

SPEECH ACTS AND RELEVANCE: IN SEARCH OF A DIALOGUE

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Abstract

This paper comments on the notion of the speech act in the tradition of J.L. Austin (1962/1975) in an attempt to assess its relevance (sic!) in a relevance-theory-based research. Relevance theory (RT) since its introduction (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995) has consistently rejected much of speech act-theoretic thinking, explicitly questioning its having a central position in pragmatics. Using the notion of “the speech act”, RT seems to ignore most of speech act-theoretic apparatus. However, despite the superficial divergence between the two frameworks, the advancements within RT, as developed especially by Deirdre Wilson, and her co-researchers over the years, are convergent with selected thoughts in the Austinian thought. The paper comments on selected points which bring the two linguistics approaches together.

Keywords: speech act theory, relevance theory, cognitive linguistics, hate, offensive language

1. Introduction

This paper offers comments on the notion of the speech act in the tradition of J.L. Austin (1962/1975) in an attempt to tentatively assess its relevance (sic!) in a relevance-theory-related research. Relevance theory (RT) since its introduction (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995) has consistently rejected much of speech act-theoretic thinking, explicitly questioning its having a central position in pragmatics. Using the notion of “the speech act”, RT seems to ignore most of speech act-theoretic apparatus. However, despite the superficial divergence between the two frameworks, the advancements within RT, as guided especially by Deirdre Wilson, and her co-researchers over the years, are evidently convergent with selected traits in the Austinian thought. There seems to be more convergence bringing the two linguistics approaches together than meets the eye at first sight. This has been shown here with focus on offensive language; it is presented not as a fully-fledged model, but as a first approximation.

2. Speech acts in the Austinian tradition

Speech act theory has been seen as central in the field of pragmatics bridging the field of semantics and pragmatics research, where conventionalised, maximally decontextualized, dictionary-like meaning meets situated interpretation. Notably, Levinson (1983) explicitly granted speech act theory this special focal place in pragmatics analysis.

Speech act theory focuses on using language as an instrument of action, where linguistic utterances mark moves in the social space, which can be clearly illustrated in performative utterances, such as “I plead not guilty”, as spoken by a defendant in a court of justice, or by “I hereby name this ship *Strzebrzeszyn*”, as spoken by, e.g., a state president’s wife in a ship naming ceremony.

One of the main tenets of speech act theory in the Austinian model is the tripartite division within a speech act. Although a speech act is still seen as a unit, it is indicated that it can be approached in three different perspectives, which recognise its locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels. The locutionary act defined by Austin as the act embracing the phonetic act, the phatic act, and the rhetic act, can be seen as concentrating on the presented form with its semantic meaning, which is close to a relatively decontextualized dictionary meaning. It is about uttering certain noises, words in a certain grammar construction, with “a more or less definite” sense and “a more or less definite” reference (Austin 1962/1975, p. 11). The illocutionary act corresponds to the function, also known as a force, of an utterance, and is conventional in the sense that users can recognise the force because they share expertise in conventionalised pairing of form and function within their speech community. Finally, the perlocutionary act corresponds to the effects of an utterance, which start with direct effects such as uptake, i.e. the utterance being received, processed, understood, and extend to extralinguistic phenomena, such as thoughts or actions on the part of the receiver of the message. As Austin (1962/1975: 11) points out “[s]aying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them [...] We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a ‘perlocutionary’ act”. Thus, the locutionary act is an act “of saying”, the illocutionary act is an act “in saying”, and the perlocutionary act is an act “by saying”; roughly indicating form, function, and result or consequence.

