



# From Speech Act Theory to Pragmatics

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**From Speech Act Theory to Pragmatics :  
the loss of the illocutionary point. (= “Pragmatics today”)**

First I would like to thank Irène and Costantino for having invited me to participate to this round-table.

The aim of this presentation is to offer a very brief survey, both conceptual and historical, of the developments of Pragmatics during the last sixty years (of course many things will be missing and my development will be very schematic compared to what has already been exposed, but the idea is to offer a way of looking at this history). More precisely it will be the story of how Speech Act Theory has become « Pragmatics », and therefore has lost part of its conceptual interest, namely John L. Austin's discovery of the *illocutionary aspect* of speech – namely the fact that speaking is an *action*. I will thus try to emphasize the fact that contemporary Pragmatics is not faithful to speech act theory and does not intend to be (at least since Herbert P. Grice), because it does not offer the same kind of analysis, losing sight of what is really *done* by a speech act, in moving back from a conventionalist point of view to a more “truth-conditional” and “mentalist” one. At the same time, I hope to point to some pervasive conceptions in contemporary philosophy of language that, as you will see, echo, and sometimes duplicate, problems and conceptions occurring in the Middle-Ages Pragmatics. We will find out in the twentieth Century the same kind of problems and the same diversity of responses that those we have studied during this conference. A further aim will be to show that certain theories are needed to explain certain pragmatic phenomena.

For sure, both Speech act theory and Pragmatics intend to study linguistic phenomena left unexplained by the grammatical or logical analysis of language, which constituted the orthodox view in the analytic philosophy of language during the twentieth century. This lack was already noticed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe by theorists such as Adolf Reinach, Alan Gardiner or Charles Morris. But it is at Oxford in the 1950s that a group of philosophers, called “ordinary language philosophers” because they concentrated on ordinary language use rather than logical analysis, including Austin, Peter F. Strawson, Ryle, Grice,

Urmson, precisely criticized logical analysis and extensional and truth-conditional conceptions of language according to which a sentence expresses a “proposition” analysable in terms of its truth-conditions. According to that conception, the sentence (i) “The cat is on the mat” would be true if and only if the cat is on the mat; its meaning could thus be reduced to its timeless truth-conditions. But Strawson, for instance, is well-known for having been the first to undermine Russell's logical conception of meaning and denotation and for having shown that “referring” is a pragmatic action, rather than a purely linguistic one, in emphasizing the role of pragmatic presuppositions in that process : according to him, in order to refer, certain presuppositions need to be in order (which does not mean that they need to be asserted or meant) in certain uses of language. It was one of the first step towards a pragmatic account of language use.

But pragmatic reflections have really emerged on the philosophical scene with what is called “Speech acts theory”, which essentially originates in the pioneer and revolutionary work of Austin (1911-1960). He considers that the truth-conditional account of language use (as it has been proposed by Logical Positivist) is faulty because of a “descriptive illusion” which leads to suppose that language mainly aims at saying true things, at transmitting a certain “content” or piece of information about something (the world or the speaker's thought about it). Now Austin wants to emphasize *pragmatic* phenomena arising in speech : more precisely the fact that discourse may accomplish action. What he discovers (or discovers anew) is the fact that speech changes something in the course of events (we'll see what later), and not (or not only) the fact that it conveys something that is not explicitly said. Austin's aim is thus to focus on what is *done* in discourse rather than on what is said (what is said depending, according to him, on what is done)

His main concern is language in use; that is, *utterances* which he distinguishes from *sentences*. Indeed every utterance aims at something and thus does not only depend on truth-conditions : it depends on certain *felicity conditions*. There are specific felicity conditions related to every kind of utterance. A felicity condition is not fulfilled when the content of a sentence is true but when the *circumstances* are adequate for using it. For instance, if I say (ii) “I promise to go to bed early” I make a promise only if the audience trusts me. The same happens with baptism, all obviously institutional utterances and even with *declarative utterances* – utterances

intended to be true. Indeed, I can only say (iii) "It's raining" if I have reasons to say so, that is if I am *justified* in using this sentence in this context. Otherwise, my utterance is not even false: it *fails* because I have no point making it. Just as my promise does not fail because of the falsity of its content but because one cannot perform it as an action – as something that may fail. Thus declarative utterances too are actions because they have felicity conditions : they are *speech acts*. There are thus different kinds of speech acts, such as promises, declarations, statements, etc., and each has specific felicity conditions which are *conventionally* and *contextually* determined and has nothing to do with truth-conditions. Rather, the felicity of an utterance depends on certain conventions.

