

SPEECH ACTS AND NORMATIVITY: A PLEA FOR INFERENCEALISM

Federica Berdini

1. Introduction

Since its origins Speech Act Theory has been concerned with the capacity of language to engender normative states of affairs (e.g., commitments, obligations, rights, licenses). While sketching its foundations, John L. Austin (1962/1975) conceived the theory explicitly to account for such a capacity of language. Austin's great contribution to pragmatics is thus to have pointed out, so to speak, that *all speech is action*.

Depending on the way the performance of speech acts is accounted for, two main traditions can be distinguished within Speech Act Theory: «Austinian» approaches, based on rules and conventions, and «neo-Gricean» approaches, based on the speaker's communicative intentions and their recognition by means of inferences.¹ Both traditions can be traced back to some features by means of which Austin characterized the notion of illocutionary act, namely:

(i) the necessity of the securing of uptake (i.e., the understanding of the meaning and force of the utterance) for the successful performance of an illocutionary act,

(ii) the production of states of affairs in a non-normal way, different from natural causation, and, more generally,

(iii) the conventional nature of an illocutionary act.

Aspects (ii) and (iii) played a central role in the development of two different varieties of conventionalism within Speech Act Theory: Searle's «conventionalism of the means» (1969), and Sbisà's «conventionalism of the effects» (1989; 2002; 2009).² On the other hand, Bach and Harnish's (1979) inferentialist approach focuses on (i) in order to encompass the account of speech acts within a broader neo-Gricean explanation of successful linguistic communication.

¹ Cp. Harnish (2005). The use of the term «*inferentialism*» here refers to the second, neo-Gricean kind of approaches to speech acts, and not to Robert Brandom's inferentialism, within whose framework, to be sure, interesting accounts of the normativity of language have been provided. The possibility of a comparison between the these two approaches, interesting as it might be, just oversteps the aim and scope of the present work, and might be topic for further occasion.

² The distinction between the two forms of conventionality is traced by Sbisà herself (2009).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it points out the inadequacy of Searle's conventionalist approach (1969; 2001; 2010), and advocates as an alternative an inferentialist approach along with Bach and Harnish (1979).

Second, it proposes an account of *normativity* (in the sense of the normative dimension of the states of affairs produced by the performance of speech acts) within the inferentialist framework. The proposed account appeals to the *presumption about the interlocutor's rationality*, which I derive from Grice's work (1989; 1991; 2001). I suggest that by making this presumption fully explicit, and by attending to the set of expectations and constraints that result from it, we can account for the normative dimension engendered by speech acts.

2. Searle's Conventionalism

To regard Searle's approach as a conventionalist one is actually to make a radicalization, since in *Speech Acts* a pivotal inferentialist element, i.e., the notion of communicative intention, is exploited to account for the «illocutionary effect» (1969: §2.6). However, the role of the communicative intention is dropped in the works subsequent to *Speech Acts* (cp. 1986, in particular). On the contrary, Searle keeps steady the appeal to conventions and rules up to his latest work (2010), and in fact *the illocutionary force of an act is regarded as a matter of the semantic rules governing the expression used to perform it*. It is in this sense that I will consider here Searle's approach as a form of *conventionalism*.³

By labelling Searle's account as *conventionalist*, I essentially follow Harnish's (2009) taxonomy of the approaches within Speech Act Theory.⁴ It seems to me that Searle's account best fits in the Convention-Rule-Norm (C-R-N) based side of the spectrum along which Harnish classifies these approaches. C-R-N theories analyze illocutionary acts in terms of «being performed in accordance with rules, conventions and/or norms» (Harnish 2009: 11).

The hypothesis central to *Speech Acts* is that

Speaking a language is performing acts according to rules. The form this hypothesis will take is that the semantic structure of a language may be

³ See Bach and Harnish (1979: § 7.3) for a characterization of Searle's account as a conventionalist one along these lines.