It is evident that Austin’s model of the speech act, although advertised as primarily “conventional”, exhibits a mixture of ideas which today are likely to be reclassified as either conventionalist or intentionalist in nature. There are references to convention, and both locutionary and illocutionary acts are explicitly defined as “conventional” in Austin’s original model, but there are also numerous references to speakers’ intentions, feelings, “private” conversational agendas. Quite naturally, in Austin’s original account, which had always been a theory in

the making¹, we find a mixture of ideas, including the fact that the intentionality and conventionality in speech acts is addressed in various ways and perspectives. The problem was later addressed in an influential article by Peter Strawson (1964), significantly entitled “Convention and intention in speech acts”, where the author tries to develop Austin’s account and divide speech acts into two main types: private, intention-based acts, and public, conventionalised ones. The many models of speech act theory that have been presented since the time of Strawson’s article seem to fall in either of the categories, focusing on either the intentional and cognitive dimension of a speech act, or on a conventional dimension, which backgrounds Speaker’s intentions and focuses on social conventions. The models tend to be either psychologistic, or sociologistic, and the Austinian model is often juxtaposed with the Gricean (1975, 1989) model, where Austin’s understanding of a speech act is supposed to be sociologistic, and Grice’s understanding of how speech, and especially conversation, works is to fall on the intentionalist side. Although all such models are indeed mixed in nature, the difference can be felt quite easily. Among the models that lean towards a more cognitive perspective, the first elaborate one after Strawson (1964) seems to be Bach and Harnish’s (1979) as given in *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* and focusing on communicative intentions, communicative intentions that have to be recognised by the Audience in order for the act to be successful.

Another point about Austin’s model is the false (as it should be claimed here) assumption that his speech act theory is (only) about singular utterances, or even orphan sentences to use Goffman’s (1976: 276-277) category of “little orphans”, which originally referred to discourse samples used in non-dialogic approaches. It seems that although numerous examples in Austin’s lectures are in the form of isolated sentences, the discussion around them points to the importance of context, and in many a place Austin emphasises the fact that speech is but one means in which meaning can be expressed in a much wider communicative perspective. In addition, Austin emphasises that in many contexts there is a parallel between acts performed verbally and non-verbally, e.g., “many *conventional* acts, such as betting and conveyance of property, can be performed in non-verbal ways” (Austin 1962:19; cf. lecture 2, 9, 10), and that for numerous ritualised procedures there may be a verbal or non-verbal form for the act (e.g. lecture 7) or one may accompany the other (cf. lecture 6), or complement the other (cf. lecture 9).

In addition, Austin’s approach to classifying speech acts is far from formal in that it presupposes the interpretative richness relevant to the reception of a speech act. Austin exposes the fact that the same form may be interpreted differently due to contextual reasons, and as a result one form may find its place in more than one class (the fact that invited much criticism with regard Austin’s classification itself).

¹ It should be remembered that Austin’s speech act theory is mainly available through the publication based on his Harvard and Oxford lectures, edited and published as *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1962/1975) posthumously, after his untimely death.

It seems important that the present discussion focuses on speech act theory in the Austinian tradition as despite the presupposed existence of one such theory – the theory of speech acts, it is better to think of “it” in terms of a constellation of different models (cf. Witczak-Plisiecka 2013a), some of which can follow Austin in a rather loose manner, or explicitly reject selected ideas found in the original account, as, e.g., Searle (1969) rejected the tri-partite division within a speech act. The picture that we inherit from Austin on the basis of his main speech act-theoretic work, i.e. *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1962/1975), as well as from his other works (e.g., 1964, 1970) is that speech act theory is interested in how words “act” in the world, and how even relatively small modifications in linguistic utterances can change the nature of such acting.

3. Speech acts and relevance

The relation between speech act theory and relevance theory has been a rather difficult one. Relevance theory (RT), since its introduction in the 1980s (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995), has consistently rejected much of speech act-theoretic thinking, explicitly questioning its having a central position in pragmatics (as granted earlier, *inter alia*, by Levinson 1983). At the very beginning of the last section of “Communication and Cognition,” notably devoted to speech act, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995, pp. 243ff.) refer to “[p]erhaps the single most uncontroversial assumption of modern pragmatics that any adequate account of utterance comprehension must include some version of speech act theory” (p. 243). However, they mention the opinion just to ridicule and reject it. In the authors’ words, “[t]he vast range of data that speech-act theorists have been concerned with is of no special interest to pragmatics” (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995, p. 243), with the exception being non-declarative sentences and their interpretation, which is a true problem for a theory of communication.