Indeed Austin does not only forges the concept of *performative* utterances, he also shows that all utterances *are* speech acts in that they perform specific actions. These ones are conventional actions in that the effect they produce is purely conventional (it's important to note that it is not a natural effect). To be more precise, Austin specifies three ways an utterance can do something. One makes a *locution* in using a sentence to *mean* something in a certain context. One makes an *illocution* in using a sentence to *alter* (in a kind of legal way) the state of affairs. One makes a *perlocution* in using a sentence to *affect* the audience. Take our example of a promise. The locution is the fact that I *said* I promised to go early to bed. The illocution is the fact that I *promised* to go early to bed. The perlocution is the fact that, by promising, I may have *reassured* my parents. These are three modalities of the act of saying but the most important one is the generalized illocutionary aspect implying that any utterance is conventionally determined. Contrary to perlocutionary effects which are contingent (and which correspond to what the old rhetoric studied), illocutionary actions need conventional procedures to be performed because they imply that the hearer will necessarily take the performance of the utterance as altering the world (that's the "uptake") – in a conventional or a legal sense. This conventional/legal aspect of illocutionary acts explains the commitments they necessarily convey : to perform an illocutionary act is to alter the world in the sense that it leads to an illocutionary effect, which can be characterized as obligation and/or permission (deontic modalities – it relates to what Catarina Dutilh Novaes said yesterday). For instance, in using (ii) to make a promise, I'm committed to keep my promise ; in using (i) to make a statement, I'm committed to

prove the truth of that statement. These commitments and obligations only arise by conventions ruling the speech acts : they are real changes of the course of events, even if they cannot be but conventional effects<sup>1</sup>.

This account of utterances as speech acts also implies that speech has conditions of use determined by the felicity conditions. Thus each utterance has *presuppositions*, *implications* and *commitments* : for instance, if I promise to marry Valery, it is *presupposed* that I'm not already married and it *implies* that I will marry her. These pragmatic conditions, which take into account the context of utterances, will become important in Grice's analysis, in which they will gain a cognitive role (Whereas, according to Strawson and Austin, presuppositions are dumb : they do not carry any meaning or content ; they just refer to something that exists). Moreover no special role is given to intentions ; better : Austin explicitly criticizes any appeal to intention to explain the commitments taken by speech acts (as Laurent Cesalli reminded us).

In sum, Austin's theory of speech acts is a radical conventionalist account of speech highlighting the ritual practices to which speaking contributes and revealing two specific acts (illocutionary and perlocutionary) that arise in linguistic exchanges. This way, it reveals the revolutionary fact that speaking does change the course of events.

John Searle, who was Austin's student at Oxford in the 1950s, refines Austinian claims in a more systematic and mentalistic way. Although Austin tries to escape the truth-conditional orthodoxy of analytic philosophy, Searle tries to give an analysis of speech acts phenomena in line with this orthodoxy. He transforms ordinary language analysis into a logical analysis of speech acts, seen as semantic phenomena (see Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). For him, a speech act is composed of an *illocutionary force* and a *propositional content*, that may be explained in an extensional way. Take the promise (ii)<sup>2</sup>: it has the illocutionary force of a promise and the propositional content "I go to bed early". Consider sentence (i)<sup>3</sup>: in a certain use it has the illocutionary force of a statement and the propositional content "the

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1. The conventional character of the illocutionary effect is noticeable by its « defeasibility ». One can annul the illocutionary effect of a speech act if one can show that the conventional procedure is not valid or the felicity conditions of the act not fulfilled.

2. "I promise to go to bed early"

3. "The cat is on the mat"

cat is on the mat". There exist as many illocutionary forces as kinds of speech acts, each having certain conditions of use and of satisfaction. Here propositional contents are classically analysed in terms of truth-conditions, except that Searle considers the reference as a specific speech act. Two different speech acts may have the same propositional content and different illocutionary forces – for instance, I may use the propositional content "I go to bed early" to make a promise or a statement. But each kind of speech act obtains its specific satisfaction depending *both* on the propositional content and the illocutionary force which specifies the way the act can be satisfied : if I make a promise, it is satisfied if I keep it ; but if I make a statement, it is satisfied if it is true.