⁴ This is a broad (and perhaps too loose) characterization of conventionalism, for sure, but it seems to be useful to capture several (and often intertwined) respects under which Searle's account may be regarded as *conventionalist*. On the other hand, stretching a little bit this taxonomy, I will here regard Bach and Harnish's account as *inferentialist*, i.e., an Intention-Inference (I-I) based theory, inasmuch as I will be focusing mainly on their account of *communicative illocutionary acts*, whose performance is a matter of expressing certain kinds of intentions. See section 5 below.

regarded as a conventional realization of a series of sets of underlying constitutive rules, and that speech acts are acts characteristically performed by uttering expressions in accordance with these sets of constitutive rules. (Searle 1969: 36-7)

By *constitutive rules* Searle refers to rules that create, rather than merely regulate, a certain activity, and that have the form «X counts as Y in context C» (1969: §2.5). According to this hypothesis, Searle pursues an analysis of the act of promising, which is then extended to other kinds of illocutionary acts. First it establishes the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful and non-defective performance of the act, and subsequently a set of *semantic* rules for «the use of the illocutionary force indicating device» is extracted from these conditions (1969: Ch. 3). The rules extracted are semantic inasmuch as the recognition, on the part of the hearer (H), of the illocutionary act as an act of a certain type, e.g. as a promise, comes about as a result of H's knowledge of the *meaning* of the sentence (condition 8). The rules extracted are the propositional content rule, the preparatory rules, the sincerity rule – which constrain the propositional content, the utterance circumstances and the mental states of the promisor and the addressee/promisee respectively – and the essential rule. The essential rule, which is the most important, has the form of a constitutive rule and makes the utterance containing the illocutionary force indicating device count as an act of promising.

Searle thus characterizes the *illocutionary effect*, i.e., the understanding of the meaning and force of the utterance, as follows:

In a performance of an illocutionary act in the literal utterance of a sentence, the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect; and furthermore, if he is using the words literally, he intends this recognition to be achieved *in virtue of the fact that the rules for using the expressions he utters associate the expression with the production of that effect.* (Searle 1969: 45, emphasis mine)

The keystone of Searle's project is the *principle of expressibility*, according to which «whatever can be meant can be said» (1969: 68), if needed by enriching the language with new expressions.⁵ This principle enables Searle

To equate rules for performing speech acts with rules for uttering certain linguistic elements, since for any possible speech act there is a possible

⁵ It seems to me that Searle's characterization of the principle of expressibility, and the role it is meant to play within his theory of speech acts, allows for a strong interpretation of the principle itself, along the one given, for example, by Recanati (2003).

linguistic element the meaning of which (given the context of the utterance) is sufficient to determine that its literal utterance is a performance of precisely that speech act. (1969: 20-1)

A consequence of this principle, Searle states, is that cases of nonliteralness, vagueness, ambiguity, and incompleteness «are not theoretically essential to linguistic communication» (*ibid.*), and thus his analysis is limited to «full blown explicit promises» (1969: 55).

Searle also provides an account of indirect speech acts, i.e., cases in which «a sentence that contains the illocutionary force indicators for one kind of illocutionary act» is «uttered to perform, *in addition*, another type of illocutionary act» (1975: 30, emphasis in the original). In order to explain the understanding of such cases Searle appeals not only to

- (a) the theory of speech acts previously developed, but also to
- (b) «certain general principles of cooperative conversation»,
- (c) «mutually shared factual background information of the speaker and the hearer», and
- (d) «an ability on the part of the hearer to make inferences» (1975: 32).

Searle thus provides a reconstruction of the inferential processes the hearer unconsciously carries out, by means of (d), to the understanding of the indirect speech act. In these processes (b) and (c) play a role in assessing the existence of «an ulterior illocutionary point beyond the illocutionary point contained in the meaning of the sentence»,⁶ while (a) and (c) determine what the ulterior illocutionary point is.