In most cases RT, being a post-Gricean model, addresses speech act problems related to what can be recognised as a Gricean level, and, naturally—for a theory that focuses on utterance interpretation, i.e. hearer’s meaning—acknowledges selected issues important for pragmatic hermeneutics, including the disambiguation of non-declarative sentences, e.g. exclamations, questions, imperatives. Sperber and Wilson criticise speech act theory for focusing too much on descriptive issues, such as typologies of speech acts, the number of acts within a type, etc., although it should be noted that much of this criticism is directed at Searle rather than Austin.

Thus, RT refers to “speech acts” ignoring most of speech act-theoretic apparatus, at the same time indicating that speech act theory in its entirety may well form a non-necessary meta-level, for instance in the form of speech act typologies, as often elaborated by speech act theorists. Naturally, one does not need a sophisticated knowledge of types of speech acts in order to use them, but

on a metalinguistic level, such classifications may well be useful. On the other hand, RT is worried that classifications as practised in speech act theoretic models cannot be perfect due to inherent underdeterminacy of linguistic meaning as manifested in the fact that one form may be paired with more than one function. As often the difference in the interpretation is a function of drawing a different implicature, speech act theory appears to mix explicatures and implicatures when it comes to classifying speech acts. There are of course differences with regard to the level(s) of explicitness required in various contexts. As RT suggests, bidding while playing bridge must be explicit and linguistic, unlike a variety of other social contexts, e.g. private predictions about the weather, which can be interpreted without being recognised as “predictions” (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986/1975, pp. 244-245). While there is no harm in either communication the intended type of a speech act, or in its recognition, such assignment of function on the part of the speaker, or hearer is in a RT perspective just an option. Criticising speech act theory, RT suggests that explicit contexts (such as, e.g., the bidding while playing bridge example) are typically bound with institutional use, and as such should be part of a quite separate study of institutional speech acts, and not communication in general. In summary, RT suggests that speech act theory studies a variety of quite distinct phenomena, some of which need to be recognised to be performed, e.g., promising or thanking, while for others being recognised is not needed, or is just an option (e.g. asserting, demanding, warning). It is implicit in this context that speech act theory may prove redundant as it seems not to suggest any special pragmatic principle which should be at work in language processing.

Interestingly, RT points that a limited class of speech acts is really of interest to pragmatics, and that this class includes “saying”, “telling”, and “asking”, which, however, have in turn been largely ignored in speech act theorising. The three “acts” are related to different moods, quite universal grammar forms and seem to require different interpretative mechanisms within RT (cf. also Blakemore (1991) on acts and moods²), e.g., the analysis of questions alone involves the notion of the interpretive use of language. In general, RT seems to come back to sentence types and how speech acts can violate the convention in contexts where sentences uttered on a particular occasion do not (as utterances) perform the expected function, but a different one. In this context RT theorising seems to come close to Austin’s original conclusion that performative utterances are “masquerades”, which pretend to be statements, but are in fact something else (i.e. actions). For instance, uttering: “The bus is leaving” may be not just a piece of information, but a directive inviting the hearer to hurry up. In short, such a “description” can be relevant, or can achieve relevance, in many different ways. As for “saying”, “telling”, and “asking,” speech act theory seems to devote limited attention to them, as they are notoriously polysemous and general. Virtually any speech act, any social function, can be realised with the use of a variety of moods. Even in

² Blakemore (1991) also supports the view that some acts do not need to be recognised as a certain type to be successfully performed.

the context of the three lexemes, RT and speech act theory exhibit much different attitudes, although the phenomenological interest on the part of RT would most probably be seen as attractive in Austin's perspective.

RT is presented as a cognitive theory focused on Speaker's interpretation of her interlocutor's input. In this sense it is cognitive and psychologicistic, and pays much attention to context, which functions as an important determinant for cultural, thus naturally social, signs which further affect what counts as ostensive and important, and what counts as non-significant. RT is a cognitive theory, which approaches meaning as underdetermined, perspectival, dynamic, and construed in conversation in an online mode. A lot of attention in RT theorising is directed towards the processes of semantic enrichment, or an opposite mechanism, i.e., narrowing. Linguistic utterances are seen as inherently contextualised, always situated in a particular time, place, and social context.

