LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION: A SCHEMA FOR SPEECH ACTS

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ABSTRACT

Extensive work in the study of language has been stimulated by the work of Chomsky on grammar, Grice and Katz on meaning, and Austen and Searle on speech acts. Nevertheless, little has been done to integrate this topic into a general account of linguistic communication. Even though it is widely recognized that to communicate linguistically is more than just saying something---what is communicated is determined not merely by what is said. In my view a communicative intention has the peculiar feature that its fulfillment consists in its recognition. The speaker intends the hearer to recognize the point of his utterance not just through (1) content and (2) context but also because (3) the point is intended to be recognized. The inference is simplest in the literal case, but each case involves all three factors: content, context, and communicative intention. These factors require systematic explanation. Accordingly, I attempt to characterize precisely the nature of communicative intentions together with the nature of the inference the hearer makes in identifying them. Within the framework of this account people are offered a detailed classification of speech acts and the role of social conventions in the performance of speech acts.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic, Communication, Speech Act Schema (SAS), Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCB), Illocutionary, Locutionary, Perlocutionary

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to present a conception of linguistic communication that integrates philosophical, linguistic, and psychological issues. People don't speak merely to exercise their vocal cords. Generally, the reason people say what they say when they say it is to communicate something to those they are addressing. That is in saying something a person has certain intention and the act of communicating succeeds only if that intention is recognized by the hearer. The intention is partly recognized on the basis of what is said, but only partly. What is said does not fully determine what the speaker is to be taken to be doing. If he says "I'm going to pay you back for that," he could be making a promise or issuing a threat. How does the hearer decide which? And how does the speaker know which way the hearer will take his utterance?

Components of Speech Acts

Before taking up those questions, different aspects of speech act should be distinguished. If S is the speaker, H the hearer, e an expression (typically a sentence) in language L, and C the context of utterance, the main constituents of S's speech act can be schematically represented as follows:

Utterance Act: S utters e from L to H in C.

Locutionary Act: S says to H in C that so-and-so.

Illocutionary Act: S does such-and-such in C.

Prelocutionary Act: S affects H in a certain way.[1]

These acts are intimately related. In uttering e, S says something to H; in saying something to H, S does something; and by doing something, S affects H. Moreover, the success of the perlocutionary act depends on H's identifying one of the other acts. This problem is to specify precisely as possible the nature of these acts as well as their relations to one another.[2] Clearly there is more to a speech act than saying something (performing a locutionary act), but preliminary characterization gives no indication of the difference between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Austin's distinction in terms of what is done in saying something and what is done by saying something (1962, lectures IX and X) is suggestive at best, since it does not explain the distinction it marks.[3] Illocutionary and perlocutionary acts can both produce effects on the hearer, but according to Austin (p. 116) a successful illocutionary act brings about "understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution,' that is, it secures uptake. Strawson (1964a, 459) suggests that for illocutionary acts, the effectiveness of the speaker's intention is that the hearer identifies identity the very act the speaker intends to be performing, and successful communication requires fulfillment of that intention.

Simple Version of the Speech Act Schema (SAS)

People view linguistic communication as an inferential process. The speaker provides, by what he says, a basis for the hearer to infer what the speaker intends to be thereby doing. However, what he says underdetermines what he can reasonably expect to be taken to be intending. In general, the inference the hearer makes and takes himself to be intended to make is based not on what the speaker says but also on Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCBs), as people use such silent contextual information. With the example "I love you like my brother" (uttered by woman) in one case the crucial MCB is that the woman does not have amorous feelings toward her brother, whereas in another it is that the speaker hates his brother. Such items of information is known as "belief/s" rather than "knowledge" because they need not to be true in order to figure in the speaker's intention and the hearer's inference. It is known as "contextual" because they are both relevant to and activated by the context of utterance (or by utterance itself).

In short, the hearer relies on, and is intended to rely on, MCBs to determine from the meaning of the sentence uttered what the speaker is saying, and from the force and content of the speaker's illocutionary act. Accordingly, the inference H makes and is intended to make is of roughly the following form:

	Basis
L1. S is the uttering e.	Hearing S utter e
L2. S means such-and such by e.	L1, MCBs
L3. S is saying that so-and-so.	L2, MCBs
L4. S is doing such-and-such.	L3, MCBs

Cast in this preliminary form this inference pattern constitutes what we call the speech act schema (SAS).

In addition to mutual contextual beliefs, there are two general mutual beliefs that the hearer relies on to make his inference. They are shared not just between S and H but among members of the linguistic community at large. Previous as they are, they may seem almost too obvious to mention, but must be included in the SAS. We call them the linguistic presumption (LP) and the communicative presumption (CP).

In the following section certain raised issues pertaining to the connection between what S says (L3) and what S means (L2) by what he utters (L1).[4]

Saying and the Linguistic Presumption

Without mutually believing that they share the language they are using. Generally, this mutual belief arises from the linguistic presumption that prevails among members of the community at large. As a matter of social fact, the LP in a community is so strong that not to know the language is often sign of nonmember ship in the community. People presume that if you belong to the community, you know the language. So when S utters something e in L (the language is question), he expects H to understand it. Indeed he expects this not because he thinks H has heard e before ever learned the meaning of e in particular, but because he thinks H knows L and will, by virtue of knowing L, understand e.[5] Thus, because the LP applies generally to communication situations in C_L, S and H mutually believe that each will understand almost anything in L uttered by the other; unless something happens to show that LP does not apply, S and H are each in a position to reach L3 of the SAS, H to identify what S is saying and S to intend H to identify what he is saying.