Searle then points out a systematic relation between the sentences «conventionally» used in the performance of indirect directives, which have been classified into groups, and the felicity conditions of the type of speech act they are used to perform. In this way an explanation of indirect speech acts is provided «in terms of the theory of speech acts» (1975: 43-8). In particular, an explanation is provided in terms of what I take here to be Searle's *conventionalist* account of speech acts.

3. Issues with Searle's Account

One problem of Searle's conventionalist account is represented by the very methodological assumption on which the analysis is grounded, i.e., the

⁶ According to Searle, the illocutionary point, along with the direction of fit and the expressed psychological state, is one of the dimensions of variation between different types of illocutionary acts. See Searle (1975).

restriction just to literal cases, the «idealization of the concept analysed» (1969: 55). This idealization is made possible by the endorsement of the principle of expressibility, which rules out nonliteral, ambiguous and incomplete cases as theoretically irrelevant.

This attitude seems to be in force also in Searle's account of indirect speech acts, since the appeal to general principles of cooperative conversation (b), factual background information mutually shared by the interlocutors (c), and the hearer's inferential ability (d), proves to be purely instrumental: far from being complemented and integrated with the rule-based account, such inferentialist explanation actually remains peripheral and is merely aimed at the confirmation of the conventionalist speech act theory as developed in *Speech Acts*.

In order for Speech Act Theory to adequately account for nonliteral and indirect cases, it seems that more than (constitutive) semantic rules governing the meaning of the linguistic expressions is needed. To this effect, contextual and intentional factors involved in the determination of the illocutionary force should not just be idle wheels within the theory, as in Searle's account (1975), but rather play an effective role and thus receive appropriate theoretical emphasis. In this respect, an inferentialist approach proves to be preferable to an approach like Searle's (see section 5 and 6 below).

However, the main problem with Searle's account is that it assimilates the illocutionary force of speech acts into the semantic and representational dimension of language. While in *Speech Acts*, following Grice (Searle 1969: §2.6), Searle regarded the communicative intention as constitutive of meaning, later (Searle 1986) he contends that «primary-meaning intentions are intentions to represent and they are *independent of and prior* to the intention to communicate those representations» (1986: 216, emphasis mine).⁷

Even though Searle maintains that «in the standard speech situation the utterance both represents and communicates» (1986: *ibid.*, see also 2010: 75), *representation* is defined as consisting of «a propositional content in an illocutionary mode» (1986: 213). Searle seems thus to regard the illocutionary mode as merely a matter of semantic representation. The idea of an assimilation of the illocutionary force to the semantic and representational dimension of language is indeed confirmed by Searle's more recent explicit avowal that

The distinction between the locutionary and the illocutionary, however, does not seem to me to work. The reason is that the meaning of the sentence, which is supposed to determine the locutionary act, is already sufficient to fix a certain range of illocutionary forces. You cannot distinguish between meaning and force, because *force is already part of the meaning of the*

⁷ A *primary-meaning* intention is «an intention to represent», and a *communication intention* «is an intention that the hearer should know the representing intention» (Searle 1986: 216).

sentence. There is no way that I can utter the sentence “It is raining”, or for that matter, “Shoot her”, without performing some illocutionary act insofar as it is a locutionary act. There is no distinction between the locutionary and the illocutionary, because the locutionary is *eo ipso* illocutionary. (Searle 2001b: 221, emphasis mine)⁸

Against Searle, and along with Bach and Harnish (1979), I claim that semantics does not suffice to account for the understanding of a speech act *as* an act of a certain type, with a certain *force*. As a matter of fact, it is not possible to univocally establish a link between an illocutionary act and the locutionary act employed to perform it, since the same locutionary act can carry out different illocutionary acts – e.g. the utterance of the sentence «The door is open» may well be an assertion, an order, a threat, or a piece of advice – and the same illocutionary act can be performed by different locutionary acts, which range from sentences containing explicit performatives to elliptical, ambiguous or nonliteral sentences.⁹

Contrary to Searle’s analysis and the principle of expressibility on which it is grounded, the illocutionary force seems to be irreducible to the locutionary act.¹⁰ In order to vindicate the original Austinian distinction between illocutionary acts and locutionary and perlocutionary ones, I think this aspect of irreducibility should be appropriately highlighted.

