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What About Perlocution?

Commentary on Lewiński's How to Conclude Practical Argument in a Multi-Party Debate

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1. INTRODUCTION

There have traditionally been two broad avenues of research in linguistics, which carry over, to a fair extent, to the linguistically-oriented study of verbal communication. One of them encompasses data-driven approaches and builds on meticulous and fine-grained analyses of natural interaction in order to identify context-specific patterns of communicative *behaviour*. Many of these approaches (ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and interactionist approaches more generally, see e.g., Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff et al., 1977; Hutchby & Woofitt, 1988) emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in reaction to formal and abstract models of language analysis, and have made their scholarly endeavour all about the data: analysis primes over theoretical generalisation, which is often not the chief concern of such accounts. The other direction of research inherits its epistemology from logic and analytical philosophy, which share a concern for formalism, and has traditionally offered moderate to radical reductionist accounts. The idea, in this approach, is to establish, in essentialist terms, descriptively and explanatorily adequate scientific models of language (the Chomskyan tradition in generative syntax is a prime example of this type of research, which also extends to contemporary models in semantics, phonology, morphology and the philosophy of language). Somewhat divided in two, the linguistics research map seemed to offer two quite clearly delineated options, as each tradition was in its own place. And then pragmatics came along.

While Charles Morris is usually credited for the birth of pragmatic research, the study of language in use truly came forward in analytic circles with Austin, Searle and Grice's pioneering work in speech act theory and the study of rational principles of communication (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Grice, 1975, 1989). Speech act theoretic input paved the way for the analysis of communication as action – since

saying came to be also construed as *doing*. Data-driven approaches in pragmatics saw an opportunity to hop on the P-train (i.e., the performative train), and kept on analysing language from a contextual perspective, now with improved systematicity, taking advantage of developing speech act classifications. As to formal approaches, they hopped on the I-train instead (i.e. implicature train), and were eager to pursue their forefathers' work on meaning by adding yet another layer to it, building on Searle's notion of indirectness and Grice's model of implicature – contemporary pragmatic research on meaning is thus largely devoted to the analysis of the different components of meaning.

Today, any piece of research on any aspect of communication that mentions the word *context* can roughly qualify as pragmatic research. A quick look at the programme of every biennial edition of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA) conference – which usually features 5 to 6 days of talks with more than 10 parallel sessions – reveals that a large number of researchers investigating extremely different things all operate under the umbrella of pragmatics, since they all address various aspects of communication accounting for the complexity of human verbal exchanges.¹ So 60 years or so after the William James lectures (both Austin's and Grice's), pragmatics still very much looks like the waste-basket Mey (2001, p. 21) and Bar-Hillel (1971, p. 404) mention – at least judging by the internal disparity of all work conducted in the discipline.

However, in the past 10 years or so, increasingly more pragmatic work explores the juncture of both trends and tries to bring both of them together in an attempt to offer at the same time description- and theory-friendly accounts. I believe Lewiński's is an example.

In the remainder of this commentary I discuss, from a methodological and epistemological perspective, how I think Lewiński's analysis contributes to mutually strengthening both trends in pragmatics into one consistent model and how his proposal specifically highlights and rests on the pragmatic notion of perlocution, which pragmaticians have nearly systematically ignored in their accounts.

2. LEWIŃSKI'S PROPOSAL: A STEP CLOSER TO ECOLOGICAL VALIDITY

Lewiński's paper is an inquiry into the nature and function of the speech

¹ See for example this year's (2015) programme of the conference at the University of Antwerp:

<http://ipra.ua.ac.be/download.aspx?c=CONFERENCE14&n=1476&ct=1476&e=15315>.

acts that can count as proper conclusions in patterns of practical argumentation (PA) which draws on speech act theory and pragmatics. This proposal is at the same time descriptively and theoretically fertile. From a descriptive perspective, it offers a very detailed functional typology of the speech acts that may be used (and how they may be used) to verbalise conclusions in practical argumentation. On the theoretical front, analytical categories are functionally justified and Lewiński provides a model with enough generalising power to cover the variety of speech acts potentially involved in the phenomenon he is tackling, i.e., conclusions in PA patterns. In a nutshell, Lewiński offers a theoretically-grounded accurate description of argumentative reality.

