words of one person are believed to have the power to damage another. (MacFarlane 1970: 201)

The act, in witchcraft, is the word [...] Now witchcraft is spoken words; but these spoken words are power, and not knowledge or information. (Favret-Saada 1980: 9)

The possession of a powerful and effective word is often highlighted as the essential characteristic of witch.

She has the power of words, to defend herself or to curse. (Larner 1984: 84)

In Early Modern England, this power was attributed specifically to those who had suffered a wrong and had no other means of redress:

It was a moral necessity that the poor and injured should be believed to have this power of retaliation when all else had failed. (Thomas 1971: 507)

Added to this was the idea of the pact with Satan, which transformed anything that came out of the mouths of alleged witches into a manifestation of the power of the devil. Even if in England the continental idea of the pact was

never deeply rooted, the faith in the presence of evil in the words of the witch remains a very important factor.

Once someone's behaviour was interpreted as an act of witchcraft, any misfortune could be identified as the realisation of the curse, from the death or illness of people or animals, to the inability to make butter, cheese or beer (Barber 1979: 11-12; Thomas 1971: 436-7). Indeed, it was sometimes only in retrospect that a particular utterance was reinterpreted as a curse, usually in order to reject the possibility that a misfortune was caused by divine punishment (MacFarlane 1970: 192 ff.; Thomas 1971: 512) or to find an explanation for otherwise unexplainable events (Thomas 1971: 535 ff.).

In the rest of this paper we will focus specifically on the difference between the meaning of the verbs *to curse* and *to wish* in the witchcraft context and their main meanings today. We will compare different ways of accounting for this change drawing from different pragmatic theories.

#### 4. The witches' curse and semantic/pragmatic change

In their discussion of curses in Anglo-Saxon legal documents, Danet and Bogoch (1992) make a distinction between 'serious' and 'ludic' curses. The former captures those cases where the speaker believes in the power of his or her words and intends to cause harm by uttering them. This is indeed the meaning that is attributed to alleged witches' utterances when the verbs *to curse* and *to wish* are used in our data (whether or not those utterances were intended by the speaker as serious curses is another matter). Ludic curses, on the other hand, are 'uttered only in jest, or as an expression of anger or frustration', as is the case in our modern examples (Danet and Bogoch 1992: 135). Turning to pragmatic theory, the difference between the dominant current meaning of verbs such as *to curse* and *to wish* and their meaning in the period of the witch hunt can be expressed, first of all, in terms of various classifications developed within Speech Act Theory.

In his pioneering classification of names of illocutionary forces, Austin (1962) explicitly mentions *to curse* and *to wish*, and places both verbs within the category of 'behabitives', alongside verbs such as *apologize*, *thank* and *congratulate*. Behabitives are defined as follows:

Behabitives include the notion of reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes, and of attitudes and expression of attitudes to someone's past conduct or imminent conduct. (Austin 1962: 159)

This clearly captures the fact that in current usage these verbs do express reactions, attitudes and moods, and therefore fall within the area of 'social

behaviour', as Austin points out (Austin 1962: 151). The same cannot be said, however, of the meaning of *to curse*, and *to wish* in our witchcraft narratives. Whatever the actual intention of the alleged 'witch', the action performed by her utterance is interpreted as much more than a simple expression of her reactions or feelings: through her words she is believed to create the conditions in which a specific negative event must necessarily befall the person against whom the curse is pronounced. This use of the verbs in question cannot satisfactorily be accounted for within Austin's framework. As Searle (1979: 17) points out, this is due to the fact that, after abandoning his early distinction between constatives and performatives, Austin was left with a classification that could not fully do justice to speech acts that cause (or are believed to cause) a change in the world, such as appointing, marrying, and in our case, cursing. For want of a better category, one could argue that the verbs referring to witches' curses fall under the category of exercitives, which Austin defines as follows:

Exercitives are the exercising of powers, rights or influence. (Austin 1962: 150)