Moreover, as Bach and Harnish point out, the linguistic meaning of a sentence *underdetermines* the illocutionary act that can be performed by uttering it, and this applies even to literal cases. For instance, whether the utterance of the sentence «The door is open» constitutes an assertion, an order, a threat, or a piece of advice obviously depends not only on «what is said», but also on the *context of utterance* and on the speaker’s *communicative intention*. Unlike Searle’s, Bach and Harnish’s account genuinely accounts for contextual and inferential factors involved in the determination of the illocutionary force (see *infra*, section 5).

The next section is devoted to Searle’s account of normativity, and to my criticism of it. In sections 5 and 6 I provide a brief overview and an evaluation of Bach and Harnish’s inferentialist account.

⁸ The same contention was already maintained in Searle (1968).

⁹ According to Austin, even non-linguistic behaviour, such as swinging a stick (1962/1975: 119-20), may constitute an illocutionary act.

¹⁰ For a recent criticism of Searle’s treatment of illocutionary force see Kissine (2011).

4. Searle on Normativity

In *Making the Social World* (2010) Searle is concerned with the nature of the commitment engendered by the performance of speech acts. According to Searle the production of a public deontology, i.e., a set of normative states of affairs such as commitments, obligations, rights, is an essential feature of language:

We will not understand an essential feature of language if we do not see that it necessarily involves social commitments, and that the necessity of these social commitments derives from [i] the social character of the communication situation, [ii] the conventional character of the devices used, and [iii] the intentionality of speaker meaning. (2010: 80, numbering added)

After indicating two features proper to the notion of commitment, namely irreversibility and obligation, Searle argues: «these two features combine in speech acts performed *according to rules*» (2010: 83, emphasis mine). According to this latter characterization of commitment, the second of the three elements determining the necessity of social commitments – [ii] the conventional character of the devices used – seems to play a major role; that is what makes Searle's account of normativity a *conventionalist* one.

There is, anyway, further support for this interpretation. According to Searle, the commitment produced by the use of the «collectively accepted conventional procedures» is *internal* to the procedures (2010: 82). In *Rationality in Action* (2001a: ch. 6), while providing an account of the creation of commitments (there denominated «desire-independent reasons for action»), Searle claims that «the apparatus we use for the creation of desire-independent reasons for action is the set of constitutive rules of speech acts and *their realization in the semantic structure of actual human language*» (2001a: 179-80, emphasis mine).

Searle seems therefore to be committed to the view that the successful performance of an act, i.e., *in accordance with the relevant semantic rules*, cannot but produce the commitment of the speaker to the conditions of satisfaction proper to the speech act performed. He in fact avows that «it is tempting, and indeed true, to say that the constitutive rules of the institutions of statement making and promising make every statement into a commitment to truth and every promise into an obligation to do something» (2010: 81). The performance of speech acts, by means of the invocation, on the part of the speaker, of the relevant constitutive rules, brings about commitments, which are thus «already built into the structure of the speech act» (2001a: 174).

It seems natural to me to construe [iii] the intentionality of speaker meaning as (merely) an explication of the *internal* character of the commitment. By «speaker meaning» Searle means the occurrence, in the standard speech act

situation, of the speaker's primary-meaning intention *and* her communicative intention (Searle 1986; 2010). But, as I have argued in section 3, and by his own admission, Searle conceives the illocutionary force as already contained in the meaning of the sentence, at the representational and semantic level. Further on Searle (2010) in fact explains that the speaker's *intentional* «imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction»¹¹ (i.e., the primary-meaning intention, or intention to represent), and its *public* performance by means of *conventional* devices used, necessarily involves the creation of the deontic powers relevant to the speech act performed. Commitments are not further «accretions» beyond the act of meaning something by an utterance, but language itself, Searle claims, provides «the public assumption of conventionally encoded commitments» (2010: 84).

Searle's account of normativity constitutes a complement to his conventionalist account of speech acts, since the explanation of the creation of commitments, as well as their nature, is due to the set of constitutive rules governing the successful performance of speech acts, and ultimately to the conventional character of the linguistic devices employed in such performances.

My aim is to retain the characterization of normativity as *internal* to the performance of speech acts – let's call this, along with the necessity to account for the distinctness of the illocutionary level, the *Austinian constraints* on an adequate development of Speech Act Theory. Nonetheless, I think Searle's conventionalist account of the normative dimension engendered by speech acts should be rejected, essentially for the very same reasons I have rejected his development of Speech Act Theory.

5. The Inferentialist Approach

The main tenet informing Bach and Harnish's theory is their conception of linguistic communication as an inferential process (1979: §1.2). Unlike Searle, they regard the connection between the linguistic meaning of a sentence and the speech act it serves to perform as essentially inferential.

Joining the neo-Gricean/inferentialist tradition within Speech Act Theory – the one launched by Strawson (1964) – they maintain that a large class of

¹¹ By imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction Searle means the double level of intentionality of the speaker's intentional production of a physical utterance *and* this utterance's being intended as having certain conditions of satisfaction (those being determined by the intentional state expressed by the utterance, e.g. belief, desire, intention); see Searle (2010: 74-6).

illocutionary acts is communicative:¹² the intentions with which these communicative illocutionary acts are issued are communicative ones. *Communicative intentions* are defined as essentially overt¹³ and reflexive:

They are reflexive intentions, in the sense of H. P. Grice (1957): a reflexive intention is an intention that is intended to be recognized as intended to be recognized. We further restrict illocutionary intentions to those intentions whose fulfilment consists in nothing more than their recognition. The sort of reflexive intentions that has this feature is that of expressing an attitude (such as a belief or desire). Accordingly, an act of linguistic communication is successful if the attitude the speaker expresses is identified by the hearer by means of recognizing the reflexive intention to express it. (Bach and Harnish 1979: xiv-xv)

Bach and Harnish thus conceive communication as consisting in the speaker's *expression of an attitude* by means of reflexive-intending «that the hearer take [the speaker]'s utterance as *reason* to believe one has the attitude» (1979: 39, emphasis mine). The outcome of a successful act of communication, i.e., the *illocutionary effect*, consists in the recognition, on the part of the hearer, of the speaker's reflexive intention. Depending on the attitude expressed – beliefs, desires, intentions, and feelings – a taxonomy of communicative illocutionary intentions (and therefore types of speech acts) is provided (1979: ch. 3).

Bach and Harnish account for the performance of speech acts by putting forward the *speech act schema* (SAS), which represents the pattern of the inference a hearer follows, and is intended to follow, in order to identify the illocutionary act performed by the speaker.¹⁴

The SAS involves not only «what is said» (i.e., the meaning of the sentence), but also *mutual contextual beliefs* (MCBs), and general mutual beliefs peculiar to the communicative situation. In particular, the general mutual beliefs are *presumptions* on which the hearer relies on in order to infer the speaker's illocutionary intention. They represent the conception of the communicative situation shared by the interlocutors and constitute the very conditions of possibility of the communicative exchange. These presumptions are:

¹² Bach and Harnish distinguish between *communicative* illocutionary acts and *conventional* illocutionary acts. Although they trace this distinction, their approach can be defined as mainly inferentialist (see Korta and Perry 2006: 19).

¹³ In Bach and Harnish 1979 the «overt» of the communicative illocutionary intention – in Strawson's words, its «essential avowability» (1964: 454) – is built into the communicative presumption (CP) (see below in this paragraph).

