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ILLOCUTIONARY DYNAMICS AND DISCRIMINATION

Introduction

There is a way of studying speech acts, and particularly illocutionary acts (Austin, 1975), that can help us deal with social phenomena such as *discrimination* and other matters of power relations (see, e.g., Langton, 1993; Bianchi & Caponetto, 2025).

It is not the case that any conception of illocution among those proposed in the history of speech act theory can do this job. Therefore, I will briefly illustrate my perspective on speech acts and illocution (Sbisà, 1989; 2023) and show how it can throw light on them, as well as with other social phenomena related to the topic of this conference: how language can be an instrument for coexistence or, instead, of conflict.

Let us first lie down some definitions and introductory considerations.

By “illocution” I mean one kind of thing that we do with words, such as make requests, assertions and promises, ask questions, give orders and permissions, offer apologies and explanations. Having illocution as a category of speech action distinct from locution (uttering words, meaning something with them) and perlocution (producing psychological and behavioral responses in the audience) (Austin, 1975; Sbisà, 2013) enables us to see that, with our words, we introduce regulations and changes in the relations among the participants in the linguistic exchange we are contributing to. It is relevant to our topic to discuss how this can happen and we will come back to that soon.

As to “coexistence” and “conflict”, it should be recognized that in principle, these words do not stand in a mutually exclusive opposition. Conflict itself

presupposes co-presence and therefore coexistence (how can you be in conflict without having some relation with your counterpart?). But there are conflicts, most dangerous ones, that take the form of the disacknowledgement of one's counterpart's existence. The use of language plays a crucial role in them.

Discrimination is a phenomenon strictly connected with conflict and may lead to denying coexistence. It has been studied in terms of speech acts: there are ways of using language, particularly illocutionary acts, that pave the way to discrimination, actively operate it, or presuppose and therefore legitimize discriminating attitudes.

To see how speech acts are connected to discrimination, conflict, acknowledgement/ disacknowledgement of coexistence, we must consider illocutions as actions that affect the deontic modalities to be assigned to speakers/agents, that is, what speakers/agents can or cannot, should or should not do. In considering how such effects can be achieved by using language, we also uncover a deeper and more general connection between the use of language and social facts: effective illocution depends on the audience's recognition of its performance and success, but that recognition presupposes in turn the recognition of the speaker's subjectivity and the constitution of an intersubjective relationship. So, communication (as the performance of speech acts) requires the appropriate recognition of the other's subjectivity in a framework of relational coexistence.

Illocution as action affecting deontic modalities

The effects proper of illocutionary acts can be described in terms of the assignment or cancellation of deontic modal properties to the relevant participants. (The deontic modal properties of agents are expressed by modal verbs such as "can", "may", "should" or "ought to" but also by a great deal of phrases representing particular degrees or shades of those main notions, such as "having a right", "having an obligation", "enjoying a license", "being entitled", "having authority on", "being committed to", and many others).

So, an order assigns the addressee an obligation to do something, a prohibition assigns an obligation not to do something, a permission cancels an

obligation to do/not to do something, a promise assigns to the addressee the right to get something done and commits the speaker to doing it, and thanks cancel (in part at least) a state of obligation of the speaker as regards the addressee. Other cases (such as judgment, assertion, estimate, assessment) involve transmission of knowledge about facts or values by assigning the audience the entitlement to assert a certain content or make decisions on its basis.

The successful accomplishment of an illocution presupposes a certain initial position of the speaker which involves authority, capacity, epistemic entitlement, or obligation, requires that the speaker should execute certain verbal and possibly nonverbal activities, and may pose further requirements on the other participants and the circumstances of the interaction. The requirements on the initial position of the speaker and other participants are assumed to hold *ceteris paribus* (unless there is reason to doubt their being satisfied) and are often «accommodated» (Lewis, 1979), especially when they concern deontic modal properties, that is, what the speaker or other participants can or cannot, should or should not do. Indeed, such properties can be acquired by the participants thanks to a sort of backward or “backdoor” effect (Langton, 2018) of the illocutionary act. So, illocutions broaden their capacity to manipulate matters of power in various directions.

On the one hand, all this is extremely useful for social organization. It is even an indispensable component of a society becoming civilized. Rights and obligations can be distributed by means of language on condition of the mutual agreement of the participants and, in principle, without coercion. For example, a weak old person can give order or advice and exert authority just because they are recognized as being entitled to do so. On the other hand, there are risks. Not only certain illocutions (belonging to the group of Exercitives: Austin, 1975, 155–157; Sbisà, 2020) may assign obligations to the target participant or cancel some of their rights, but also, if they are socially accepted as successful, they may establish the speaker’s authority over the matter dealt with or over the target participant, thus introducing relations of subordination. While this may be fine up to a point and for limited, context-bound aims, positions of power can become trans-contextually stable and make power imbalance irreversible.