According to RT, in communication interlocutors make manifest both their communicative and informative intentions. It has been indicated (e.g., Wilson and Sperber 1993, Sperber and Wilson 2012, Piskorska 2016) that IFIDs (illocutionary force indicated devices), as discussed in speech act theory, could be seen as means of making the speaker's intentions manifest and as elements encoding at least selected aspects of procedural meaning. IFIDs encode information of different kind and they do it in a variety of ways; information may be encoded lexically, as when people add "please" at the end of "Could you pass me the salt?" to make the force of request more explicit, or information could be encoded in, for instance, the intonation pattern. In any case an IFID is likely to give rise to a higher-level explicature in the interpretation process on the part of the hearer. In general speech act descriptions, i.e., information with regard to the speech act type, is likely to appear in the form of a higher-level explicature (cf. Wilson and Sperber 1993).

Despite the apparent animosity between speech act theory and relevance theory, there has been some considerable amount of research in the interface, e.g., Mark Jary (2010) on assertion in relation to speech act theory, there has also been work explicitly mentioning speech acts and contributed by, inter alia, Blakemore (1991) with regards to acts and moods, Agnieszka Piskorska (2016) on perlocutionary effects understood as psychological states evoked by ostensive stimuli active in linguistic interpretation-oriented processes, and I. Witczak-Plisiecka on legal contexts (2005, 2006, 2008). It is also evident that despite the superficial divergence between the two frameworks, the general advancements within RT, as developed especially by Deirdre Wilson, and her co-researchers over the years, converge with selected ideas in the Austinian thought.

4. Hateful language, speech acts, and relevance

Hate speech, and less technically seen hateful language, provides much material for theorising with regard to "doing things with words", as it is rarely as visible

how linguistic performance may “act”, as in hate speech and related forms of verbal behaviour. However, this intuition is not easily accommodated in speech act theory as the spectrum of antisocial behaviour grouped as hate is much varied and derives its force from a variety of sources, not always readily from a clearly defined pairing of form and (intended) function.

Hateful language, which includes hate speech, is a notion widely used in legal, policy-making, and academic circles. Despite its ubiquity in the social sphere, the concept still has vague boundaries and lacks a precise definition. In fact even in general international contexts, and in human rights law, as well as in relevant scholarship, there is no explicit authoritative definition of the phenomenon (cf. McGonagle 2013: Council of Europe expert). Usually, hate speech, and hateful language, is defined as a spectrum of very negative discourse, ranging from hatred and incitement to crime to abusive vilification, such as prejudice and bias. Some of its instances can be recognised as slurs, libel, slander, other instances may not constitute hate in a technical sense, but embody ill intentions. It is also common practice to see using hateful language, and hate speech, as a form of aggression, a form of discrimination targeting subjects defined by the so-called protected characteristics, typically related to race, gender, ethnicity, or any type of minority. The problem of defining and classifying hateful language is aggravated by the fact that electronic communication provides space in which such language may successfully proliferate with performers staying relatively safe, or simply anonymous. In general, hateful language is a much varied phenomenon, and differentiated strategies are needed in its description, just as, in a similar manner, differentiated strategies are necessary to effectively combat hate speech, where the need arises.

Hateful language can often take the form of threatening, abusive or insulting speech, which, in turn, will naturally involve a spectrum of linguistic patterns, which relatively rarely are phrased as explicit performatives. In natural discourse, antisocial acts are usually hidden, or at least rarely used in the explicit canonical performative form, as in, e.g., “I hereby bribe you into employing me”, or “I hereby offend you”. Explicating the purpose in such context would often ruin, or at least ridicule, the act as covering the act’s true value will often contribute to its being (more) vicious. It is thus questionable whether hateful language can indeed be a good example of a speech act, despite the fact that it is recognised as having an “acting” nature. Hateful use of language may be a better candidate for a category of “speech action,” a concerted use of language with a function, but not necessarily with a conventionalised form (which Austin would require for any illocutionary act³).

