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PERFORMATIVE DISCOURSE: THE POWER OF WORDS

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Abstract

Until the advent of the studies of pragmatic linguistics proper, there had been analyses which, though belonging to other trends of language exploration, had directions of research in common with pragmatics. Ch. Morris, J.L. Austin, J.R. Searle, prominent representatives of language philosophy, N. Chomsky, J. Ross, generativist semanticists, as well as many others, fascinated by the actional dimension of language, opened the way for research destined to create a domain which has been receiving a lot of attention: language as action.

In the present article I have focused, on the one hand, on a brief overview of the founding of pragmatics by non-pragmatists, and, on the other hand, on illustrating performative discourse in a text by A. Maurois, centre on the power that words wield in daily life.

The conclusion would be that it is not only linguists, whose centre of interest is language, who intuit the power of words, but also philosophers, men of letters and all those who find pleasure in reflecting upon words.

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Keywords: Pragmatics, discursive acts, intentions, conventions, performative hypothesis.



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1. Introduction

Pragmatics was talked about long before the appearance of specialist studies relating to this linguistic domain. The interest for approaches from various perspectives is also explained by the fact that the domain represents an area of interference of several disciplines: enunciative linguistics, textual semantics, conversational analysis, cognitive sciences, and not least, semiotics, since any language is defined as the relationships within a whole system of signs.

In the year 1938, in an article intended for a scientific encyclopaedia, the philosopher and semiotics scholar Charles Morris operated a distinction between the disciplines whose object of study is language. The distinction was also resumed in his main work, *Signs, Language and Behavior* (Morris 1946/1955) and particularly refers to *syntax, semantics and pragmatics* (syntax as the grammar of the relations between signs, semantics as the science of the significations established on the basis of the denotative relation between linguistic signs and their referents and pragmatics as a science which analyses the relations between signs and their users). In speaking about the object of pragmatics, the philosopher confined himself to those expressions whose significations derive from the exterior data of language, pertaining to the situational context. He had the intuition of the major importance constituted, in the interpretation of a message, by the sphere alluded to by verbal language, beyond the literal meaning of the words. Morris' attention focused on the study of 1st and 2nd person pronouns (whose referent varies according to the situational context) and on the place and time adverbs "here" and "now".

However, despite the already existing preoccupations with the production and understanding of the sentences based on knowledge outside the linguistic sphere, at the time of Morris' studies pragmatics represented a mere word not yet founded on relevant research that would justify a strictly linguistic approach to the domain. Things were to evolve and be refined due to the vision of J.L. Austin, who proposed in 1955 not to found the science of pragmatics as a linguistic subdomain, but as a new philosophical discipline called the "philosophy of language" (Austin, 1961). The series of conferences given by Austin in 1955 were to question one of the fundamentals of the Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy of the time, according to which the essential purpose of language is the description of reality. In the light of this theory, all utterances (with the exception of interrogative, exclamatory and imperative ones) can be evaluated as *true or false*. They are considered as true if the situation they describe exists in reality and as false in the opposite case.

Instead, Austin invokes the paradigm of those utterances which describe absolutely nothing and consequently cannot be evaluated as true or false. The philosopher brings into discussion those utterances which, far from being used to describe a reality, do not say anything about the present or past state of the world, but, quite the contrary, seek to change or *do* change it. Austin's new theory, too, implicitly changes the vision on possible approaches to language, from an exclusive one, centred on the sole alternative at that time of "saying something about the world", to a dualistic one, which adds to the former the alternative of "acting on the world" (Austin, 1962)

2. Problem Statement

Ever since the beginnings of reflections on language, the discussion of linguistic facts by recourse to philosophical and logical approaches has constituted the starting point of the theories referring to the

use of language in the acquisition of knowledge and in interpersonal communication. Over the past few decades, language sciences have been developing more markedly through the integration of information at all levels (holism) rather than through atomization. This could explain the fact that the founding of pragmatics as a distinct discipline is owed to some non-pragmatists – philosophers or generativist semanticists whose studies contributed decisively to the foundation of a science meant to analyse the relations between signs and their users.