This proposal is representative, I believe, of a trend in pragmatic research (construed broadly) that is now gaining momentum and which reaches over to cover experimental research as well. This trend strives for *ecological validity*, in that it purposefully tries to achieve descriptively and explanatorily adequate accounts of communicative phenomena. In this particular case, Lewiński's account of conclusions in PA fulfils in my opinion these goals on several counts.

First, Lewiński adopts a sufficiently broad and unrestricted conception of communication, which by definition is a social phenomenon taking place between at least 2 parties who exchange information and react to each other's messages within a set of specific circumstances (i.e., a context). While this conception seems like a basic minimal requisite for doing research on communication, Lewiński offers more than just that as his framework is tailored to capture communicative complexity. By shifting the perspective from conclusions formulated as "I should do P" to conclusions formulated with the plural "we should do P," the framework puts agency at its core: agents provide reasons, evaluate reasons, but also perform actions based on reasons or are led to reject the performance of actions based on reasons, through argumentative discussion. The incorporation of dialogism (or polylogism, as Lewiński would probably have it) as a feature of the units of analysis is precisely meant to achieve a fuller and more comprehensive account of communication: only by considering as part of the whole communicative process that (i) utterances are designed by people to have an effect on other people (utterances – and many times their effects – are intentional), (ii) utterances trigger a range of different (re)actions, (iii) speakers are free to (re)act by engaging in further communication, and that (iv) actions are relevant in the theorisation of meaning (as they signal the completeness of a verbal exchange), can we pretend to provide an adequate account of communicative exchanges. In this framework, agents, actions and reactions are given proper

consideration, and this has implications for more theoretical aspects of how communicative exchanges should ideally be construed in terms of intention recognition and fulfilment. To sum up, the first advantage of this speech act analysis is its attention to the complexity of verbal exchanges, action-wise and agent-wise.

Second, it provides an exhaustive matrix of all the different speech acts that may conclude practical argumentation. In this respect, the account surveys all the speech acts that may actually be used by participants according to two criteria: their primary agent, i.e., who is responsible for performing the action that is predicated in the speech act, and their illocutionary strength, which could also be interpreted as a scale of commitment to the illocutionary force of the speech act. The strength of the framework, on this very issue, is to incorporate both the perspective of the speaker and that of the addressee into the model. As a consequence, descriptive power is increased, since the nature and function of speech acts functioning as conclusions of PA can exhaustively be assessed through consideration of all parties taking part to the communicative exchange. Furthermore, the typology offered here overcomes the difficulties faced by approaches which refrain from generalising and provides an interesting option to systematise the analysis of talk in interaction.

Third, and in connection with the first two advantages, the model introduced here goes beyond the interaction between propositions and offers a hands-on theoretical kit to approach natural data. Many pragmatic approaches are interested in what happens in terms of meaning at the level of propositional (and sometimes non-propositional) content, without taking into account that those propositions are taken up by their addressees – and this does play a role in the communicative process. Of course, you don't necessarily need to consider the entirety of cognitive and behavioural efforts both parties incur in communication to explain how it works;² however, only when you do can you aspire to provide a full account of communication, since, as shown by Lewiński, the identification and felicitousness of speech acts may have to take into account their perlocutionary success (see section 3 below).

² For example, Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) does not consider cooperation to be a notion that is required to explain how communication works, since mere coordination suffices – the speaker's and the hearer's behaviour happen to dovetail in communication, but that does not mean that both interlocutors cooperate, in the Gricean sense (see Allott, 2007 for a rationale for this).

For those three reasons, I believe that Lewiński's proposal gets us one step closer to a more *ecologically friendly* account of conclusions in PA. His analysis of the "Keep it in the ground" case study convincingly shows that in order to describe and reconstruct argumentative discourse in a way that does justice to the data, such a framework is advisable: it takes into account both (re)actions and agents (as producers, recipients and evaluators of speech acts), both production and reception, both illocution and perlocution. Also, it assesses speech acts and their *consequences*, which, most importantly, opens up new directions for rethinking the very notion of speech act felicity, as we shall see next.