The problem of hate speech and speech acts also naturally involves the tension between the freedom of expression and aggressive verbal action, the former of

³ However, the notion of conventionality of the illocutionary act as advocated by Austin seems inherently underdetermined. It is indeed possible to accept much freedom with regard to context and the act’s dependence on context; Austinian conventionality works within a frame defined by contextual information and cannot be limited to a list of relevant utterances.

which is in all democracies seen as lawful and in need of legal protection, while the latter is recognised as harmful and (often) illegal. There is thus the expectation that both authorities and “ordinary” people should safeguard free speech and fight hate speech. It is also interesting that the tension between free speech and hate speech has already had its own history with speech act theorists acting as expert witnesses in courts of justice. Thus, in this context, not just linguists, but also lawyers and various other social groups have shown belief that academics, backed with speech act theory can shed light on what is done with words. Interestingly, in cases involving, e.g. sleeping in the park, burning of the Army card, or burning of the cross speech and performance without using language has sometimes been seen as mutually equivalent (cf., e.g., cases such as *Texas v. Johnson* (1989) involving flag burning, *Community for Creative Non-Violence v. Watt* (1983) involving sleeping in a public place to protest about homelessness, *R.A.V. v. St. Paul* (1992) involving cross burning, *Virginia v. Black et al.* (2003)).

Cases as the ones mentioned above show both reliance on manifest behaviour and exhibit the actional aspect of communication. They “act” by “saying” or “showing”, inviting a RT perspective where communication comes in a spectrum between explicit linguistic mode and implicit behaviour.

To reiterate, there is thus a presupposition that speech acts, perceived as functional units, can be identified in discourse, and that speech act theory can shed (scientific) light onto judgments related to using language to spread hate, and to attack. However, it is doubtful whether such units, i.e. functional units of hate, can really be identified and described in a reliable and systematic way?

Below there are some examples which may well be identified as “evil language” in that they aim to harm. Although some of them may look quite innocent from a distance, they can constitute aggressive “acts”.

On the one side of the hateful language spectrum there is explicit hate aimed at protected characteristics, at the other either explicit or implicit language underlined with “evil intentions”.

4.1. Nounism, calling names, labelling, and stars for messages

An interesting case of offensive language is known as “nounism”, associated with Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, during which, especially in 2020, he referred to his political opponents using labels such as “Crooked Hillary,” “Little Marco,” “Lying Ted” or “Sleepy Joe.” Through his consistent use of such labels, it was indicated (<https://www.washingtonpost.com> ...), Trump really practiced role allocation in the political space, which turned out to be his winning strategy. As Jeremy Sherman suggested already in 2011, using such strategy, Trump is able to appeal to natural human instinct to categorize and label as a way to achieve stability and certainty, to secure a sense of permanence. In Sherman’s epistemological view, such “nounism” can also be a way to describe something or someone in a way that is an absolute. Just like a chair is a chair and not just

“charily”, or “chairish”, “Crooked Hillary” is Hillary who is “crooked”, and not for instance “being crooked”, being occasionally, crooked, or occasionally performing a crooked action. It can work as an absolute description.

Political discourse seems to abound in such strategies, albeit often less colorful ones. For instance, in Polish political discourse it would often be an ultimate argument to label the opponents as “communists and thieves” (Pol. “komuniści i złodzieje”), or to identify one’s political opponent as “a Jew and (Free) Mason” (Pol. Żyd i mason), or “perpetrators”. Significantly, such labels tend to work as shortcuts in framing the other as a bad character, and appear to rely not on facts or defined convictions, but on emotional attitudes associated with the labels in a very loose way. The label seem to implicate something bad, not necessarily connected with the lexical meaning of the words, which does not have to be overtly pejorative.

On the other hand there is a lot of implicitness which sometimes is seen as “given”, as in the case of interpreting eight stars as an offensive message against the government in Poland during the months prior to the 2023 elections. The message of the stars seem to be just implicit, and so not subject to formal assessment, but nonetheless found its way to a court of justice and was seriously considered as grounds for a case.

Offence comes in a scale and an analysis of nounism, or calling names, exposes the problem with the scope that speech act theory has to face, if related linguistic performance is to be seen as speech act-theoretic at all. It is intuitively sound that consistent use of nounism, as, for instance, practiced by Trump, constitutes effective use of language which can exert pressure in society and produce desirable, or undesirable, communicative and political effects. It is visibly part of polarising discourse. In this sense it is “doing things” and it is “doing things with words”, but the force is not directly bound with predefined lexical forms, not in an expected conventional form and way; the pairing of form and function is less direct, although it is not about once meaning, related to the time of the utterance only. Such force may be better explained with the use of relevance theoretic approach, where more emphasis is put on the receiver of the message, and the way in which the message is construed on the part of the audience. The particularised context of an utterance remains in interplay with the more conventional forms and together they guide the receivers of the message in their search for relevance and sense. In such contexts, RT can expose salient features in a particular, situated communication; for instance in the nounism example, the illocutionary force, i.e. also how the utterance is taken, is a function of the audiences merging of the relevant linguistic, contextual, and encyclopaedic data.

4.2. Intentions, speech acts and relevance

Another problematic dimension of hateful discourse, a problem for speech act theory is the problem of intention. In natural discourse we seem to presuppose that what interlocutors are attempting to do is uncovering speakers intentions, i.e. what they “want” to do. In turn, in legislation on hate speech it is often the case that the meaning of the words (i.e., the words spoken) prevails. What words mean in a more semantic than pragmatic sense is seen as more significant than Speaker’s individual, more private intentions. It is accepted that a person’s hateful words “act”, and mean, in the social sphere even if the speaker did not mean what the words suggest, or “mean” on their own. Once the words are “out there”, they get independent enough so that the Speaker was held responsible for “what they do”. Such an approach has been documented in many legal contexts. As early as in 1942, the existence of “fighting words” was acknowledged in *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, where they were taken to “inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace” by virtue of just being uttered.

Hutton (2009: 169-170) cites cases from defamation law, where authors were held responsible for meanings which turned out to escape their control. As Hutton also suggests in defamation law, e.g., in cases of libel and blasphemy, the intent of the author, or Speaker is usually backgrounded and the relevant legal authority will decide whether the offence was committed because the words would have a harmful effect, for instance that of lowering the plaintiff in the estimation of right-thinking members of society.

It is implicit in such reasoning that words can act independently of their author’s, their utterer’s, intention as it is not of prime importance what the writer or speaker of an alleged libel or defamation wants to mean, but how the words “on their own” may act in society. There is a presupposition that speakers are responsible for their words, just as they are responsible for their actions, whether intentional or not, whether premeditated or accidental; as a result there is a requirement of social responsibility on the part of the speaker.

Placing emphasis on how hearers interpret utterances, and granting such interpretation the status of “true meaning” stays in agreement with a relevance theoretic spirit.

It is worth noting that the idea itself is not new, and not just relevance-theoretic; for example it is directly addressed by Robin Lakoff in her 1992 text, where she emphasizes the fact that people may have a more clear idea of what others say than they have about the meaning of their own utterances:

“we tend to have a much better conscious grip on what has been said to us than beneath a relatively superficial level on what we ourselves have meant by what we have said. We are seldom fully aware of our deeper intentions. (i.e.: at a general and theoretical level, the illocutionary act is superficially apparent, much easier to determine and define than its

complement. But on a case by case basis, looking at actual utterances produced by real people and heard by others, the perlocutionary act seems much more reliably determined.)” (Lakoff 2017 [1992]: 318)

In the quote above, Lakoff identifies interpreted meaning with the utterance’s perlocutionary act emphasising the “effect” that a particular utterance has. Indeed, the three-level perspective suggested by Austin (1962/1975) at the same time invites, or exposes (?), problems and provides much inspiration for research.

To account for how an utterance is taken by the audience, or audiences, Korta and Perry (2007, 2011) introduce the notion of the “forensic aspect” of speech acts, and suggested another division into “what is locuted” and “what is said⁴.” Significantly, this newer development in speech act theory refers to the locutionary level. “What is locuted” refers to the form of the message, and its sense and reference as envisaged by the speaker. However, “what is said” (with no direct connection with the Gricean notion) may be quite different and refers to how Hearer understands the message. In Korta and Perry’s (2007, 2011) example, saying “John is turning red” with the literal intention, e.g., that John’s face is turning red is “what is locuted”. However, if a hearer interprets it as the speaker’s opinion that John is turning a communist, such interpretation is going to have its own life, it is going to proliferate as “what is/was said,” and the speaker may be held responsible for “saying” that about John. Similarly, saying “Aristotle enjoyed philosophy” may be “locuted” about the Ancient Greek philosopher, but taken to be “said” about Aristotle Onassis, and interpreted as “wrong” in the latter case.