However, despite the subsequent establishment of pragmatics as a distinct discipline in its own right and the advancement of its theoretical groundwork, its key principles are often superseded by the complexities of contextual codes of linguistic behaviours, which more often than not fall in-between clear-cut pragmatic categories or utterance type classifications. For instance, the distinction between constative and performative utterances, though clearly theorised at linguistic and pragmatic levels, is still to be explored and described from an increasingly interdisciplinary perspective, requiring an investigation of cognitive, interpretive and communicative processes, which should harness the insights of such interrelating domains as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, communication theory or critical discourse analysis. What we set out to demonstrate is that the demarcation between constative and performative utterances is rather fluid and flexible, insofar as the attendant encoding and decoding processes are often shaped by inferences stemming from encyclopaedic or extra-linguistic knowledge. This context-bound, culture-bound knowledge of the world provides a source of interpretation and negotiation of concepts which extends beyond linguistic levels of classification, which proves that pragmatics is a dynamic, composite domain which requires an encompassing perspective on the language functions and usage, constantly shaped by evolving social and communicative behaviours.

3. Research Questions

Our research questions are, by and large, the ones confronting the beginnings of pragmatic research, questions which can be summarised in one single query: what is the function of language? Beside the well-known social function, which helps strengthen the bonds within and between human groups, the cognitive function, which ensures the representation, the storing, the description and transmission of our knowledge of the world, is there yet another function of language which would allow a speaker to obtain what he wants, which, obviously, would not be possible without the intermediation which only language can realise?

The main concern here is whether there can really be such a thing as a purely constative or performative utterance. Though formally and functionally classifiable by virtue of either surface or deep structure, the fact remains that these categories sometimes overlap or seep into each other. More often than not, most utterances contain an element of in-betweenness, which can only be discernible on the basis of our encyclopaedic rather than purely linguistic knowledge. Ultimately, could it be that in many instances of human interaction, any constative utterance can arguably contain an underlying or understated performative meaning, inferable only on the basis of extra-linguistic factors or experience? It is a question that still needs to be addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective.

4. Purpose of the Study

Any natural language is not only the result of message encoding and decoding processes, but also of the inferential procedures based on the interpretive strategy of the participants in the linguistic exchange and on their shared knowledge, which is juxtaposed on the linguistic code in order to offer a complete interpretation of the utterances. These inferences are also based on the encyclopaedic (extra-linguistic) knowledge, which also constitutes a source of interpretation relating to the working of some concepts which cannot be reduced to a solely linguistic level.

The purpose of this study is to underline the importance of those aspects pertaining to the conceptual splitting of the differentiations between explicit and implicit, uttered and implied, aspects which pragmatic research has never ceased to investigate.

5. Research Methods

The study presents a brief overview of the contribution of philosophers and generativist semanticists to the advent of pragmatics. Beside the diachronic analysis of the steps taken towards the shaping of the domain of pragmatic linguistics, I have also undertaken an analysis of the transformation of a declarative/assertive utterance into a performative one, as it results from the short excerpt from *Un art de vivre (An Art of Living)* by André Maurois (1939). The analysis is based on the application of the essential aspects of communication theorised by John Searle as referring to *intentions and conventions*. The examination of the sample utterance and its declarative to performative turn is aimed at demonstrating that the recognition and understanding of intentions is inherently dependent on the linguistic conventions which allow the adequate interpretation of an utterance on the basis of its contextual appropriateness – that is its being appropriate to the respective situation of communication. The description of the contextual conditions and conventions ensuring the success of the analysed speech act is based on the comparative application of the discursive rules identified by Searle (1969).

6. Findings

Austin's theory had a resounding success and provoked numerous heated debates. Austin's ratiocination is based on a distinction which is as clear as it is pertinent. On the one hand, in language there are declarative or assertive utterances which describe the world and are therefore true or false to the extent to which their signification matches or not the reality described; these will be called from now on **constative utterances**. On the other hand, there is also another kind of utterances in language, which do not describe the world and consequently cannot be categorised as true or false, their purpose consisting in determining their addressee to act in one way or another; these are **performative utterances**. Austin names them after the verbs whose utterance realizes, in the corresponding circumstances, the very act they designate. As an example, he invokes the performative verb "to baptize" in the enunciation "I baptize you Paul", by which a person is actually given a name by the priest in the specific conditions of a real baptism. The list of performative verbs continues with *to order, to promise, to swear, etc.*

Austin's theory is developed, but also radicalized as the philosopher probes into the linguistic diversity by which performative utterances are constructed. He realises that he had ascertained the

constative/performative opposition somewhat simplistically, by contradicting himself in some of his initial observations. Thus, he notices that certain performative utterances are not necessarily in the first person of the present indicative, as he initially thought, while others lack a performative verb. His research acquires a major relevance when he formulates the distinction subsequently acknowledged by all linguists as the fundament of the speech acts theory. Austin reaches the conclusion that any utterance, once said in a certain situational context, corresponds to the performance of at least one speech act from the well-known triad: locutionary act/illocutionary act/perlocutionary act. The example chosen to illustrate the triad is the directive *Shut the window*, where the locutory act consists in the actual uttering of the enounce, the illocutionary act in giving an order, and the perlocutionary act in the mental projection of the purpose that the speaker proposes to accomplish by the interlocutor's performance of the order given.

Among his successors and disciples, it was the American philosopher John Searle (1969) tool over and developed two of the essential aspects of communication referring to *intentions and conventions*. Austin had seen in utterances the conventional means by which the intentions of a speaker are expressed in communication. Searle takes over the theory from this point, being of the opinion that a speaker has to formulate his intentions in such a way that these are recognised by the interlocutor by virtue of the conventions guiding the interpretation of the utterances in the current language. The recognition and understanding of the intentions is possible only due to the linguistic conventions which lead to an adequate interpretation of the sentences uttered in concrete situations of communication. Searle also contributed to the description of the conditions in which a speech act is successful. Consequently, he proposes a wide range of discursive rules, among which are included:

- **preparatory rules**, which refer to situations of communication (the interlocutors speak the same language, and, in addition, they have to speak in earnest);
- **the propositional content rule** (for example, a promise means that the speaker binds himself to perform a future action);
- **preliminary rules** (the speaker who gives an order wants that the action requested should be carried out; at the same time, he is also aware that the action would not be carried out if the order had not been given);
- **the sincerity rule** relating to the speaker's mental state (when her states or promises something, he has to be sincere);
- **the essential rule**, which specifies the type of obligation contracted by one of the interlocutors (a promise or assertion involves the speaker's commitment to his intentions or beliefs);
- **rules of intention or convention**, which describe the speaker's intentions and the manner in which he applies them by means of linguistic conventions.

All these rules, which Searle enumerates in his *Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Searle, 1969), ultimately lead to an incontestable truth: even if articulate language is an independent code, its use cannot be separated from other human capacities (reason, knowledge of the world), which, strictly speaking, have no linguistic specificity (Reboul & Moeschler, 1998).

As we have seen, the entire framework of the speech acts was based on works on the philosophy of language. In the course of time, the discursive acts theory equally influenced the linguists concerned with

the pragmatic dimension of language. But until the advent of the studies of pragmatic linguistics proper, there were analyses which, though belonging to other trends of language exploration, had directions of research in common with pragmatics. Here we could include generative semantics, whose theoreticians could figure among the great precursors of pragmatics. Relevant for this type of approach is the theory of John Ross (Ross, 1970) who, elaborating more deeply the distinction between *surface structure* and *deep structure*, comes to formulate a different point of view from that of the founder or the generativist trend, Noam Chomsky (Chomsky, 1965). Utterances which do not have an explicit performative in the surface structure have a *performative preface* in the deep structure. John Ross speaks, from the perspective of the studies of the 70s, about the *performative hypothesis*, capable of recuperating the element or elements lacking from the surface structure, sometimes consciously suppressed with a view to obtaining a certain stylistic effect. What is absent from the surface structure, but recoverable in the deep structure takes the form of a message that can be more direct and maybe more convincing than a redundant message.

