Symbolic Power, Illocutionary Force, and Impoliteness: 
A Critical Look at the Foundations of Speech Act Theory

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Researchers have long been aware that linguistic communication, of which face-to-face 
dialogue is merely one variety, is an irreducibly social phenomenon. Remarkably, 
however, among authors dealing with theoretical questions in pragmatics, including 
Austin, Searle and Grice, there is a consistent tendency to downplay, hide, or abstract 
away from the institutionalized nature of most if not all speech acts, and from the 
in particular tends to naturalize and decontextualize the conventions involved, as he has 
the explicit aim of redescribing the philosophy of language as a subpart of the philosophy 
of mind. In keeping with with this approach, he tries to reduce the social aspects of 
language use to biological characteristics of the mind, and to relocate the social 
conventions in a allegedly largely culture-independent domain of rules of language usage 
that follow their own logic. In recent years, speech act theory has ceded much ground to 
more descriptive approaches like conversation analysis, but on this specific point no 
major revisions appear to have been made. My intention here is to exploit what lines of 
empirical research could be opened up if we do take the social and institutionalized 
dimension of linguistic communication seriously. 

At first sight, the main pragmatic principles hardly appear up for doubt or debate. For 
example, Grice’s “Cooperative Principle” seems an obvious regulating ideal for the 
proper conduct of dialogue: conversation partners by no means always adhere to it, but 
they are simply expected to do so, and sanctioned if they do not. The Cooperative 
Principle is presented as not simply a set of arbitrary conventions but, much more 
strongly, as capturing rational means for conducting co-operative exchanges (Levinson 
1983: 103; Grice 1989: 28-30). Searle also seems committed to something much like 
Grice's cooperative principle, especially in the analysis of indirect speech acts, which he 
treats as interpreted on the assumption that the speaker must have a reason for not 
speaking directly and literally.

The ultimate assumption behind all this is the eminently reasonable, indeed almost self-
evident belief that it is in the conversation partners’ own best interests to be cooperative. It 
simply seems to make no sense for a rational language user not to observe universal
principles of conversational cooperation or to adhere to the norms and conventions of a one’s language and culture. A similar belief also informs, for example, Lewis’s (1969) treatment of the coordination problem as the basis of all convention (and specifically linguistic conventions), and Habermas’s (1981) claim that ideally cooperative speech exchange is indeed the goal or regulative ideal for all “communicative action”.

Although the assumption of cooperativeness or communicativeness as a matter of simple rational self-interest seems inevitable, indeed almost trivial, it changes status if we use insights from the social sciences, notably the idea that linguistic communication is just one kind of social action. Thus, according to Bourdieu, the efficacy of ritual speech acts cannot be separated from the existence of institutions conferring a legitimate authority on utterances. He argues that Austin and his followers mistakenly locate the power of words, in particular a speech act’s illocutionary force, in the symbols used rather than in the language users conferring this authority on words. Levinson (1983: 246) seems to concur with this: “illocutive force belongs firmly in the realm of action, not in the theory of meaning.”

Seen in this light, conversational cooperation and the coordination of meanings as forms of social action look like prototypical ways of aiming at social integration; a case could even be made for its being the basis, foundation or prerequisite of all such social coherence, or as Bourdieu (1991: 166) expresses it, “symbols are the instruments par excellence of social integration... logical integration is the precondition of moral integration”. In other words, such principles assume what has been called a consensus view of social action, such as first and most influentially formulated in Durkheim’s (1912) Elementary forms of the religious life (cf. Leezenberg 1995: 220-222). Religious ritual, on Durkheim’s view, aims at contributing to the integration of a society, and to the reproduction of the existing social order. “Cooperative” interactive ritual of a linguistic kind, such as polite face-to-face dialogue, may be seen as directed towards similar goals. This theoretical emphasis on social integration, and indeed an explicit appeal to Durkheimian social science, are most apparent in Brown & Levinson’s (1987) seminal work on linguistic politeness, which applies the Gricean apparatus to a wide cross-cultural range of politeness phenomena.

But there are other ways of looking at social action, which may broadly be characterized as conflict views. Most famous, or notorious, are of course Marxist approaches that analyze social action in terms of differentiated access to means of production and other resources, and of the ensuing class struggle. More recently, feminist theories have likewise called attention to the fact that an apparent consensus may mask underlying relations of power, and potential or actual conflicts of interest of various sorts. The central analytical concept underlying conflict views, then, is that of power.

