

The Nature of Perlocution

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Abstract

The perlocutionary act of Austin's trichotomy on speech acts is significantly crucial to the understanding of communication, but has attracted the least attention ever since its formulation. This paper reviews its studies in the past and discusses the nature of perlocution within the framework of pragmatics. A proper understanding of perlocution will provide a fresh linguistic approach for literary criticism and will in turn shed light on the teaching of literature.

Key words: Perlocution, nature, transaction.

I. The Philosophical Origin of Perlocution

1. Ordinary Language Philosophy

Perlocution is rooted in 'ordinary language philosophy'. *Logical positivism* and *ordinary language philosophy* are two dominant movements in twentieth-century philosophy to concern themselves with language. Logical positivist philosophers such as Bertrand Russell tried to construct artificial languages with sufficient constraints to prevent the expression of metaphysics in them. Russell and others took the view that everyday language is somehow deficient or defective, a rather debased vehicle, full of ambiguities, imprecision and contradictions. Their aim was to refine language, removing its perceived imperfections and illogicalities, and to create an ideal language. They were principally concerned with the properties of sentences which could be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity. The response of Austin and his group was to observe that ordinary people manage to communicate extremely effectively and relatively unproblematically with language just the way it is. Instead of striving to rid everyday language of its imperfections, he argued, we should try to understand how it is that people manage with it as well as they do (Thomas, 1995, p. 29-30).

J. L. Austin in Oxford and Wittgenstein in Cambridge are the forefathers of this school of philosophy. Ordinary language philosophers hold the view that the key to, or at least a necessary condition for, finally solving philosophical problems lies in some sort of detailed attention to ordinary language. The concept of speech acts was largely originated by Austin. Austin's basic ideas, which were formed by him in the late 1930s, were presented in his lectures given at Oxford in 1952–1954, and later in his famous William James Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955. These lectures were finally published posthumously in his most influential book *How to do things with words* in 1962. Austin's views have been enormously influential in both philosophy and linguistics. After his death in 1960, the American philosopher John R. Searle and some others developed and systematized Austin's ideas.

2. Austin's Speech Act Theory and His Initiation of Perlocution

The central tenet of speech act theory is that the uttering of a sentence is, or is part of, an action within the framework of social institutions and conventions. Simply put, saying is (part of) doing. Actions performed via utterances are generally called speech acts. Austin's initial distinction made by between performatives and constatives was soon to be rejected by him in favor of a general theory of speech acts. The distinction was later replaced by his threefold classification of acts. He made a well-known tripartite distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.

(1) The *locution* is the act of saying something. This 'includes the utterance of certain noises [the phonetic act], the utterance of certain words in a certain construction [the phatic act], and the utterance of them with certain 'meaning' in the favorite philosophical sense of that word, i.e., with a certain sense and with a certain reference [the rhetic act]' (Austin, 1962, p. 92).

(2) The *illocution* is the act done in saying something. More precisely, an illocution explains in what way one is using a locution: 'for asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning', etc. (Austin, 1962, p. 98).

(3) The *perlocution* is the act done by saying something. 'Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of an audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons (Austin, 1962, p. 101)'

Austin's conception of the locutionary and the illocutionary acts has been scrutinized, challenged and modified (and drastically so with respect to illocutionary act) since the initial formulation of SAT in 1962. The perlocutionary act, in contrast, has received the least attention (Gu, 1993, p. 405). A discussion of perlocution is a tough job in view of the fuzziness of the concept since its very birth. Indeed, Austin was by no means specific enough about his understanding of perlocutions and neither were his followers. Austin's main concern in his SAT is with illocutionary act as can be seen from the following statement: 'Our interest in these lecture is essentially to fasten on the second, illocutionary act and contrast it with the other two (Austin, 1962, p. 103).' Nonetheless, this study will focus its attention on perlocution due to the fact that there are some important issues which call for further scrutiny and criticism.

II. The Related Studies and Major Views on Pelocution

1. The Related Studies

There are only a small number of papers devoted to the study of perlocution: Cohen (1973), Campbell (1973), Gaines (1979), Davis (1980), Gu (1993), Attardo (1997), Dennis Kurzon (1998), Marcu (2000). Marginal discussions within linguistics literature are found in e.g. Black (1969), Searle (1969), Sadock (1974), van Dijk (1977), Bach and Harnish (1979), Leech (1983) and Levinson (1983). These studies have contributed, in one way or another, to our understanding of perlocution. For example, Campbell (1973), Gaines (1979), Gu (1993) tries to pin down the role of intention in interpreting perlocutions and speech acts; Cohen (1973) makes a distinction between 'direct' and 'associated' perlocutions; Gu

(1993) gives a full account of the fallacies such as Effect=Act Fallacy that follow from a straightforward adoption of the multiplicity, infinity, or causation thesis.

Despite the fact that perlocution is largely ignored by linguists and the study of perlocution is a tough job, Davis (in Searle eds. 1980, p. 37-38) provides two reasons for the necessity of focusing attention on perlocution. First, they are especially interesting for certain issues arising in current action theory. Second, a proper understanding of perlocutionary acts will throw some light on the complex phenomena involved in communication. Gu (1994, p.15) also emphasizes the significance of studies on perlocution. He holds that perlocution is an indispensable part of a complete speech act. Perlocution is a very important concept for communication. The ignorance of perlocution is substantially due to three reasons. First, Austin and Searle show much less interest in perlocution. Second, perlocution involves some extralinguistic factors which are beyond the scope of linguistics. Third, the study of perlocution has always been concerning Causation Theory. Thus, there is an urgent need to clarify and delimit the notion of perlocution, whose features will shed new light on literary discourse analysis.

2. Major Views on Perlocution

There are several different views on perlocution which contribute more or less on the understanding of perlocution.

2.1 Austin's conception

Perlocutionary acts are the third in Austin's tri-partite nomenclature of speech acts. Austin's definition of perlocution can be elaborated according to his work (1962) from the following five aspects concerning its intention, design features, resulting theses, the distinction between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts, as well as the important notion 'effects':

Firstly, perlocutionary act can be performed both intentionally and unintentionally. He said that perlocutionary act 'may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them (the effects)... (Austin, 1962, p. 101)'. However, he also noted later in his book that intention was not a necessary condition for a perlocutionary act.

Secondly, a requirement for the performance of perlocutionary acts is that 'the speaker's saying something will often, or even normally, produces certain consequential effects on the feelings, thoughts, or actions of his audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons...(1962, p. 101)'. This requirement involves four defining features as Gu (1993, p. 406) listed: (1) S says something to H; (2) H is affected in a certain way; (3) That H is affected is treated as a consequential effect of S's saying something; (4) S is therefore attributed with the performance of the

perlocutionary act.

Thirdly, the four defining features give rise to four theses (Gu, 1993, p. 407-409). They are the Multiplicity Thesis, the Infinity Thesis, the Causation Thesis and the Intention Irrelevance Thesis. As far as the first feature is concerned, Austin writes that '[i]t is characteristic of perlocutionary acts that the response achieved, or the sequel, can be achieved additionally or entirely by non-locutionary means: thus intimidation may be achieved by waving a stick or pointing a gun (Austin, 1962, p. 119)'. Most studies ignore the non-verbal means of achieving a perlocutionary act. The second feature gives rise to two theses, Multiplicity Thesis and Infinity Thesis. The Multiplicity Thesis is the view that S's saying many things may jointly contribute to one effect. The Infinity Thesis is the view that the issuing of an utterance may produce an infinite and indefinite number of perlocutionary effects. The Causation Thesis derives from the third feature. Davis (1980, p.39) introduced three terms, namely, perlocutionary cause and perlocutionary effect and perlocutionary act. In his understanding, S's saying something (perlocutionary cause) causes H being affected (perlocutionary effect). The Causation Thesis seems to be fundamental to the conception of the perlocutionary act, but it is not without problems. Intention Irrelevance Thesis results from the fourth feature. The view is that S's intention is irrelevant as to the decision of whether a given act is perlocutionary or not.

Fourthly, to better understand Austin's notion of perlocutionary act, we need to look more closely at how he distinguishes illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Austin himself admits that it is the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions which seems likeliest to give trouble. According to him, illocutionary acts are *conventional* and can be made explicit by the performative formula; but perlocutionary acts cannot (1962, p.103). Austin used three linguistic tests of the illocutionary act to distinguish it from the perlocutionary. However, these tests seem to be problematic.

Fifthly, Austin distinguished some senses of consequences and effects in connection with perlocutionary acts. In the case of the perlocutionary act, a rough distinction is made between achieving an object and producing a sequel. The two types of perlocutionary effects can be illustrated as the achievement of a perlocutionary object such as convince, persuade, frighten, etc. and the production of perlocutionary sequel such as unintended or unforeseen effects. According to Austin, because illocutionary acts produce their own effects which are not perlocutionary in nature. The expected effects from illocutionary acts are the utterance's 'uptake' (i.e. 'bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution'), 'taking effects' ('bringing about states of affairs in the normal

way'), and 'inviting a response' (1962, p. 116-118).

2.2 Searle's viewpoint

Searle (1969) modified Austin's Locution/illocution/perlocution system. Searle (1969, p. 24-25) presents a theory which is a development of the account presented in Austin 1962. Searle claims that four acts are characteristically performed in the utterance of a sentence: (a) Uttering words (morphemes, sentences) = performing *utterance acts*. (b) Referring and predicating = performing *propositional acts*. (c) Stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc. = performing *illocutionary acts*. (d) Persuading, convincing, enlightening, edifying, inspiring, etc. = performing *perlocutionary acts*.

Searle (1969, p. 25) adds Austin's notion of the *perlocutionary acts* to *utterance acts*, *propositional acts* and *illocutionary acts*. Searle substituted for 'locution' the concept of propositional content. He states that 'Correlated with the notion of illocutionary act is the notion of the consequences or *effects* such acts have on the actions, thoughts or beliefs, etc. of hearers. For example, by arguing I may *persuade* or *convince* someone, by warning him I may scare or alarm him, by making a request I may *get him to do something*, by informing him I may *convince him* (*enlighten, edify, inspire him, get him to realize*). The italicized expressions above denote perlocutionary acts'.

Searle and Vanderveken (1985, p.12) treat perlocutionary effects as extra-communicational in that it reflects the consequences of communication, rather than figuring in its constitution. They think that perlocutionary acts are not essentially linguistic, for it is possible to achieve perlocutionary effects without performing any speech act at all. Illocutionary acts, on the other hand, have to do with understanding, so they are conventionalizable. According to them, it is not possible to have a linguistic convention to the effect that such and such an utterance count as convincing you, or persuading you, or annoying you, or exasperating you, or amusing you. And that is why none of these perlocutionary verbs has a performative use.

2.3 Levinson's elaboration

Levinson (1983, p. 236-237) reaccounts perlocutionary act as: 'the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterance'. Levinson (1983, p. 237) observed that it seemed to Austin the more troublesome was the distinction between illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. The illocutionary act is what is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accord with a conventional procedure, and is consequently determinate (in principle at least). In contrast, a perlocutionary act is specific to the

circumstances of issuance, and is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering that particular utterance, and includes all those effects, intended or unintended, that some particular utterance in a particular situation may cause.

Levinson calls to attention that the interactional emphasis (on what the recipient(s) of an illocutionary act must think or do) in Austin's work has unfortunately been neglected in later work in speech act theory (see Austin, 1962: Lecture IX).

2.4 Leech's abandonment

Leech (1983, p. 199) rethinks the triple classification in terms of the process model of communication. In the means-ends diagram, we have 'phonetic' at the bottom, 'locutionary' on the upper layer, 'illocutionary' on the third layer from the bottom. To include Austin's perlocutionary act, Leech (ibid., p. 201) suggests that one can simply add one further layer to the hierarchy. Thus, the perlocutionary act represents the sequence of events enacted to reach the perlocutionary attainment. Leech (ibid., p.202) emphasizes that not all perlocutionary acts are appropriately represented in his means-ends diagram. The perlocutionary effect involved follows as an intended result of the hearer's interpretation of the speaker's illocutionary goal. Leech (ibid., p. 203) points out that there are some kinds of causative verbs which have been assumed to denote perlocutionary acts. A distinction may be made, for example between effects which are planned, and those which are not. When *s bores or embarrasses or irritates* his audience, in most cases the result is unintended, and therefore does not form part of a means-ends analysis. Further, there are effects of greater or of less directness: the ultimate result of a *reproach* may be to bring about a desired reformation of *h's* behaviour; but an intermediate result will be that of making *h* feel guilty or sorry.

Leech does not want to get involved too much in the illocution vs perlocution, so he observes that it is unnecessary to be too deeply concerned with these distinctions: "perlocutionary effects do not form part of the study of pragmatics, since pragmatic force has to do with goals rather than with results" (ibid., p. 203).

2.5 Gu's modification

Gu (1993) presents an overall review of the theory of perlocution and deals with the notions like the Multiplicity Thesis, the Infinity Thesis, the Causation Thesis, the Intention Irrelevance Thesis and The Effect = Act Fallacy. He argues in the paper that the current theory of perlocution is fundamentally misguided and a fresh approach is called for. He considers the Causation Thesis to be the source of many problems, and argues that perlocutionary effects cannot be said to be 'caused' by the utterance as there is no one-to-one causal relationship between an utterance type and its effects. The fact that this does

not happen shows that there is a gap between understanding and believing.

To replace the Causation Thesis, Gu suggests that an utterance might be said to “trigger” an act on the part of the hearer. He claims that the perlocutionary act is not a single act, but a transaction. Gu argues that perlocutionary acts should be considered in terms of verbal interaction. The effects of an utterance should not be explained in terms of causations or acts performed by the speaker, but they ‘ought to be explained in transactional terms with the recognition of hearers as agents of the effects’ (1993, p. 423). According to Gu, the hearer is an independent agent of the perlocutionary effect or effects and must be regarded as an active participant in the transaction. The perlocutionary act cannot be said to be performed by the S alone. It is a joint endeavour between S and H. It involves S’s performance of speech acts and H’s performance of response-acts. Therefore, he concludes, “the interactive relation between S and H is linguistic and communicative” (1993, p. 427). Kurzon (1998, p.575) summarizes Gu (1993)’s approach as being more pragmatic in everyday sense than the other speech act approach, for Gu sees perlocutionary acts only in terms of verbal transaction; it takes two to make a perlocutionary act – the speaker and the hearer.

2.6 Bach & Harnish’s refinement

Bach & Harnish (1979) review Austin’s work and use much of the basis speech act framework as the underpinnings of their own Speech Act Schema (SAS). In so doing, they refine some of Austin’s characterizations. They agree with Austin that perlocutionary acts may actually result in any number of related or unrelated effects on the audience, but, contrary to Austin, they exclude unintended perlocutionary effects from their framework (Bach & Harnish 1979, p. 17 & 81). Thus, for Bach & Harnish, perlocutionary acts can only be intentional and may only cause certain effects, namely “psychological states or intentional actions” (ibid., p. 81).

III. A Reclarified Account of the Nature of Perlocution

1. The Fallacies of the Previous Approaches

Perlocutions are extremely significant within a theory of communication and pragmatics because the normal reason for speaking is to cause an effect in H, and S typically strives to achieve this by any means s/he can. Enlightened by Marcu (2000)’s critique, this study lists several fallacies of the previous studies on perlocution:

They are (1) the fallacy of ruling perlocution out of the meaning of an utterance and out of the scope of pragmatics in general, (2) the dismissal of the role that the structure of locutions plays in the success of perlocutionary acts, (3) the fallacy of considering

perlocutionary acts to be simple consequences of locutionary acts, (4) the fallacy of attaching little or no importance to the role of the speaker in the perlocutionary act, (5) the fallacy of attaching little or no importance to the role of the hearer in the perlocutionary act, (6) the fallacy of taking no consideration of the actually achieved effects in a hearer.

2. The Nature of Perlocution

Perlocution can be accounted for within a broader range of pragmatics and socio-psychology. Speech acts are basic units of communication. There are three ‘forces’ of communication, namely, locution, illocution and perlocution. In general, the locutionary act, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary act are mere abstractions. Every genuine speech-act is a combination of the three. Acts of all the three kinds are necessary, since they are the performing of actions.

The modern usage of the term pragmatics is attributable to the philosopher Charles Morris (1938). Morris distinguished three distinct branches of inquiry: syntactic, being the study of “the formal relation of signs to one another”, semantics, the study of ‘the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable’, and pragmatics, the study of ‘the relation of signs to interpreters’ (Morris, 1938, p. 6). ‘Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or a writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)’ (Yule, 1996, p. 3). A study of perlocution has to do with the interaction between a speaker (or a writer) and a listener (or a reader) in accounting for meaning, so it is an indispensable part of pragmatics, dealing with largely ignored issues such as the hearer’s reception and the speaker-hearer relationship.

The structure of locutions plays an essential role in the success of perlocutionary act. Structuring a message for communicative purpose is very important, because different ‘structured’ message creates different perlocutionary effects.

Speech act theory acknowledges only the causative role that a speaker has in producing a perlocutionary act; however, studies have shown that the background, credibility, etc. of the speaker and of the source to whom a message is attributed plays an important role in achieving perlocutionary effects than theories of perlocutions have acknowledged so far.

A careful analysis of Austin’s definition of perlocutions show that he assigns to the hearer a passive role in the success of a perlocutionary act. However, as Gu (1993) notes in his critique of the causation and infinity theses, treating the hearer’s response act as a simple consequence of speaker’s speech act denies the status of agent for the hearer. ‘Perlocutionary act is not a single act, but a

transaction’.

According to Grice's theory, S meant-nn something by X: this means that speaker intender} the utterance of X to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of his intention. For Grice, meaning has to be interpreted in terms of the hearer and so meaning and intention were brought together in his analysis. Grice's theory: meaning = intention interpreted by the hearer (intention to communicate). This can be further explained by Grice's mechanism for pragmatic inference. It goes as follows: X intends to bring about a response on the part of Y by getting Y to recognize that X intends to bring about that response; Y does recognize X's intention, and is thereby given some sort of reason to respond just as X intends him to. Grice's semantic theory revolves entirely around the perlocutionary dimension of language, that is, around the reception of speech acts and its impact on the hearers. Gricean semantics remains the most elaborate account of the semantic significance of perlocutionary effects on the audience (Medina, 2005, p. 29). Jose Medina (2005, p. 28) points out that a theory of meaning must not only take into account the illocutionary force of utterances, but must also pay attention to their perlocutionary effects. The perlocutionary dimension of language also has semantic significance. The effects of an utterance on its audience or receptors can also affect its meaning. From a communicative perspective, perlocution should not be ruled out of the meaning of an utterance.

Intentions are not sufficient for meaning construction. Perlocutionary effects can be intended or unintended. In addition to intentions, it is a certain kind of convention or some kind of rule that is necessary for meaning. Perlocutionary effects are, to some extent indeterminate, but they are determinable, to some extent.

IV. A Tentative Taxonomy of Perlocution

Based on the analysis above, this study gives a tentative taxonomy of perlocution. One utterance will result in three kinds of perlocution simultaneously. They are Explicative perlocution, Implicative perlocution and Evocative perlocution. all three levels are presumed to be correlated with psychological factors in human beings.

Explicative means ‘tending to lay open to an understanding’. On this level, perlocutionary acts are taken to be consequences of locutionary acts. The effects start with the hearer's recognition and acceptance of the content of an utterance. Perlocutions bear some sort of relationship to linguistic form. A speaker's utterance literally causes some effects in the hearer. Explicative perlocution is a bridge linking surface forms with particular communicative goals.

Implicative means ‘tending to suggest or imply’. On this level, the same meaning will arise between speaker (writer) and hearer (reader). Perlocutions are direct and in-built consequences of illocutionary acts. Perlocutionary effects are achieved through intention recognition. Austin's “uptake” may be included in this kind of perlocution. The hearer understands both the force and the content of an utterance.

Evocative means ‘(of) that produces memories and feelings’. Speaker's saying something may produce multiple effects on the hearer. The number of individuals to be affected can be more than one, and the effects may differ from one individual to another. The hearer in this case must be a rational agent.

The three levels interact in complex ways: they are not isolated and autonomously packaged ingredients of utterances that can be analyzed independently of one another. One of the latest (and probably the most illuminating) approaches to perlocutions is due to Davis (1979). He claims that in a performance of a perlocutionary act the conditions to be fulfilled concern not only the successful performance of an illocutionary act or propositional act in uttering p, but also the role of communicative competence shared by speaker S and hearer H in a particular language. Thus, the assumption that a perlocution is an act strictly related to S's and H's communicative competence should be a governing factor in the investigations of speech acts.

In sum, the existing accounts of perlocution are inadequate. A clarified account of perlocution can enrich speech act theory. The taxonomy proposed here will more powerfully account for the mechanism of literary discourse, which previous studies on the application of speech act theory to literary works have never dealt with.

V. Conclusion

Although Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) identified perlocution as a speech act, this concept has been largely ignored. The existing accounts of perlocution are inadequate. Little attention has been given to the hearer's emotions and the speaker-hearer relationship in prior research on speech acts. This study tries to show that perlocution, like locution and illocution, similarly warrants as much linguistic attention. This study has made a theoretical clarification of perlocution. It seeks to give a revised account of the notion of perlocution. The exploration into the nature of perlocution can provide a tool of analysis for the interpretation of literature and offer the literary critic new methods to account for the complexities of the way formal and contextual features interact in the reception and interpretation of literary discourse. Moreover, the understanding of perlocution can help students and teachers alike solve problems of interpretation by showing them in a rigorous way

why one interpretation is possible but not another, and thus enhance their aesthetic appreciation and emotional reaction of a poetic discourse.

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