¹⁴ The SAS is supposed to represent only communicative illocutionary acts, since for conventional illocutionary acts conventional intentions, rather than illocutionary ones, have to be fulfilled, i.e., when the relevant convention is satisfied (Bach and Harnish 1979: 108).

Linguistic presumption (LP): The mutual belief in the linguistic community C_L that

- i. the members of C_L share L , and
- ii. that whenever any member S utters any e in L to any other member H , H can identify what S is saying, given that H knows the meaning(s) of e in L and is aware of the appropriate background information. (1979: 7)

Communicative presumption (CP): The mutual belief in C_L that whenever a member S says something in L to another member H , he is doing so with some recognizable illocutionary intent. (1979: 7)

Presumption of Literalness (PL): The mutual belief in the linguistic community C_L that whenever any member S utters any e in L to any other member H , if S could (under the circumstances) be speaking literally, then S is speaking literally. (1979: 12)

A general form of the SAS is thus presented for literal (and direct) cases (1979: 61):

		<i>Basis</i>
L1. [<i>Utterance act</i>]	S is uttering e	hearing S utter e
L2. [<i>Operative meaning</i>]	S means ... by e	L1, LP, MCBs
L3. [<i>Locutionary act</i>]	S is saying that $*(\dots p \dots)$	L2, LP, MCBs
L4.	S , if speaking literally, is F^* -ing that p	L3, CP, MCBs
L5.	S could be F^* -ing that p	L4, MCBs
L6. [<i>Illocutionary act</i>]	S is F^* -ing that p	L5, PL

The linguistic presumption (LP) allows the hearer to determine the locutionary act, after the operative meaning of ambiguous expressions has been fixed by means of contextual selection. The communicative presumption (CP) is in force to the effect that the hearer can determine *that* an illocutionary act has been performed (as opposite to cases of practicing one's pronunciation, or of rehearsing some lines). A pivotal and pervasive role is played by MCBs. They fill the general form of the SAS with content, by enabling the determination of the type of illocutionary act performed, i.e., the attitude the speaker expresses by performing it (1979: 40).

The SAS is subsequently enlarged to account for all possible communicative strategies by means of which a speech act can be performed: direct and indirect *literal* cases, and direct and indirect *nonliteral* ones. The same inferentialist account is provided even for such cases: more inferences are required at some stage or other of the schema (1979: ch. 4), whose general form is anyway one and the same.

According to Bach and Harnish the search for nonliteral and indirect illocutionary intentions is triggered by the interruption of a sense of general coherence, and of contextual and *conversational appropriateness* holding in the interlocutors' beliefs about the communicative exchange they are engaged in (1979: 62). Bach and Harnish define a speaker's contribution to the exchange as conversationally appropriate «if and only if it accords with those conversational presumptions in effect at that time» (1979: 65). The notion of *conversational presumptions* is drawn from Grice's maxims, and as presumptions their status is that of «defeasible mutual contextual beliefs» (1979: 62), i.e., they are operative unless there is indication to the contrary.

6. Evaluation of the Inferentialist Approach

Three main reasons have been presented to reject Searle's semantic account of speech acts. In the first place, it proves unable to genuinely account for nonliteral and indirect cases. What's more, given the role played by the speaker's communicative intentions and contextual information in the determination of the illocutionary force, even in the (direct) literal cases, Searle's account seems to be implausible just for its avowed, idealized explanandum, i.e., literal speech acts. Moreover, it assimilates the illocutionary level into the semantic and representational dimension of language, thereby frustrating a main accomplishment of Speech Act Theory as originally outlined by Austin.

