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RATIONALITY AS THE NORMATIVE DIMENSION OF SPEECH ACTS

abstract

My paper deals with Searle's account of the normative dimension involved in the performance of speech acts. I will first critically assess the rule-based speech act theory behind Searle's characterization of the normativity of language – arguing that this approach cannot explain what makes a certain illocutionary act the specific type of illocutionary act it is, both in literal and non-literal or indirect cases. As an alternative, I will endorse the inferentialist model of linguistic communication proposed by Bach and Harnish. Besides a benefit on the side of speech act theory, the inferentialist model – along with some suggestions offered by Grice's later reflections about rationality – can adequately account for the normative dimension arising from language. In particular, it enables to do so by emphasizing an aspect pointed out by Searle himself: the social character of the communication situation. I will claim that the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality could be regarded as the basic form of normativity deriving from the social character of the communication situation.

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In this paper I address a crucial thesis maintained in Searle's *Making the Social World*, namely that "language is the basic form of public deontology" (Searle 2010, 82). My aim is to criticize the rule-based speech act theory underlying Searle's account of the normativity of language, arguing in favor of an alternative way of accounting for the normative dimension associated with the performance of speech acts. In order to deal with the criticism it is worth considering in the first place the way Searle characterizes the deontology related to the performance of speech acts.

Searle's rule-based approach to speech acts survives substantially unaltered since its early formulation in *Speech Acts* (1969), inasmuch as Searle avows that "it is tempting, and indeed true, to say that the constitutive rules [whose form is 'X counts as Y in C'] of the institutions of statement making and promising make every statement into a commitment to truth and every promise into an obligation to do something" (Searle 2010, 81). The hypothesis central to *Speech Acts* consists in regarding "the semantic structure of a language as a conventional realization of a series of sets of underlying constitutive rules", with speech acts defined as "acts characteristically performed by uttering expressions in accordance with these sets of constitutive rules" (Searle 1969, 37). In *Making the Social World* Searle is concerned with the nature of the commitment engendered by the performance of a speech act and the dependence of the commitment on the compliance of that performance with the constitutive rules.

According to Searle, it is not possible to perform a speech act in accordance to conventional procedures, without thereby publicly committing oneself to the conditions of satisfaction proper of the speech act performed. The undertaking of social commitment is *internal* to the performance of any possible speech act. Searle states that the necessity of social commitments derives from:

(i)   the social character of the communication situation,
(ii) the conventional character of the devices used,
(iii) the intentionality of speaker meaning (Searle 2010, 80).

Aspects ii. and iii. play a strong role in Searle's characterization of the

commitment produced by the performance of a speech act. With respect to iii., in the standard speech act situation the commitment flows from the *primary-meaning intention* (i.e., the intentional imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction) as well as from the *communicative intention* (i.e., the intention that the hearer should recognize the representing intention) (Searle 1986, 2010). With respect to ii., the commitment flows from the conventional character of the procedures allowing to communicate the conditions of satisfaction, namely the accordance of the speech act performed with some relevant semantic rules. As to i., it is intended by Searle as concerning the fact that the performance of a speech act is "*above all a public performance*" (Searle 2010, 83).

According to many scholars, Searle's approach presents at least one weakness. Bach and Harnish, in particular, maintain that a rule-based conventionalist approach cannot properly account for non-literal and indirect performances of illocutionary acts. More generally, the performance of the speech act in compliance with conventional rules is not sufficient to perform the act *as* an act of a certain illocutionary type: "meaning never exhausts illocutionary force" (Bach & Harnish 1979, 132)[1]. For example, the utterance of the sentence "The door is open" may well be an assertion, an order, a threat, or a piece of advice, and the linguistic meaning of the sentence alone cannot determine it.

With regard to Searle's account, Searle explicitly limits it to serious, literal and direct discourse (Searle 1969, 20, 55-56). Furthermore, Searle's own attempt to explain indirect speech acts (Searle 1975), notwithstanding its appeal to rules and conventions, brings into play mutually shared background information, the hearer's inferential abilities, and general principles of cooperative conversation. Still, the strategy employed to explain indirect cases remains peripheral and is not complemented with the main rule-based account according to which literal cases are fully accounted for.