In summary, intention as a factor behind a speech act has its problems, one of which is the mentioned above “freedom” of interpretation granted to Hearer. Problems with which speech act theory must struggle can prove easier, or less rigid, while taking advantage of relevance theory, which provides more space for the hearer. It is further connected with a cognitive turn which emphasises the fact that meaning is naturally underdetermined and perspectival, and finally “worked out” in context thanks to what RT identifies as explicatures and implicatures.

4.3. Implicit speech acts, underdetermined meanings

In today’s speech act theory there has been a growing interest in implicit acts, suggested meanings which are felt as “actional”, but also, just like Gricean implicature, inherently non-provable. Relatively new notions include “dogwhistles” as discussed by Kimberly Witten and Jennifer Saul (e.g., 2018, cf. also Haney López 2014, Goodin & Saward 2005). For instance, an overt intentional dogwhistle is a speech act designed, with intent, to allow two plausible interpretations. One of such interpretations is going to stay as a private, coded message and is intended for just a subset of the general audience. It is concealed

⁴ This concept of “what is said” should not be identified with Grice’s (1975, 1989) “what is said,” which is of different nature.

in such a way that the general audience receiving their interpretation is unaware of the existence of the second, coded interpretation for Speaker's "chosen" audience. It may often be the case that the coded message is not politically correct, but attractive for the intended audience, as, e.g., a racist signal might be. Feminist issues have already built its own literature in related contexts (cf., e.g., Langton 1993, Hornsby et al. 2011, Witczak-Plisiecka 2013b and references within).

Once more, "traditional" speech act theory is bound to find such acts problematic, not only due to their vagueness, ambiguity, and context-sensitivity, but also because they are meant to mean different things simultaneously.

A cognitive approach, and in particular relevance theory may help elucidate such acts, without trying to over-isolate them. Most of such acts exhibit conventionality of a special kind, not that of explicit social nature, but one that is in interplay with context which provides clues for their interpretation.

Phenomena such as "fig leaves," or Frankfurt's (1986/2005) "bullshit" pose related problems. They "do" things with words without exploiting (relatively) simple pairing of form and function. Fig leaves "cover" the truth, and often not pro-social meanings, and "bullshit" refers to exerting pressure in communication using, e.g., blatant lies, or misleading the audience with nonsense which, however, passes undetected. Moving towards the language of deception is a further problem for speech act theory. Such uses of language exhibit 'actional' nature, but fall rather far away from traditional speech acts. A creative combination of speech act theoretic apparatus and RT methodology with its focus on interpretative mechanisms may prove more effective in elucidating the nature of utterances constituting such negative discourse coming in different degrees of ostensiveness.

In this tentative approximation it is claimed that the question of ostensive communication in RT and force ascription in speech act theory (SAT) can be focal in showing convergence between the two theoretical models. It seems that the process of disambiguation, central in relevance theory, can explicate problems encountered in speech act theorising about negative discourse, and hate speech in particular, including the problem of explicitness of the (speech act-theoretic) locution.

The analysis which looks at the findings of both theories can better explain why the force of a linguistic form is in selected contexts "heavier" than the (actual/potential) intention of the speaker to the effect that words are taken to act irrespective of speakers' (actual) intentions. Despite the superficial divergence, there are points which bring the Austinian model of speech act theory and relevance theory together. On reflection it can be seen that the element of Hearer's meaning, another point central in relevance theory, is emphasised in many contexts where speech act theory is applied. This can be seen as explicit in official judgments on hate speech (with a caveat phrased above that such contexts are good material for speech act theorising), where the audience's perception of what has been done (with words) outweighs Speaker's private intentions. Whether we are to deal with "protected characteristics" being an object of hate speech or,

for instance, Tramp's "nounism" (e.g., labels such as "Crooked Hillary," "Sleepy Joe" as mentioned above), RT may enrich the theoretical picture contributing not only to its methodological elegance, but also widening the perspective on what and how is being done.