In the light of such reasons an inferentialist account à la Bach and Harnish seems to be preferable to Searle's conventionalist one. From the brief overview provided it clearly emerges how the two problems highlighted in Searle's approach do not arise in Bach and Harnish's theory: (direct/indirect) literal and (direct/indirect) nonliteral cases are equally accounted for within one and the same SAS. Furthermore, inasmuch as the SAS is meant to represent the pattern of the inference a hearer follows, and is intended to follow, in order to identify the illocutionary act performed by the speaker, the illocutionary level is adequately accounted for *as pragmatic*. Within the inferentialist account the

meaning of the sentence represents the starting point for the determination of the illocutionary force, but can never exhaust it (1979: 132).¹⁵

Moreover, by explaining how an illocutionary act is understood *as* an illocutionary act of a certain type, Bach and Harnish's approach seems to provide an adequate account of speech acts in that it fully accounts for the distinctness of the illocutionary level.¹⁶

However, an important feature of speech acts, i.e., the normative dimension they bring about, remains unexplained within Bach and Harnish's account. While they concede that what they classify as *conventional* illocutionary acts (*ConvIA*) produce institutional (i.e., normative) states of affairs, they deny that *communicative* illocutionary acts (*CommIA*) do the same. Regarding two types of communicative illocutionary acts, directives and commissives, Bach and Harnish state:

Although effectives [*ConvIA*] like licensing and prohibiting create rights or obligations, it should not be thought that directives do likewise, at least *as illocutionary acts*. At best, they create mutual beliefs between *S* and *H* about rights or obligations, and it is a moral question whether (or when) they create rights and obligations. (1979: 124, emphasis mine)

Commissives are acts of undertaking obligations, but to undertake an obligation is not automatically to create one, even if *S* uses a performative like "I promise". *S*'s utterance may express his belief that an obligation is thereby created, but that does not make the belief true even if *H* shares the belief and it is mutual. That *S* is obliged to fulfill his commitment is a *moral* question not answerable by the theory of illocutionary acts. (1979: 125, emphasis mine)

More recently Harnish (2005) has envisioned a way of accounting for the normativity associated with the performance of speech acts by considering the inferentialist notion of expressing an intentional state in uttering a sentence and the notion of taking a normative stance in uttering a sentence (this last notion is borrowed from William Alston's development of Speech Act Theory, based on conventions, rules and norms) as equivalent. He argues as follows:

¹⁵ Within such an account it is supposed that inferential processes intervene also in the determination of the locutionary act, of «what is said,» since they help to fix not only the operative meaning of ambiguous expressions, but also the relevant referents of definite descriptions, pronouns, and proper names (1979: §§2.2-2.3).

¹⁶ Of course this is not to say that it is the best account possible. It is at least dated. In particular, the claim of the psychological plausibility of the SAS (see Bach and Harnish 1979: ch. 11) should be confronted with up-to-date empirical evidence from experimental pragmatics. As a consequence, a number of refinements would be in order, not least the questioning of the *presumption of literalness*.

If *S*'s expressing the belief that *P* (in uttering *e*) involves giving *H* a reason to think that *S* holds "*P*" true, then one takes responsibility for those reasons being reasons for the truth of "*P*". If this were sufficient for taking responsibility for the truth of "*P*", then we would have the connection. (2005: 36)

Even though this seems to him not to be sufficient, Harnish still suggests that the Gricean notion of «expressing an intentional state» seems to be connected to high-level notions as «commitment», and «taking responsibility» via the notions of being liable to criticism and blame (2005: 38). Yet he claims that further work is required to establish whether that connection holds.

In the following section I indicate a possible way to account for the normativity associated with the performance of speech acts within the inferentialist framework.

7. A Fully Inferentialist Account of Speech Acts

In the introduction I have presented Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* as a great contribution to pragmatics for the reason that it claims that *all speech is action*. The relevant dimension of action investigated in the lectures is that engendered by speech acts at the illocutionary level.¹⁷ An adequate theory of speech acts should therefore not only provide a plausible account of the way in which speech acts are performed and understood *as* illocutionary acts of a certain type; it should also explain how normative states of affairs are generated by means of the very performance of those speech acts (above I have named these two desiderata for Speech Act Theory *Austinian constraints*). In this latter respect I distance myself from Bach and Harnish (1979), and similarly to Searle (2001; 2010) I do regard the deontology associated with speech acts as *internal* to their performance.