To perform a speech act is thus to generate a propositional content linked to an illocutionary force. But to generate an illocutionary force one has to follow several kinds of semantic rules (corresponding to the Austinian felicity conditions): the *preparatory* conditions, the *sincerity* condition and the *essential* condition. Preparatory conditions include the contextual and linguistic factors, already noticed by Austin. The sincerity condition includes intentional factors about the speaker – for instance, if I want to make a promise, I must have the intention to do what I say. The essential condition includes the (conventional and constitutive) rule entitling one to take certain utterances as performances of speech acts – for instance, if I want to make a promise, my utterance is to count as the undertaking of an obligation. It includes the commitment taken in making a certain speech act – a commitment that must be explicit in the speaker's intentions: to perform a certain speech act he must have the intention to undertake the commitments attached to it.

But, with Searle, speech act analysis begins to depart from Austin's ideas. The first important aspect of Searle's account of speech act is the rigid distinction he introduces between the content and the force of it (something which was absent from Austin's analysis). The second is that his analysis depends on an intentional or mentalist view which implies that the speaker's intentions – and their recognition – are essential to the realisation of a speech act (whereas for Austin one cannot perform an act by making an appeal to intention). Finally, according to Searle, one can perform a speech act only if one manifests one's intention to do it by using such a sentence and if one manifests one's intention to undertake all the commitments of the speech act one intends to perform. Searle's analysis thus combines conventional

and intentional aspects to give a new semantic account of speech, in the sense that what one has to manifest to make a speech act is no more a certain procedure but a certain cognitive content (the intention). The uptake does not concern conventions but intentions. So the speech act does not really carry a change in the world anymore : now it entails a change in the way the audience is taking the intentions of the speaker. It rather points to a conceptual change (“in the head” of the speakers).

From this intentionalist point of view other conclusions may be drawn. If speaking consists in making one's intentions to make a certain speech act explicit, then speaking may be seen as a *communication* of intentions. One can thus apprehend language as a means of communicating. Therefore Grice (1913-1988) – who studied and taught at Oxford at the same time as Austin but whose work became known after Austin's death – analyses language as a non-natural way of meaning something, that is of conveying some communicative intentions. By the way, his explicit goal is to depart from Austin's philosophy of ordinary language and to offer not a theory of speech act but of communication.

Grice distinguishes between natural meaning and non-natural meaning – the latter being conventional *and* intentional. The natural meaning is close to natural and regular relations between two elements in the world (for instance, clouds mean that it will rain). The non-natural meaning includes all conventional meanings – especially linguistic meanings. Contrary to Austin, Grice's proposal is to offer a foundational explanation of non-natural meaning made in terms of intentions (and not primarily of conventions): a speaker means something non-naturally when he uses something intentionally to convey some information to an addressee. For instance, in saying “It is raining”, I intend to produce the belief that it is raining by making the hearer recognize through the use of that sentence (having a certain meaning) my intention to make her believe that it is raining. This process explains how the sentence “it is raining” acquires its meaning. Then, by conventionalization of intentional uses, language becomes a code with a semantic content to decode.

But language itself may be used to convey another content than the one coded. If I say “It is raining” meaning “I won't go out”, what I mean or communicate is not included in the meaning of the sentence “it is raining” (in its propositional content) and cannot thus be reduced to what I say. It is *inferred* or

*implicated* by what I say. How can one establish what is to be inferred? It can be done because communication is a cooperative practice determined by several conversational, universal principles (governed by the general principle of cooperation) ruling linguistic behaviors and governing linguistic inferences. If the inferences are only made according to the conventional meaning of the words used, then implicatures are conventional (in saying “It is raining” I may conventionally implicate “The weather is bad”). If the inferences do not directly follow from the linguistic meaning, then *conversational implicatures* are made according to *conversational principles*: if I say “Is there a bathroom in this place?” during a party, my presupposed rationality and the principle of cooperation allow the hearer to infer that I need to know where the bathroom is (a content that is not literally meant by my words).

A speaker may of course violate one or another conversational principles but even this violation enables the addressee to interpret the linguistic behavior in a rational way. When what I say is not relevant the hearers interpret this un-relevance as a way of meaning something – something one may infer given the other principles and the meta-principle of cooperation. Of course, what one implies belong to the domain of the conceptual (or the meaningful).

Grice thus identifies new ways of analysing certain phenomena that traditional linguistics cannot take into account and that Austin called *presupposition*. He accomplishes this by giving a certain role to contextual features but, quite surprisingly, this enables him to elaborate a theory of human communicative behaviour governed by *rational* principles (and not contextual principles). Furthermore one observes a change of perspective : we are not trying to explain what speech does or how it acts anymore ; we just want to know how it communicates a content that is not explicitly said. All the focus of the analysis is now put on the cognitive content of language (however contextually determined it may be), rather than on its pragmatic conditions and the pragmatic effects it may have.