Discrimination

The use of language may operate discrimination explicitly or implicitly. Both ways, illocution is involved. An unfair verdict or regulations excluding certain categories of people from certain activities or places are cases of explicit discrimination. Not all illocutions involving the imposition of obligations or the suspension of rights and entitlements are discriminating: these effects may be limited to a specific domain (an institution, a department, a temporally limited activity) and play a precise role in it or be widespread but informal and therefore reversible from one occasion to another. But reiteration may create a habit and the transfer of the (context-bound) power imbalance resulting from certain illocutionary effects outside its original context may turn it into stable discrimination.

Implicit discrimination usually paves the way to the explicit one. Insults and biased generic statements are illocutions that establish the preconditions for the explicitly discriminating ones. The use of slurs (derogatory words) (see Bianchi, 2014; Cepollaro, 2020) in utterances that are not themselves insults serves the same function more indirectly, since it conveys by presupposition those negative stereotypes which can then be used to support explicitly discriminatory illocutions. Speech acts expressing or presupposing bias are deviated uses of language, but limiting or redressing them is difficult, because language is used by people on the basis of what they know (or believe or believe they know) and what they feel, and they (we) do not always think and feel as would be right and fair. Simply banning certain words and phrases does not cancel prejudice, which can be conveyed in more complex and subtle ways or even explicitly reclaimed as if it were the truth. But those who think they are free from prejudice on a certain subject matter should be careful to speak about it in a way that not only avoids endorsing prejudice, but also positively serves as an example of good discursive practice for other people. After all, imitation and reuse of phrases used by other people play a role in shaping our linguistic habits.

Finally, when in direct interaction with people who are at risk of discrimination or may be targeted by discriminatory language, it is obviously important not to forget linguistic politeness (Lakoff, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1987), which is not a mere matter of form. Indeed, beyond its culture-relative rules,

and beneath face-work, it has a deeper root in the recognition of the interlocutor's subjectivity (Sbisà, 2021).

Illocutionary uptake and intersubjective recognition

Effective illocution depends on the securing of uptake (Austin, 1975, 117). There is discussion among speech act scholars about what exactly “uptake” and the “securing” of it should consist of. It may be thought that only uptake consisting of the audience's understanding of the intended meaning and force of the utterance enables the illocutionary act to take effect or that any way in which the audience receives the speech act may serve that function and contributes, therefore, to determining what illocutionary effect the speech act actually has (compare, e.g., Langton, 1993; Kukla, 2014; Bianchi, 2023). I would consider as “uptake” any way in which the audience receives the speech act, except, perhaps, the cases in which the audience does not react to the speech act altogether or those in which they display some completely unrelated behavior. However, the uptake's suitability for enabling an illocutionary effect is a more complex issue. As to the “securing” of uptake, it may be identified with the speaker getting the audience correctly retrieve their communicative intention but also with their making a reasonable effort to make the meaning and force of the speech act clear enough for their audience in the circumstances. Actually, obtaining uptake should entail having it “secured”, but the opposite might not be the case, since a performance conforming to a socially accepted procedure can still be misunderstood due to some negative attitude or bias of the audience. Moreover, there are cases in which the utterance comprises several not completely coherent force indicators, or includes reformulations that are not illocutionary equivalent: in those cases, one would say that the uptake that the utterance gets is precisely the uptake that the speaker *de facto* “secured” and may suffice to enable the corresponding illocutionary effect (unless further modified by disclaimers or negotiations).

At any rate, whatever the details of how and when uptake is secured and enables the illocutionary effect, it should be pointed out that the whole point of the securing of uptake is to reach some kind of intersubjective agreement among the relevant participants as to the effect that the illocutionary act, if felicitous, achieves. Indeed, illocutionary effects are “conventional” and

defeasible (as Austin presents them) because they depend on intersubjective agreement: rights, obligations, entitlements, commitments are assigned to agents insofar as there is intersubjective agreement on the new setting of their deontic properties. Likewise, an agent owes something to another, or has authority over another, insofar as these situations are intersubjectively agreed upon, whether that is a matter of explicit regulations of the society or of informal interpersonal relations. Since for there to be intersubjective agreement, there must be subjects that entertain a relation, the participants in a communicative exchange have to acknowledge each other's status as subjects. So, the dynamics of illocution, by requiring uptake, also requires the intersubjective recognition of the participants. Without appropriate recognition of the other's subjectivity, illocutions do not take off or flawed and distorted situations are created.

Layers of intersubjective recognition

Intersubjective recognition is a basic move in society as it is in communicative exchanges. It has ethical and political relevance. It is not necessarily "re-cognition" of something that already exists as such, but has a foundational and creative function, especially as regards collective, institutional and virtual agents and the roles played by human individual agents (which would not exist if not recognized). In many cases, though, it is something "due" to agents in consideration of their physical and psychological resources (if human individuals or animals) and their capability of feedback and reciprocation. This paper is not the appropriate place for discussing intersubjective recognition in depth, but an outline of its main layers and kinds is relevant to a better understanding of its role in illocution as well as in social relations in general. Here are, therefore, some layers of intersubjective recognition. An agent may be recognized as:

- having perceptions and emotions (and therefore being a centre of perspective)
- entertaining intentional states (desire, belief, hope, fear)
- possessing positive and negative face-wants
- possessing linguistic competence and other know-how
- endowed with intentional agency and accountable

- endowed with rights and obligations and other deontic modal properties
- endowed with authority, capacities or knowledge.

Failing to concede recognition (in absence of evidence that it would be unjustified, for example, not supported by the capacity to give an appropriate feedback) is unfair. The attributions should be consistent: for example, you cannot literally recognize intentional states without recognizing the agent as a centre of perspective and you should not recognize face-wants (that are actually claims to face-related rights) without recognizing the agent as a bearer of rights. In case of doubt, it should be considered whether the feedback received supports the attribution and, at any rate, deal with the agent with care, because it is usually better to be optimistic in one's recognition (given the damages that a pessimistic estimate would have). But in some cases, optimistic attributions too might be dangerous (for example, the specific assumption that an agent has full linguistic competence in a certain language, while they have not, may lead to overlooking or misreading their difficulties in communicating).

The unfair failure to recognize the other's subjectivity at some relevant layer is the source of various troubles in verbal interaction and social life that have recently been denounced and analysed. One of them is illocutionary silencing, which has been discussed especially in the context of sexual encounters in which a woman refuses or attempts to refuse to have sex, but her refusal goes unheard or gets misinterpreted (for a recent analysis of what is missing in such situations, see Caponetto, 2021). Another consequence of failure in intersubjective recognition (when targeting human individuals) is dehumanization, a treatment applied, for example, to (alleged) enemies, prisoners and people discriminated because of racial or gender issues (see on dehumanizing speech McDonald, 2024): by speaking of them or dealing with them in ways that disregard or bracket or distort their possession of modal properties, their entertaining intentional states and even their being centres of perspective, the humanity of those individuals is downgraded, exposing them to physical and psychological damage (if not death).

Broadening our view

Intersubjective recognition also concerns the coexistence of different languages and cultures and gives a key to understanding problems of “identity”. There is today (perhaps more than ever) a widespread quest for identity. But it is not merely a matter of personal identity. It seems that, for many people, personal identity is something too abstract, or not meaningful enough, or even shaky, unless it is confirmed and enriched by means of the participation in a collective identity. This leads to overstating the importance of belonging to a collective identity (language, culture, ethnic group, religion) and of its public signs. The fact that belonging to a collective identity involves obligations and may even subordinate the individual to the authorities of the group is usually not considered: many people feel that it is better for them to face such conditions than remaining alone in the world without any identity label. The result of all that is that any independent sense of one’s personal identity is weakened, with possible negative consequences for self-confidence and (perhaps) freedom of thought.

I am not criticizing collective identities *per se*, however. There are many kinds of groups to which a person may belong and most of those belongings contribute to making the person’s life and temperament richer. But I would like to point out that there is a difference between personal identity and the belonging to a collective identity and that difference can be clearly seen when we consider how those kinds of identity interact with intersubjective recognition in the sense illustrated above.

Intersubjective recognition as a basic move in communicative exchanges and in society in general is primarily concerned with personal identity: in principle, an individual is recognized as a subject (according to one or more layers of subjectivity) by another subject for their own sake, independently of any collective identity to which they may belong. Such a move is really basic if it is unconditional, that is, does not depend on the individual’s fulfilling a checklist (albeit it may be suspended or withdrawn if the individual turns out not to be suitable for the layer of subjectivity they have been attributed with).