An exercitive is the giving of a decision in favour or against a certain course of action or advocacy of it. It is a decision that something is to be so, as distinct from a judgement that it is so: it is advocacy that it should be so, as opposed to an estimate that it is so; it is an award as opposed to an assessment; it is a sentence as opposed to a verdict. (Austin 1962: 154)

Indeed, Austin includes under exercitives the verb *excommunicate*, which is very similar in terms of illocutionary force to the witchcraft use of *curse* and *wish*. On the other hand, exercitives appear to be a rather miscellaneous category, which does not fully capture the essence of the speech act attributed to the witch.

Searle's (1979) model, which was intended to build on and extend Austin's classification, is better able to account for the issues we are concerned with. Verbs referring to cursing in today's world would fall under the category of 'expressives', which is very similar to Austin's behabitives. On the other hand, verbs referring to witches' curses in our data can be placed under the class of 'declarations', which includes verbs such as *resign*, *appoint*, *marry*, *excommunicate* (see also Danet and Bogoch 1992: 136-7). Declarations are defined as follows:

Declarations bring about some alteration in the status or condition of the referred to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed. (Searle 1979: 17)

It is the defining characteristic of this class that the successful performance of one of its members brings about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality, successful performance guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world. (Searle 1979: 16-7)

In our case the emphasis on propositional content is actually superfluous, since it was not necessary for the witch to explicitly invoke a particular kind of misfortune in order for her utterance to be interpreted as a curse.

In his discussion of declarations, Searle stresses that they normally depend on the existence of extra-linguistic institutions within which the addresser and addressee occupy specific roles. In other words, in the prevailing belief system of today (or today's Western world), a person's word acquires the power to change the world only in virtue of the position that person occupies within an institution (a company, a church, a judicial system, and so on) (Searle 1979: 18). Interestingly, Searle mentions two exceptions, one of which is 'supernatural declarations' (1979: 18). Searle's own example is the point where God in the Bible says 'Let there be light', and creates light by means of his utterance. Similarly, it can be argued that the witches' curses are declarations that do not depend on an institution as such, but on the belief that particular people's words have become powerful due to a supernatural alliance, namely their pact with the devil. We will stress below, however, that the institution of the judiciary played a crucial role, during the witch hunt, in supporting the belief that the words of certain people possessed supernatural power, and in sanctioning the interpretation of certain utterances as witches' curses.

Within Searle's framework, expressives (modern curses) and declarations (witches' curses), also differ in terms of what he calls the 'direction of fit between words and the world' (Searle 1979: 3). So, for example, part of the point of an assertion is that the words (or, to be more precise, the propositional content) match some aspect of the world, while the point of a request is to get the world to match the words. In the case of expressives, Searle argues,

there is no direction of fit. In performing an expressive, the speaker is neither trying to get the world to match the words nor the words to match the world; rather, the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed. (1979: 15)

In the case of declarations, on the other hand, the direction of fit is both ways (Searle 1979: 19): the words are supposed to match some aspect of the world (in our case the speaker's attitude towards the addressee), but they also have the power to change the world in some respect or other (in our case the course of the addressee's future life).

Building on both Austin (1962) and Searle (1979), Bach and Harnish (1979) proposed a third influential classification of illocutionary acts (rather than *verbs* referring to illocutionary acts). They draw a basic distinction between communicative and conventional illocutionary acts. The difference between the two lies in the fact that communicative illocutionary acts ‘succeed by means of recognition of an intention’ (e.g. promising or warning), ‘whereas conventional ones succeed by satisfying a convention’ (e.g. marrying a couple or sentencing someone in court) (Bach and Harnish 1979: 110).