Literal Illocutionary Acts

In the speech act schema L3 represents what the speaker says and L4 what he is thereby doing in saying it. Since the speaker might not be performing any illocutionary act at all, it is only on the presumption that he is (the CP) that the hearer will infer that the speaker is performing some illocutionary act or other. As for identifying what the act is, the hearer relies primarily on what is said, and when we find the most straightforward relation between what is said and what is done when the speaker literally and what he says and nothing else. In this case he is speaking literally and what he does is largely determined by what he says.

Because of non literal and indirect illocutionary acts, the slogan "Meaning determines force" is generally false. It is most nearly correct in the case of literal acts- but not quite. Although what the speaker does might be determined by what he says, that he is performing any illocutionary act at all is not; he could be merely practicing his English or mechanically reciting some lines. Moreover, that he is speaking literally is not determined by what he says. If S says, for example "The sun is shining on me today," he could be talking either about the weather or about his fortunes, depending on whether or not he is speaking literally.

Even allowing for the fact that the meaning of what is uttered does not determine that some illocutionary act is being performed, much less that it is being performed literally, it is not always true that meaning determines the force of literal illocutionary acts. In general, the meaning merely delimits the force. For example, if someone says that he will return, whether he is making a promise or merely a statement of intention, his illocutionary act is literal. So the force (illocutionary act type) of an utterance need not to be explicit to be literal. You do not have to say "I accuse…." To make an accusation. For that matter, you can use a performative verb nonliterally, as when posing a threat by saying "I promise."

The Communicative Presumption and Illocutionary Intentions

The communicative presumption is the mutual belief prevailing in a linguistic community to the effect that whenever someone says something to somebody, he intends to be performing some identifiable illocutionary act. Generally people don't have the technical concept of illocutionary acts and therefore do not have beliefs, much less mutual beliefs, about illocutionary acts and therefore do not have beliefs, much less mutual beliefs, about illocutionary acts. But they do mutually believe that speakers speak with overt intentions and this mutual belief figures in ordinary communication situations. People do rely on others to have identifiable intentions in their utterances and they expect others to rely on them to have such intentions.

Illocutionary Intentions and Effects

An illocutionary act is communicatively successful if the speaker's illocutionary intention is recognized by the hearer. These intentions are essentially communicative because the fulfillment of illocutionary intentions consists in hearer understanding. Not only are such intentions reflexive, their fulfillment consists in their recognition. Not only such intentions reflexive, has their fulfillment consisted in their recognition. Thus the intended effect of an act of communication is not just any effect produced by means of recognition of the intention to produce a certain effect produced by means of recognition of the intention to produce a certain effect, it is the recognition of that effect. There seems to be a reflexive paradox here, but in fact there is none. The effect, the hearer's recognizing the speaker's intention to produce the effect, is not produced by the hearer's recognizing that intention- that would be worse than a paradox, it would be a miracle. Rather, it is produced by the hearer's recognizing that the speaker has intention to produce a certain effect in him that he is to identify (and thereby have produced in him) partly by recognizing S's intention to produce an identifiable effect. The hearer has to figure out what that intention- the intended effect- is, on the basis primarily of the speaker's utterance, along the lines of the SAS.

Now what sorts of (intended) illocutionary effects- effects consisting in recognition of R-intentions-can there be? In other words, what can be the content of communicative intentions? It is a commonplace that linguistic communication consists in putting one's thoughts into words. This cliché is correct as far as it goes; the problem is to go further. In our view, to communicate is indeed to express a thought or, more generally, an attitude, be it a belief, an intention, a desire, or even a feeling; but in saying that to communicate is to express an attitude, we mean something very specific by "express."

Perlocutionary Acts and Effects

Austin (1962, 101) introduces the notion of a perlocutionary act as follows:

Saying 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 …. People would call it the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act.

Since there is virtually no limit to the sorts of things that can result from speech acts – almost anything is possible, from insulting someone to starting a war—it would seem reasonable to restrict the category of perlocutionary acts in whatever ways seem theoretically appropriate. This is a matter of terminological stipulation, of course, but that does not make it arbitrary.

CONCLUSIONS

The locutionary act, the act of saying something, provides the hearer with the core of information from which to infer the speaker's illocutionary (communicative) intent. Other items of information contribute substantially to this identification, especially when S is speaking nonliterally or indirectly. But even when he is speaking literally, such that his illocutionary intent is made more or less explicit by what he says, his instent still has to be inferred by the hearer. Thus, a locutionary act is always distinct from any literal illocutionary act being performed, and until the hearer takes into account other information besides that provided by the locutionary act, all he can infer is what, if any, literal illocutionary act is being performed.

The SAS is only a schema, however, and can do only so much. It represents the pattern of inference made by the hearer but it does not represent how the inference is made. In particular, mutual contextual beliefs are cited in various lines

of the schema and are relied on by the hearer to go from one step to the next, the SAS is not equipped to predict which MCBs are activated and so cannot predict precisely how a given hearer will take a given utterance. Moreover it represents the pattern of inference in steps, thereby organizing the mass of information available to the hearer, in backtracking as he goes along.

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