Belonging to a collective identity (or more than one) is a property of an individual and insofar as that individual is unconditionally recognized as a subject, their properties too must be acknowledged. So, no damage comes to

collective identities from intersubjective recognitions focused on personal identities. Instead, linking personal identity to collective identity too closely makes intersubjective recognition conditional upon the individual's belonging to a certain collective identity, which involves satisfying a checklist or at least accepting a normative model. In such cases, intersubjective recognition becomes somewhat inauthentic: it can be withdrawn if the individual whose subjectivity has been conditionally recognized is found not to satisfy the checklist associated with the relevant collective identity or fails to conform to its normative model. Moreover, there is always the risk that individuals not fulfilling the checklist of the relevant collective identity, or not conforming to the model, fail to be granted full recognition as subjects.

All that is very abstract but let us try some examples (albeit simplified ones). If a man does not recognize a certain woman as having the capacity and authority to make decisions about her own sexual activities, he might misunderstand or overlook her refusal to have sex and rape her. If a man does not recognize his partner as having a perspective of her own, an intentional agency of her own and her own rights to health and life but recognizes her as a subject of rights only conditionally on her fulfilling the role of good female partner, he might react with violence when it turns out she wants to leave him. When the citizen of a country in which most people speaks language L_a takes it that the right to use one's native language in public contexts only pertains to speakers of language L_a , they are recognizing a particular layer of the subjectivity of their co-citizens only conditionally on having native language L_a and this amounts to discriminating speakers of language L_b . Which languages can be used in official contexts is usually established by law, so, sometimes, it is the country itself (the state, an institutional agent) as opposed to individual citizens that perpetrates discrimination. But even under a fair legislation about minority languages, the actual communicative practice of people can be more or less open to the unconditional recognition of speakers of languages other than one's own. Right to one's native language is to be recognized unconditionally and this demands explicit rules and laws, but also interpersonal practices that make the exercise of that right possible.

About languages, it should be pointed out that belonging to a linguistic group provides people with one of the less demanding kinds of collective identity. The mastery of a language marks a person's mind deeply but is not mutually exclusive of the mastery of other languages, as bilinguals well know. Ethnic or

national identity is more demanding or at least, it seems to be such: in fact, everyone has got two parents and four grandparents and those (especially in border areas) need not be all of the same ethnic origin, so that the espousal of one “national” identity in the romantic, 19th century sense (revived by current “sovereignisms”) turns out to be more of an ideological move than a realistic claim. But whatever the degree of complexity of one’s ethnic origin and cultural heritage, the subject’s recognition by other agents should come unconditionally, taking the subject to be as complex as they are and thus saving the richness of their cultural resources as well as their personal elaboration of them.

It should also be pointed out that the recognition of a subject’s alien identity (in the sense of their belonging to an alien collective identity) does not prevent conflict. When intersubjective recognition is conditional on the belonging to a collective identity, in the sense that it presupposes a previous classification of the person (as a minority language speaker, a Jew, a migrant, or what not), not only it may be limited by it, but also the relevant collective identity tends to become “closed”. Its value may be vindicated by those that belong to it in opposition to allegedly mainstream identities and their values. That may be good for the people involved (much better than disacknowledgement or allegations of inferiority), but still leaves room to discrimination, because it posits a neat border and even assumes mutual exclusiveness between the contrasting identities. So, much care should be taken in granting intersubjective recognition to one another as to the precise way in which we do so and its implications.

Concluding remarks

We have reached the notion of intersubjective recognition through the analysis of the dynamics of illocution. Indeed, illocution lies at the core of what is usually called “communication”. It is what we do in exchanging words with one another: what those words “mean” and the interpersonal functions they play are closely connected with the way in which, on the occasion of utterance, the dynamics of illocution shapes the interpersonal relation between the participants and the whole context. But illocution needs the audience’s uptake to be secured, which means that an intersubjective agreement (whether tacit or explicit, by default or negotiated) has to be reached in order

for the illocution to actually occur. In turn, an intersubjective agreement (an actual and fair one) is possible only if there is recognition of the relevant layers of each other's subjectivity between the agents involved.

We have then seen that intersubjective recognition may be considered as basic also with respect to other social facts and that in order to play its function appropriately, it must be unconditional. Anyone who is recognized as a human subject in an unconditional way (at any relevant layer) has no need to worry about their "identity" since they are thereby recognized as having a personal identity of their own and their properties, are recognized as well including deontic-modal ones and the belonging to one or more collective identities. This poses the basis upon which sound and fruitful coexistence of diversities within one and the same society can develop. Recognition that is conditional on the belonging to a certain collective identity, instead, paves the way to conflict.

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