A power asymmetry is indeed quite clearly present in many forms of institutionalized dialogue, such as court cases, interrogations, and oral university examinations. All of these involve the threat or use of sanctions, force, or even physical violence, from one of
the dialogue partners involved. That the force and violence involved in these cases seem
to be legitimate does not alter the fact that they depend on, and reproduce (or, so to speak,
both presuppose and assert) real power differences. Thus far, such relatively
institutionalized forms of dialogue have at most been a subject for more descriptive
research in conversational analysis, critical discourse analysis, ethnology, and
argumentation theory; but it may be interesting to consider their potential theoretical
implications for pragmatics and semantics, i.e., to investigate in more detail whether and
how in general different kinds of power are articulated in conversation, and to see if this
brings interesting new ranges of empirical data into view.
The first problem arising is precisely how to conceptualize the power relations involved in
linguistic communication. The common but crude definition of power as “the ability to
make another social actor do something against his or her will” is of little help in the case
of linguistic communication, which at least apparently rests on consensus; more helpful
here is the recent social-scientific work of authors like Eric Wolf and Pierre Bourdieu,
which attempts to provide a general theoretical perspective on power in social action.
Besides power as a one-place relation (the Nietzschean idea of a person’s potency or
capability) and as the interactional ability of one actor to impose his will on another, Wolf
(1990: 586-7) distinguishes tactical and structural power; respectively the power to
control the settings of interaction, and the power to determine and change the settings
themselves. Very roughly, the pragmatic principles governing polite conversation may be
said to involve tactical power, whereas the broader social contexts and the semantic
categories presupposed in such conversation involve forms of structural power.
Further, Bourdieu (1991) has distinguished physical and symbolic power; describing the
latter as constituting the given through utterances, i.e. it involves the ability to establish
and maintain the institutions governing “felicitous behaviour”. Thus characterized,
symbolic power seems to be structural in nature; but it seems useful to treat politeness
principles as forms of tactical symbolic power. Typical of symbolic power, according to
Bourdieu, is also the fact that it masks itself, and is essentially mistaken for cooperation
or mutual consent; it can only continue to function unproblematically on condition of
being misrecognized in this way.
There are reasons to think that relations of power are at work in the very heart of
signification, that is, they are also relevant in semantics (cf. Wolf 1990: 593). Here, I will
only investigate the more modest claim that they pervade such pragmatic notions such as
Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Searle’s rules for carrying out felicitous speech acts.
Looked at in the terms outlined above, such allegedly universal principles of rational
communication are in fact descriptions of legitimate and unchallenged forms of symbolic
power: they hide or ignore the different power relations involved in institutionalized and
effectively legitimated speech acts. It may be replied that such abstraction from the social
context can be defended as a research strategy of starting at the micro-level of direct
conversational interaction between two participants, in isolation from macro-sociological
factors (once again, this interactional approach seems most explicit in sociologically informed work of Brown & Levinson); but consideration of the different forms of power and their interrelation suggests that a rigid distinction between interactional contexts and larger social and cultural structures is impossible. Moreover, the assumption that institutionalized and asymmetrical cases are somehow derived from, or directed towards, an essentially more cooperative form of direct and power-free face-to-face interaction or “communicative action” is by no means self-evident, and - once made explicit - actually rather implausible. There is no clear reason to think that this specific kind of speech situation is logically or conceptually prior to any other. In other words, it seems that abstracting away from power relations precludes the very possibility of accounting adequately for many forms of dialogue as anything other than anomalous or imperfect. Finally, relations of tactical and structural power can be challenged, and this is indeed precisely what happens in some forms of non-cooperative communication. I will illustrate this with some cross-cultural data of examples from more or less institutionalized forms of communication, such as ritualized challenges and insults, gossip, and slander. These constitute challenges to the power and legitimacy of a speaker, but do not necessarily degenerate into uncooperative, let alone incommunicative, behavior; they involve an explicit challenge to the addressee and constitute a claim to symbolic power on the speaker’s part. Significantly, however, detailed attention to such kinds of conflict-oriented communication or “impolite conversation” is conspicuously lacking in Brown & Levinson’s otherwise exhaustive study.

The systematic attention to forms of power involved in communication and an awareness of the fact that cooperative conversation is no more self-evident that are harmonious social relations in general, then, open up interesting new descriptive areas in the analysis of dialogue. Such an approach also cuts across the familiar divide of semantics and pragmatics as the domain of conventions and of intentions, respectively, in that it does not treat either as simply given.

Literature:


