■ *Marina Sbisà*
UNIVERSITÀ DI TRIESTE

Act

In everyday talk, we sometimes oppose "only saying" something to "doing" something. But if we reflect on how we use language, it is undeniable that language is often (if not always) a tool for doing: it enables us to achieve various kinds of effects on our interlocutors, playing an important role in collaborative action, and contributes to the establishment and management of social relationships. Thus it is sensible to wonder whether and how the idea of "doing something" should be applied to language.

The trend in the philosophy of language and in pragmatic research known as speech act theory has contended that (1) utterances of *every* kind can be considered as acts, and has tried to distinguish different senses in which the issuing of an utterance constitutes or involves the performing of an act, claiming that (2) a distinction should be drawn between what an utterance says and what is done in using it (its "force").

The first contention was already present in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly in his proposal to view language as consisting of rule-governed activities, or "language games." J. L. Austin emphasized the operative character of language, introducing the term "performative" with reference to those declarative sentences that, issued in appropriate circumstances, are not reports or descriptions, but performances of such acts as baptisms ("I name this ship 'Queen Elizabeth' ") or promises ("I promise that I'll come tomorrow"). Austin also claimed that all of our utterances can be reformulated as performatives, and that such reformulations make it explicit what act is performed in issuing the utterance. It is remarkable that for speech act theory, not only ritual utterances such as baptisms or appointments or apologies, and not only non-declarative utterances that cannot be deemed true or false such as orders, advice, and promises, but also assertions or statements are acts.

The second claim has been inspired by Gottlob Frege's distinction between the proposition (the thought expressed by a declarative or interrogative

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sentence) and the judgment that the proposition is true (which turns the proposition into an assertion), i.e., the assertive force. Austin extended the notion of force to all kinds of utterances, distinguishing the "locutionary meaning" of an utterance (what it says) from the way in which the utterance is used, namely, its illocutionary force, indicated by linguistic devices including performative verbs, mood, modals, adverbs and connectives, intonation, or punctuation. John Searle reformulated this distinction as a distinction between the illocutionary force of an utterance and its propositional content. It should be noted that the term "illocutionary" was constructed by Austin from "in" + "locutionary": the illocutionary force of an utterance corresponds to the act that is performed *in* issuing it. The identification of force as a specific level of the speech act's overall meaning has made possible a principled analysis of what we do in speaking.

Speakers perform illocutionary acts in issuing utterances insofar as there are socially accepted conventional procedures for achieving certain conventional effects, which involve the use of utterances of certain kinds in appropriate circumstances. Thus a first kind of analysis made possible is the exploration of the requirements for the performance of illocutionary acts, namely, of their "felicity" or "successfulness" conditions, as well as of what happens when the requirements are not met ("infelicities"). A second kind of analysis that has been practiced even more extensively regards the classification or typology of illocutionary acts. Among the classes that have been proposed, within classificatory frameworks sometimes in competition with each other, there are verdictives (judgments), assertives (committing the speaker to the truth of a proposition), exercitives (involving the exercise of authority), directives (attempts to get the addressee to do something), commissives (committing the speaker to a course of action), and expressives (expressing inner states). It should be noted that classifying illocutionary acts presupposes distinguishing them both from linguistic activities belonging to the locutionary, or propositional, level, and from acts performed "by" speaking (as opposed to "in" speaking), namely, perlocutionary acts (such as persuading or getting someone to do something, alerting, deterring, etc.), which are the achievement of material as opposed to conventional effects. A third area of interest is the linguistic strategies used for performing illocutionary acts of a given kind in different situational or cultural contexts.

The evolution of speech act theory has reduced the import of conventions in the analysis of speech acts, boosting the role of the speaker's intentions. It has become common to think of most speech acts as having as their effect the recognition of the speaker's communicative intention on the part of the hearer. The speaker's intentions are often held to determine which speech act is performed, and the role of the hearer is reduced to getting these intentions right. I believe this is a limitation of the theory, since it leaves no room for collaborative achievements or negotiations about what is done. In contrast, if we grant an active role to the hearer we can see what it means to claim that illocutionary acts have "conventional" effects: speaker and hearer implicitly agree on what the speaker counts as having done.

Another serious limitation of the theory is its primary concern with utterances of the size of a complete sentence and the consequential difficulty

in dealing with conversational turns, conversational sequences, and texts. Are speakers really "doing," and intending to do, something definite in each of the sentences they utter, and only if they utter a complete sentence? This does not seem to be true. But it is still true that as discourse proceeds, the participants' statuses are partly confirmed and partly modified.

There is a range of human activities connected with the management and fine-tuning of interpersonal relationships, which involve the creation of commitments, the assignment and elimination of rights and entitlements or obligations, the legitimation of expectations, and the like. I believe that this area could still be fruitfully explored by taking inspiration from speech act theory in the framework of a conception of language closely connecting language and action, but avoiding philosophical oversimplifications.

(See also *agency, intentionality, participation, performativity, power, relativity, truth, turns*)

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Dipartimento di Filosofia
Università di Trieste
via dell' Università 7
34123 Trieste, Italy
sbisama@univ.trieste.it