Within this model, ‘cursing’ as an illocutionary act falls under the communicative category of ‘acknowledgements’, which Bach and Harnish explicitly relate to the central members of Austin’s class of behabitives. In particular, the illocutionary act of cursing in the modern world is placed under the ‘bid’ group, which includes verbs such as *bid* and *wish*, and which captures the expression of hope that something good or bad happens to hearer. More specifically, Bach and Harnish point out that:

Similar to congratulations and condolences are biddings or (expressing) wishes, which may be negative, as in the case of curses. (Bach and Harnish 1979: 54)

In the witchcraft context, however, suspects are not simply accused of hoping that something will happen, but of making it happen. This takes us to Bach and Harnish’s category of ‘conventional’ illocutionary acts, which they say correspond to Searle’s declarations. Bach and Harnish emphasise that their notion of conventions relates to

actions which *if* done in certain situations, count as something else. In other words, a convention is a mutually recognised means for doing something, counting as such only because mutually recognised, perhaps by being agreed upon. (Bach and Harnish 1979: 109)

Conventions, they argue, depend on the shared beliefs within a community or group that certain acts in certain circumstances count as doing particular things. This emphasis on mutual beliefs within a community is clearly appropriate to the phenomenon of witchcraft, which depended on a widely shared belief that some people’s utterances had supernatural powers.

Within the category of conventional illocutionary acts, the witches’ curses could be subsumed under the sub-category of ‘effectives’, which are defined as ‘utterances that, when issued by the right person under the right circumstances, make it the case that such and such’ (Bach and Harnish 1979: 113). Rather like Searle, however, Bach and Harnish link conventional illocutionary acts, and effectives in particular, to institutions and institutional practices (their examples include vetoing, consecrating, graduating (a student), and so on). On the other hand, they usefully point out that it is possible for

certain individual illocutionary acts to count both as a communicative and a conventional act:

If a policeman says to a person ‘You are under arrest’, he is both arresting the person and telling him (indirectly) that he has violated the law. It is common for utterances to be both conventional and communicative illocutionary acts; when a speaker performs a conventional act, he is likely to have a reason for doing it, and he may very well intend the hearer to infer what the reason is. (Bach and Harnish 1979: 117)

This also applies to the witches’ curses. A curse, in the witchcraft context, does not simply cause a change in the future course of the addressee’s life but also simultaneously expresses a negative attitude towards the addressee. Indeed, we have emphasised throughout that it was quite possible that an utterance which was simply intended as a communicative expressive act, was interpreted as a conventional effective act, with rather unpleasant consequences for the producer of the utterance.

The shift in the meaning of verbs such as *to curse* and *to wish* becomes particularly clear, if one considers an analysis in terms of Searle’s (1969) felicity conditions. The felicity conditions for a prototypical witch’s curse are as follows:

PROPOSITIONAL ACT	Future event (E) related to Hearer (H)
PREPARATORY CONDITION	(1) E is not in H’s interest (2) Speaker (S) has a pact with the devil and is able to use his power
SINCERITY CONDITION	-
ESSENTIAL CONDITION	Counts as a declaration that E will happen to H

How well does this characterisation work? Firstly, let us see if this characterisation can distinguish a witch’s curse from a non-witch’s curse in the Early Modern English period. In Etherege’s comedy *The Man of Mode*, Loveit has just discovered that her lover has been seen going off with another woman:

[10] Loveit. Who e’re she be, all the harm I wish her, is, may she love him  
as well as I do, and may he give her as much cause to hate him.  
Pert. Never doubt the latter end of your Curse, Madam !  
Loveit. May all the passions that are rais’d by neglected Love, Jealousie, Indignation, Spight and Thirst of Revenge, eternally rage in her Soul, as they do now in mine. (George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, 1676)

If we work through the conditions of the witch's curse, we can see that the second preparatory condition is not met, since there is no evidence in the play that Loveit has a pact with the devil or that her words are attributed supernatural powers. Moreover, the essential condition is not met, since Loveit's negative events do not come about through her utterances. Clearly, this is a very different kind of curse with different conditions. This curse is, in fact, similar to the more modern curse, which we might characterise thus:

PROPOSITIONAL ACT	Future event (E) related to Hearer (H)
PREPARATORY CONDITION	E is not in H's interest
SINCERITY CONDITION	S wants E to happen
ESSENTIAL CONDITION	Counts as a wish that E will happen to H

In the prototypical witch's curse the sincerity condition is absent, since the act is performed regardless of the speaker's psychological state; on the other hand, in the modern curse the sincerity condition is fundamental, since the essential condition amounts to the expression of the sincerity condition. However, even this analysis does not adequately capture the kind of pure expressive that the curse can also be today (see example [7]). As Wierzbicka comments:

the real purpose of *curses* is speaker oriented. The speaker doesn't really want to cause any harm for the person or thing *curse*d, although he momentarily feels that he does. What he really wants to do is to give expression to his feelings. (Wierzbicka 1987: 164)

Thus far, Searle's conditions for speech acts have helped us capture the semantics of speech act verbs, and his and others' classifications of speech acts have shown us differences between the various types of curse. We have seen how such analyses have revealed a shift towards the expression of the speaker's feelings, a shift that is in tune with Traugott's (1982, 1989) hypothesis of a general process of semantic change towards increasing subjectivisation. However, our analysis is insufficient: we have said little about the fact that the curse usually co-occurred with other speech acts, that it owed much to the belief systems of the time, and that it was often a retrospective interpretation. We now introduce Levinson's ([1979] 1992) notion of 'activity types' in an attempt to address some of these issues.

## 5. Activity types

Levinson's work on activity types was inspired by Wittgenstein's comment that understanding the meaning of utterances involves knowing the activity

within which those utterances play a role. According to Levinson, the notion of activity type

refers to any to any culturally recognized activity, whether or not that activity is coextensive with a period of speech or indeed whether any talk takes place in it at all [ . . . ] In particular, I take the notion of an activity type to refer to a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples would be teaching, a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party, and so on. (1992: 69)

He goes on to say that

Because of the strict constraints on contributions to any particular activity, there are corresponding strong expectations about the functions that any utterances at a certain point in the proceedings can be fulfilling. (1992:79)

And this has the important consequence that

to each and every clearly demarcated activity there is a corresponding set of *inferential schemata*. (1992: 72)

[activity types] help to determine how what one says will be “taken” - that is, what kinds of inferences will be made from what is said. (1992: 97)

Our argument is that witchcraft events constituted such a ‘culturally recognized activity’ - a structured set of speech acts with constraints on participants, the situation, and so on.

In our texts there are particular clusters of speech act verbs. Three clusters relate to stages in witchcraft:

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| THE PACT:        | The witch makes a contract with the devil. Typically, there is an agreement that if the witch renounces Christianity, the devil will empower her. |
| THE FALLING OUT: | The witch is thwarted by the future victim. Typically, a request for food or for some minor object - pins, a shirt - is denied.                   |
| THE CURSE:       | The witch causes something bad to happen to the victim.   |

To these we might add a fourth cluster, relating to the instantiation of witchcraft:

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| THE TRIAL: | The accusation of witchcraft is confirmed. |
|------------|--|

The speech act verbs which tend to occur in these clusters are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Speech Act Verb Clusters in Witchcraft Narratives

<b>THE PACT</b>	
<i>The Witch</i>	<i>The Devil</i>
to enter tearmes of a compact, to make a contract, to renounce, to covenant, to forsake	to assault with promises, to enter tearmes of a compact, to enthrall, to invassal, to make a contract, to promise
<b>THE FALLING OUT</b>	
<i>The Witch</i>	<i>The Victim</i>
to beg, to ask	to deny
<b>THE CURSE</b>	
<i>The Witch</i>	<i>The Victim</i>
to ban, to curse, to wish (evil / harm)	to be bewitched
<b>THE TRIAL</b>	
<i>The Witch</i>	<i>The Others</i>
to confess, to deny	to accuse, to arraign, to commit, to condemn, to examine, to find guilty, to take (one's oath / upon one's death), to testify (upon one's oath)

Within the activity type, the role of witch was constrained by a set of prototypical features. As we have already mentioned, commentators are agreed that a witch was typically a woman, was older and poorer than the 'victim', led a relatively marginalised life (often a beggar), and had a reputation for moaning and grumbling. Other contextual constraints included: the existence of an appropriate belief system (for example, one that allowed the existence of the devil as a participant), the fact that someone corresponding to the description above had had an argument with someone else and that some negative event had affected the other person. The time frame for this negative event could be quite broad. In one of our Pendle Witches examples, the death of a man is attributed to a witch's curse made a year previously.

Important interpretative consequences flow from the instantiation in the courtroom of the 'witchcraft activity type'. It could be used to interpret acts and events retrospectively. Thus a speaker could perform a wish or even an expression of anger, but if the witchcraft activity type could be invoked, this wish could be re-interpreted as a witch's curse. Let us construct a prototypical

example. If a woman who was both poor and old had an argument with somebody, if that woman had wished a bad event upon that person or perhaps uttered vague insults, and if a bad event came about, then there would be sufficient evidence to invoke the witchcraft activity type and to re-interpret the wish as a curse and, as a consequence, to identify the woman as a witch. In this analysis, the power behind witchcraft lies not in the utterance of a witch's curse, but in the *instantiation* of the witchcraft activity type. The instrument of power is no longer the witch, but the judicial system. It must be remembered that in 1597 James VI had published his *Daemonologie*, a tract about the horrors of witchcraft. The judicial system, as is clear from the trials of the Pendle witches, was only too willing to do the King's bidding. In this analysis, the catalyst for witchcraft is the 'accusation'. This speech act raises the issue of whether the witchcraft activity type applies. Since the practice of witchcraft was against the law, the accuser had the option of asking the authorities to confirm or disconfirm the accusation. The judges could then instantiate the witchcraft activity type, in order to re-interpret and to construct events within that frame. Very little evidence was in fact needed to instantiate the witchcraft activity type. Once this activity type was instantiated some significant interpretative consequences followed:

- 1) The occurrence of a negative event was taken as proof of a successful curse.
- 2) The utterance of a successful curse was taken as proof that the 'curser' had a pact with the devil.
- 3) The existence of a pact with the devil was taken as proof of the 'curser' being a witch.
- 4) A witch was assumed to give unreliable evidence.

Clearly, once an accusation had been made and the judges had instantiated the witchcraft activity type, the accused would find it very difficult to disprove the accusation. Furthermore, there was no defence counsel in this period: the accused, fresh from a few months in the dungeon, had to defend themselves. All this is not to deny that some people did believe themselves to be witches and uttered curses with the intention of causing harm to the addressee. What we are saying is that the witchcraft interpretation did not in fact depend on this: the use of verbs such as *curse* and *wish (that)* to refer to specific utterances in witchcraft narratives depended more on the possibility of instantiating the witchcraft activity type than on the original intention of the producer of the utterance.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on the particular use of a set of speech act verbs in Early Modern English witchcraft narratives, and attempted to account for the difference between that specialised use and the use that prevails today. We have claimed that pragmatic frameworks such as Speech Act Theory can provide useful insights, but we have also shown how historical analysis requires modifications to the theory, particularly in order to account for different sets of beliefs about the power of spoken words. We have argued that a proper analysis of the use of verbs such as *curse* and *wish* in witchcraft narratives can only be achieved by taking the social and cultural contexts into account, and we have attempted to do this by applying Levinson's notion of 'activity type'. We have concluded that the interpretation of certain utterances as 'witches' curses' in Early Modern England largely depended on the application of what we have called the 'witchcraft activity type' to past verbal exchanges.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The witness depositions totaling some 25,000 words are drawn from *A Corpus of Dialogues, 1590-1720*. For a description of this corpus see Culpeper and Kytö (1997).

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