The objection I therefore address to Searle's rule-based account of speech acts is analogous to the one Searle himself (Searle 1980) made against the traditional semantic thesis, which states that the literal meaning of a sentence determines its truth conditions. Searle's claim is that "the literal meaning of a sentence only determines a set of truth conditions given a set of background practices

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1   As an example, considering the words "I love you like my brother", the hearer could understand the utterance in several different ways: as an assurance, an admission, an answer to a question, or a promise. Moreover, by hearing "The sun is shining on me today" the hearer cannot determine whether the speaker is performing a literal or a non-literal illocutionary act.

and assumptions", that is to say, the interpretation of a literal sentence is made possible only against "a whole background of information about how nature works and our culture works" (Searle 1980, 226-227)[2].

In the light of Searle's considerations about literal meaning, and along with Bach and Harnish, I claim that the kind of illocutionary act performed by a certain utterance cannot be determined ignoring a set of "background presumptions" about the communication context shared by the interlocutors, and that this applies even to literal and direct cases[3]. Whether the utterance of the sentence "The door is open" constitutes an assertion, an order, a threat, or a piece of advice obviously depends not only on "what is said," but also on the *context of utterance* and on the speaker's *communicative intention.*

In contrast with Searle's approach, and endorsing Bach and Harnish's perspective (1979), I advocate in favor of an inferentialist model of linguistic communication, explaining and motivating the need for such a model. In the inferentialist model, the hearer's understanding of the illocutionary act amounts to inferring the speaker's attitude from "what is said", together with *mutual contextual beliefs*, two general mutual beliefs peculiar to the communication situation (*linguistic* and *communicative presumptions*), and a set of *conversational presumptions* (drawn from Grice's maxims).

Such presumptions represent the conception of the communication-exchange as shared by the interlocutors, enabling them to engage in the communicative interaction, and actually determining the very possibility of any interaction. They have the status of defeasible mutual beliefs in that they are operative unless there is indication to the contrary, in which case the hearer is invited to seek for some alternative interpretations, or to suspend the presumption relevant to the incongruity in question. For instance, an incongruity regarding the communicative presumption would induce the hearer to think that no speech act is being performed at all, since this presumption enables the speaker not to determine *what* illocutionary act has been performed by uttering an expression, but rather *that* an illocutionary act has thereby been performed. Moreover, Bach and

2   Searle focuses on the word "cut": in spite of its having "one and the same semantic content", it "seems to make a different contribution to the truth condition of the sentence in each case" in which it occurs – e.g., "Bill cut the grass", "Sally cut the cake", "The President cut the salaries of the employees", "Cut the cackle!" (Searle 1980, 223, 221).
3   See (Kissine 2011) for a recent criticism of Searle's view on the determination of the illocutionary act. Kissine also appeals to the tension between Searle's speech act theory and his writings on the background of meaning. See also (Recanati 2003) on this point.

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Harnish contend that due to a *presumption of literaliness*, the hearer is guided to infer – as a first hypothesis – a literal interpretation of the utterance[4]. The (direct) literal act, as opposite to non-literal or indirect ones, represents the occurrence of the most straightforward relation between what is said and what is done (respectively, locutionary and illocutionary acts).

Central to the inferentialist account is the fact that communication consists in the speaker's expression of an attitude by means of reflexive-intending (i.e., an intention intended to be recognized as so intended) "that the hearer take the [speaker]'s utterance as *reason* to think [she] has that attitude" (Bach and Harnish 1979, 39, emphasis mine).

The account of linguistic communication provided by the inferentialist model has the advantage of including the explication of non-literal and indirect speech acts within the same inferential schema involved in the literal cases. Indeed, the recognition of direct and literal illocutionary acts rests on an inferential process which is homogeneous for all kinds of strategies: direct literal, literally-based indirect, direct non-literal and non-literally-based indirect[5]. Moreover, the inferentialist model allows us to focus on the first of the aspects pinpointed by Searle, as the basis from which it is possible to account for the normativity of language.

In doing so, I distance myself from Bach and Harnish, who define a "moral question" whether illocutionary acts create a deontology, stating that "at best they create mutual beliefs between speaker and hearer about rights and obligations" (Bach & Harnish 1979, 124)[6]. As Searle, I do regard the deontology engendered by language as *internal* to the performance of speech acts. Nevertheless, I do not consider the deontology as consequential to the compliance of that performance to a system of semantic rules governing the conventional devices employed. Instead, I put the focus on the "social character of the communication situation", from the standpoint of the analysis provided by Bach and Harnish, and of some suggestions occurring in Grice's later reflections about reason, rationality and value (Grice 1991, 2001). With regard to Grice's reflections, I sketch out below his main view.

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4   It has to be noticed that the hypothesis of a presumption of literaliness is too strong, and that maybe the appeal to such presumption may be avoided.

5   Characterizing the understanding of speech acts as an inferential process amounts to considering such process as abductive (non-monotonic) reasoning, along with the analysis provided by AI (see Hobbs 2004).

6   See also (Harnish 2005), which faces the issue of normativity, but envisions a solution different from the (inferentialist) one that I am proposing here.

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In the John Locke Lectures, held in 1979, Grice undertakes a clarification of the notions of reason and rationality by means of an analysis of the concept of reasoning. As a result, he upholds that the idea of *good* reasoning is prior to, and in fact shapes the concept of reasoning itself. Reasoning amounts to a *value-paradigmatic* concept, and rationality/reason turns out to be an evaluative concept as well (Grice 2001, 35-36). Furthermore, in the Carus Lectures (1983) he describes the attribute of rationality as consisting in "a concern on the part of the creature which has it [...] that the attitudes, positions, and acceptances which he (voluntarily) takes up should have attached to them certificates of value of some appropriate kind," i.e., that these attitudes should be "well grounded, based on reasons, or *validated*" (Grice 1991, 82). Taking into consideration Grice's suggestions, and rephrasing an idea originally expressed by Jaegwon Kim (Kim 1988), we could say that the terms within the scope of rationality are normative, since rationality itself is essentially normative.

I claim that the *presumption about the interlocutor's rationality* could be regarded as the basic form of normativity deriving from the social character of the communication situation. This key presumption, along with general mutual beliefs of the kind specified by Bach and Harnish, constitutes the precondition for any communicative interaction. The *reasons* with which – according to the inferentialist model – a speaker provides a hearer by expressing a definite attitude (i.e., by performing an illocutionary act intending it as an act of a certain kind) are proper of a rational creature[7].

Considering a creature as rational amounts to attributing a value to her. Considering her in such a way implies to have some expectations about her behaviour, which in turn imposes some constraints on one's own behaviour. To this end, I claim that these expectations and the corresponding constraints can be regarded as constituting an ultra-minimalist notion of normativity, starting from which it might be possible to account for the more complex arrangements of deontic powers (e.g., commitments, obligations, rights, licenses) involved in the performance of any speech act.

In the light of Grice's reflections, we could say that the normative dimension

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7   Making explicit the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality – which underlies Bach and Harnish's inferential schema, but is not fully articulated by the authors – would make it possible not to posit the presumption of literalness, and to fully account for the notion of conversational appropriateness. Bach and Harnish seem in fact unable to define this notion without circularity, inasmuch as they define it by referring to the conversational presumptions borrowed from Grice's maxims (Bach and Harnish 1979, 65).

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engendered by the performance of speech acts – which I have here traced back, as its basic form, to the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality – amounts to the *evaluative dimension* corresponding to such presumption.

Investigating on this possibility would represent a promising direction for further research on the topic. However, this goes beyond the scope of this proposal, which simply has the character of a *quessertion*[8].

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8   Richard Grandy once defined this way the character of of some of Grice's remarks. This kind of speech act should be read as "It is perhaps possible that someone might assert that [...]" (Grice 1989, 297).

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