Another point of convergence is in the trust in the salience of context, which is of prime importance in on-line meaning construction. Such trust has evidently been growing over the years of the development in speech act theory, where many current models can be seen as coming back to Austin's original agenda where he claims that "[t]he total speech-act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating." (Austin 1962/1975: 148) This "adumbrated definition," (ibidem) opens speech act theory for utterances which are dramatically context-dependent, and shows that an interest in such utterances is not a departure from traditional speech-act theory, but rather a revival of Austin's original plan.

Phenomena related to various types of suggested meaning, such as overt or covert "dogwhistles", "fig leaves", or "bullshit" are thus good candidates for speech act theoretic analysis. Enriching their analysis with RT methods may allow for a more detailed understanding of their nature, thanks to a cognitive perspective introduced explicitly into the Austinian model, usually classified as "sociolinguistic." Additionally, theory- and methodology-wise, it is evident that theorising on the conventional, sociolinguistic, and cognitive aspects of both theoretical models is bound to pose questions as to the nature of such categories that invite reflection well beyond just the correspondence and compatibility of the two models.

It should also be noted that although there seems to be a natural bond between speech acts and hate speech, and hateful language, hate is a rather special kind of acting with words as its very definition points to perlocution. Hate, or some form of vilification, is indeed the result of what is being done with words. As such hateful contexts are specially relevant for analysis from the audience perspective, and as Hearer meaning, which makes them even better candidates for RT data. In a relevance theoretic perspective we are likely to pay more attention to how what is manifest interacts with context.

In mainstream RT theorising related to speech acts starts with sentence types and attention paid to moods, while in Austin's speech act theory, it appears, it starts with pointing to the fact that utterances are "masquerades," which in their majority just pretend to be statements, while in fact they perform different functions. RT explains processing information as a search for relevance, where linguistic form triggers inference about communicator's informative intention; ostensive stimuli should set the inferential process on the right track; but sentence type – being an illocutionary force indicator, is just a to make manifest a rather abstract property of the speaker's informative intention, the direction in which the relevance of the utterance is to be sought. In the context of hateful language, there is definitely more to discover. In addition, as Piskorska rightly points out, "[t]he fundamental distinction between locution, illocution and perlocution does not map

straightforwardly onto the theoretical apparatus of RT” (Piskorska 2016: 289). Rooted in cognitive psychology, RT has been paying attention to different aspects of communication, with focus on the inferential nature of comprehension. Still, it seems that at least at a pre-theoretical level the distinction is valid and the idea of explaining not only perlocutionary effects, but the most salient aspects of speech acts in general is worth pursuing within RT framework.

5. Preliminary conclusions

In short, the renewed speech act theoretic approach can converge with relevance theory in a number of points; both approaches will explicitly focus on actual and envisaged contexts; they are bound to address the problem of mutual knowledge, a set of assumptions that is shared by the interlocutors in question. They are also likely to address the issue of the linguistic and encyclopaedic knowledge continuum. Adopting Hearer’s perspective is further linked with addressing the multiple interpretation issue as hearers interpretations may naturally vary in their understanding of what is manifest and “lexically coded,” and what is derived by inference. Changing the focal perspective from Speaker to Hearer places emphasis on Audiences’ meaning.

Turning to Austin’s model of speech act theory invites trust in the salience of context in on-line meaning construction, with less focus on pre-defined typologies of speech acts, especially in the context of the growing number of newer models granting space for multiple meanings, as, e.g., the “dog whistle” effect, or the forensic aspect of utterances discussed above. Promising research areas in the SAT (speech act theory) and RT interface include the underdeterminacy thesis, degrees of ostensiveness, speech act types and their role in communication, if any, the status of explicature, and the relevance of the three-partite division within a speech act. The question of ostensive communication and the functions of language, understood in speech act theory as force ascription in interpreting linguistic performance is a specially promising field of integrated research.

To reiterate, the convergence with RT does not seem to be a departure from the traditional model of speech-act theory, but a revival of Austin’s original agenda: “[t]he total speech-act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating.” (Austin 1962/1975: 148). This paper offers a number of loosely connected ideas, but hopefully, further research can prove relevance of real convergence between speech act theory and RT with a cognitive turn.

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