3. SPEECH ACT FELICITY, ILLOCUTION, PERLOCUTION AND PA

In order to assess Lewiński's contribution in light of speech act theory, let us first recall what Austin says about perlocution:

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 (...). We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act or perlocution. (Austin, 1962, p. 101)

Traditionally, perlocution was left out of the study of meaning, as the actual occurrence of such a consequence, in principle, is independent from the success of the illocutionary act. Austin's first example of perlocution was persuasion; one can urge or advise someone (not) to do something (illocutionary act) and fail or succeed in persuading them to comply (perlocutionary act), but whether the latter is the case or not is irrelevant to whether the speaker has effectively urged or advised her interlocutor to (not) do something. One can understand without complying, which is an indication that, crucially, the success of communication requires comprehension but not compliance. Accordingly, Austin sharply distinguishes illocution from perlocution: "[w]e have then to draw the line between an action we do (here an illocution) and its consequence" (1962, p. 110). This is precisely because understanding is distinct from cooperating – in the perlocutionary sense (see also Attardo, 1997). As far as simple speech acts are concerned, perlocution is a non-necessary, optional, consequence of meaning, and its non-satisfaction is no threat to the success of communication – again, construed only as a successful exchange of meaning.

And yet, coming back to Austin's quote, what about cases where the consequence of an illocution is precisely an action (that someone else might be asked to perform)? This is, chiefly, what PA is about, especially if, like Aristotle, Searle and most probably Lewiński, we consider that actions are part of the conclusion of PA and join "those who think action itself is the proper conclusion of PR" (Lewiński, 2016, p. 405). This is where the story becomes complicated, as at least two problems related to the potential role of perlocution in speech act felicity emerge – and these have not been discussed by Lewiński:

- do we consider that the felicity of a speech act (i.e., speech acts akin to proposals in the case of PA) rests on its recognition/identification by the addressee or on its actual ability to trigger the desired effect in the communicative exchange?
- while there is no question that illocution is crucial to characterise the felicity of speech acts, isn't PA THE particular case where perlocution is important, if not necessary, to the success of the speech act?

In other words, is the speech act successful when we understand it, or when we comply with it? In the case of PA, the constraints set by its argumentative nature can be thought to make a case for the latter.

The question, here, is therefore that of speech act felicity,³ and takes us back to the original Austinian distinction. Even if the idea that illocution is the driving force behind speech act performance in communication remains quite uncontroversial, it seems that PA poses some challenges for speech act theory, and this is mostly due to the fact that these speech acts are used argumentatively and consequently cannot be dealt with exclusively at the propositional and illocutionary levels.

Any speech-act-theoretic account of argumentation needs to consider the speech act itself, but also its *consequences* because of the dialogic (or polylogic) nature of argumentation. It is hard to consider

³ One could also relate this discussion to Vanderveken's distinction between the success and the satisfaction of a speech act (the author thanks Scott Jacobs, personal communication, for pointing this out). Here, speech act felicity is related to the notion of satisfaction: "Elementary illocutionary acts with a propositional content (...) are satisfied *only if* their propositional content represents correctly how things are (...) in the world" (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 132).

that any argumentative speech act is felicitous until it has been appropriately responded to (that is, accepted, called into question or refuted). In the case of PA, Lewiński claims that the conclusion is effectively a claim for action (“we should do X”), and in doing so gives some credit to the idea that the performance of the action expressed in those claims – or at least the performance of an argumentatively-relevant action connected to that action – should be considered at least partly as the natural conclusion of PA. From the perspective of speech act theory, the very point of these claims for action is to go beyond the informative demands of the exchange and, crucially, to make sure that they are acted upon,⁴ which are features that need to be accounted for in the theoretical model. Consequently, Lewiński’s model seems to be compatible with the idea that in order to analyse PA, we need to consider their perlocutionary consequences, as these encompass the argumentative moves triggered in reaction to the propositional content of the conclusion and, to that extent at least, determine how well the speech act fares in the communicative exchange.

4. CONCLUSION

So where does that leave us? It seems that the nature of PA conclusions, in speech act-theoretic terms, requires the analyst to consider illocution and perlocution together. This warrants a complex analysis that probably needs to extend felicity conditions to capture not only the commitments incurred by the speaker, but also the ones incurred by the addressee in his reaction. That is, while the felicity of the speech acts categorised in table 2 (Lewiński, 2016, p. 417) to a large extent depends on their proper recognition by the addressee, there are grounds to assume that it might also partly depend on the speech act’s perlocutionary import. What those perlocutionary aspects amount to precisely remains to be seen; are they restricted to compliance? Or can they take the shape of any other argumentatively relevant move (refutation, request for clarification, requalification, etc.)? This might be a direction of research that would take Lewiński’s original proposal farther in a speech act-theoretic account of PA.

⁴ This is why Lewiński, in line with Fairclough & Fairclough (2012), considers that PA conclusions are “action-relevant speech acts”.

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