Thus an explicit order: *I order you to...*, can have in certain instances a less powerful impact than a merely suggested order. The utterances containing the performative verb *to order* in the surface structure have, at first sight, the status some assertions meant to notify the interlocutor about an existing something. But the underlying meanings of the deep structure, as well as the situational context usually contain information which dominates that of the linguistic co-text (Moeschler, 1998). One cannot disregard such information as the location of the communication, the social roles assumed by the interlocutors, their social hierarchy (subaltern/superior, the one who serves/is served, etc.). The significations provided by all these reference points re-position the communication along a complete direction of interpretation which goes beyond the strictly linguistic sphere.

I have chosen as an illustration of performative discourse a short text from André Maurois, in which the absence of the performative verb from the surface structure does by no means cancel the obtaining of the desired effect. This means that the performative verb *to order that...* is recovered from the deep structure due to the *performative hypothesis* established on the basis of the conversational conventions at work here between a hotel guest and the hotel representative(s). The text is taken from *Un art de vivre (An Art of Living)*, published at Plon publishing house (Maurois, 1939):

The man who thinks with his hands, a worker, a juggler, a gymnast, moves heavy and hard objects: bricks, ballots or his own body.

The man who thinks with the core of words moves nothing but sounds or signs. This makes his action extremely easy.

You wake up in the morning in a hotel; you phone and say: "tea". A few minutes later, a cup, a saucer, a teaspoon, bread, milk, jam, a teapot and hot water are laid in front of you, as if by magic. Imagine the complexity of the actions necessary for these things to be brought to you. Think of the Chinese people who cultivated the tea or selected the tea leaves, of the ship which transported them, of the captain and his crew during the typhoon which they had to withstand, of the herdsman in Périgord who drove the cattle to pasture, of those who collected the milk, of the

train mechanic, of the baker who kneaded the bread, of the girls in Spain or the south of France who picked the oranges from which the jam was made to be served with the tea...

A single syllable put all these people at his service...

The transformation of declarative utterance into a performative one – as it happens in the present case with the monosyllabic *tea* – can give rise to interminable commentaries. But, in comparison with Maurois' commentary, many of them might seem, if not superfluous, at least insubstantial.

The findings resulting from Maurois' brilliantly conducted pragmatic demonstration provide a fresh illustration and reconfirmation of a classical truth in linguistic analysis: any lexeme, syntagmatic structure, simple or complex sentence, if taken out of context, has totally different valences of signification and interpretation from those assumed in a particular linguistic and situational context. The significations provided by the conversational conventions and by the situational parameters (the recovery of the communicative intention, the locutor-interlocutor relation, the time and place of the speech act, as well as one's positioning towards one's own discourse and that of the interlocutor) can change the status of an utterance from a declarative to a performative one. If we analyse the success of the monosyllabic, minimalistic speech act exemplified by Maurois against the set of rules identified by Searle, we see that the performative urgency of this laconic utterance is predicated not only on the perfect pragmatic correlation between *intention* and *convention*, but also on the fulfilment of each and every ruling criterion in Searle's set – preparatory, propositional content, preliminary, sincerity, essential, intention and convention.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, I should say that it is not only linguists who intuit the power of words, insofar as their interest revolves around language, but so do philosophers, men of letters and all those who find pleasure in reflecting upon words. What is certain is that the study of discursive acts opened the way for research which continued to arouse special interest and attention: language as action. And since in the Greek language **pragma** means **action**, the very term **pragmatics** warns us from the very beginning about an aspect of crucial importance: words are not as innocent as they can make us believe in certain circumstances....More often than not, they govern actions, and willy-nilly, one finds oneself urged to act, to perform those actions ordered by words more or less explicitly, more or less courteously.

In the emergence of pragmatics as a linguistic science, the research of reputable philosophers constituted the fundamentals for the definitions of its very specificity. Of course, these philosophers did not concern themselves with the description of language, but rather with the enunciation of some principles and rules relating to its utilisation. This shows that thought universals and linguistic universals are by no means irreconcilable, on the contrary, they converge whenever the human spirit dwells upon words with a reflective kind of enjoyment, whether he be a philosopher, a linguist, a man of letters or a mere anonymous wielder of language.

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