More recently, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory has intended to explain this rationality, in a way that makes theory of language heavily depend on a theory of mind (Wilson was trained as a psychologist). It relies on communication rather



seen as an *inferential* process than as a cooperative process. When people communicate they do not only decode a coded language, they *infer* assumptions about the communicative comportment of an agent. If I explicitly look at the sky, people can deduce, given some further contextual and environmental factors, that I mean something by that ostensive behavior – for instance, that it is going to rain. In linguistic interaction, the coded linguistic message does not convey all the information actually conveyed in that interaction. It only supplies evidence for making further inferences so that communication is not successful when hearers merely recognise the linguistic meaning of an utterance but is successful when they infer the speaker's meaning from it. Then they have to identify the *informative intention* to inform them of something, together with the *communicative intention* to inform them of one's informative intention.

But how are such inferences possible? How can I find what the intended meaning or the informative intention is? Sperber and Wilson's answer is a naturalistic and psychological one. According to them, human beings are complex systems treating information in a *relevant* way. Something is relevant if it allows one to infer new information when combined with old premises contained in a mental background made of assumptions (about the world, the way things go, the speaker, the hearers, etc.). A process of inference aims at obtaining cognitive *efficiency* – at having some contextual effects among one's representational assumptions. The most efficient is the most relevant. For instance, if one answers “It's raining” to my question “Would you like to go out with me?”, it seems at first sight that the answer has no point. So the most efficient inference to be made in a context where I know that the person has just come from the hairdresser is to suppose that she does not want to ruin her hairdo. That inference helps the answer to gain some relevance granting the verbal interaction's efficiency.

To secure that relevance the speaker must ensure that the hearer will take her utterance as aiming to be relevant and must then ostensibly communicate the presumption of optimal relevance. This is Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance – a kind of a natural process necessarily occurring in all communicative interactions. Thus a rational speaker must intend her utterance to appear relevant enough for catching the hearer's attention. Further this utterance should allow the hearer to make the right inferences with a minimal effort in making the best

relevant inferences in that situation in order to interpret the intended meaning. To ensure she achieves her communicative intention the speaker has to choose a sentence which would make her informative intention mutually manifest.

So one can say that Sperber and Wilson offer an intentionalist account of speech acts that, following Searle, radically departs from Austin's insights. The meaning is not given in the speech anymore but is explained by some mental inferential processes – so that now linguistic phenomena seem to depend on psychology. Moreover the only efficiency that is recognized is clearly a cognitive efficiency which does not change anything in the course of events.

This is now a new kind of orthodoxy in analytic philosophy of language and in pragmatics, even if the new fashion consist in being a contextualist defending a minimalist conception of meaning (Frédéric Gouber presented these thesis) : the meaning is supposed to be determined, in many ways and to different extent, by the context. But, still, if these latter ideas originate in an austinian account of meaning and attention to circumstances of utterances, it is often conflated with a mentalist counterpart aiming at saving a “literal content” (for example, see the debate between Récanati and Travis). In this way, Pragmatics only takes into account more contextual features that it used to be, but does not really change its focus on the content of utterances. Moreover, the very name of this new theory, “truth-conditional pragmatics”, shows how much the focus is put on “truth-values” anew – that is exactly what speech acts theory tried to avoid. In a sense, pragmatics does not really differ from semantics : it only takes different features (context, intentions, etc.) into account .

To conclude : one may thus observe a radical change of perspective since the fifties : focus is not on acts done by speech anymore, but on non-explicit meaning (or content) conveyed by what is still called “speech act”, even if nobody really knows what act is done here.

For all that, other accounts of these phenomena can be developed, following the austinian idea that speech is primarily a linguistic and social phenomenon arising in interaction. Thus various forms of « conversational analysis », which take into account the discourse's situation and the social context (see E. Goffman (1922-1982)), or analysis of illocutionary effects in terms of deontic modalities (see for

instance, Marina Sbisà's reading of Austin ; but Catarina's reading of Brandom may be another example), may be more faithful to Austin's analysis of speech acts than what pragmatics has become, in that these various forms of analysis try to explain what is the action done by language. Indeed, its inheritance in the formal pragmatics of Searle and Vanderveken or its appropriation by cognitive sciences (generally) scarcely bears any resemblance to Austin's will of taking into account the whole richness of language in its ordinary uses, especially the pragmatic effects it has in certain circumstances, in certain social environments. The question now is : is it really a conceptual gain to thus cancel the reality of the “illocutionary effect” that was underlined by Austin, and by others before him, as this whole conference has reminded us ?

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