As to the connection between the expression of a certain attitude (i.e., the performance of a certain speech act) and the relevant commitment, I think that the inferentialist model can be enriched to include within the communicative situation a *presumption about the obtaining of such commitment*. As a presumption, it would be operative unless there was an indication to the contrary, in which case the hearer could revise her understanding of what has been done by the performance of the speaker's speech act. This revision would lead one to ascertain that another type of speech act has been performed – and

¹⁷ «Our interest in these lectures is essentially to fasten on the second, illocutionary act and contrast it with the other two. There is a constant tendency in philosophy to elide this in favour of one or other of the other two» (Austin 1962/1975: 103).

therefore that the speaker has undertaken another type of commitment – or that no speech act at all was carried out.

The enrichment of the inferentialist framework I am suggesting resembles an account of commitment that has been recently advanced by some scholars within the cognitive-pragmatic framework of Relevance Theory (Morency, Oswald and de Saussure 2008) in that the focus is on the process of *commitment attribution* to the speaker on the part of the hearer. According to their view the attribution of commitment goes hand in hand with the pragmatic processes of derivation of meaning, and comes in different degrees of certainty depending on the stage of such derivation, i.e., either at the explicit or the implicit level, at which the attribution occurs. By postulating an assumption about the obtaining (or not obtaining) of the commitment, my suggestion agrees with their view of commitment attribution as a process intertwined with that of the identification of the speech act performed.

The point where I part company with Morency et al. is in the way that I think of the kind and nature of the project I take myself to be engaged in. Relevance Theory is intended to be a cognitive theory whose explicative domain is the psychological processes governing linguistic communication and operating at a sub-personal level. The gist of the critique moved by Sperber and Wilson to the Speech Act Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: ch. 4, § 10) is in fact the challenge to the psychological plausibility of the existence of a level of interpretation, in the process of linguistic comprehension, at which the hearer represents the speaker's utterance *as* an illocutionary act of a certain type. The hypothesis of an effective role of such level in the comprehension process, Sperber and Wilson claim, is unjustified. This challenge applies all the more to Speech Act Theory in its inferentialist variant, since Bach and Harnish's analysis avowedly aims to be psychologically plausible.

The spot where my suggestion ideally places itself is, in a sense by taking a step back with respect to some of Bach and Harnish's claims, purely Gricean. In order to account for the normativity engendered by speech acts within the inferentialist framework, I will focus on the *presumption about the interlocutor's rationality*. This notion does not appear in Bach and Harnish's writings, nor in Grice's, but I derive it from the latter's theory of action¹⁸ as a folk-psychological theory of *personal* level, whose cornerstone is the «manifest image» of the speaker as a rational agent.

Grice's conversational maxims – on which the conversational presumptions are modelled – are conceived as an articulation of the Principle of Cooperation,

¹⁸ By Grice's theory of action I mean the one underlying his theories of meaning and conversation.

which Grice characterizes as «a principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe» (1975/1989: 26), and whose observance is deemed as *rational*. The assumption that the interlocutors' communicative behaviour will conform to the Principle of Cooperation motivates their interest in participating in a talk exchange, inasmuch as conforming to such a principle and to the maxims is considered to be *rational*. Following Sbisà, the Principle of Cooperation can be regarded as amounting to «a system of expectations we have with respect to those utterers we take to be *rational* subjects willing (or, at least, not unwilling) to communicate» (Sbisà 2001: 203, emphasis mine). Therefore, the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality on which I am focusing can be regarded as the very basis on which the Principle of Cooperation is grounded.

The reason for drawing attention to this presumption is that, despite its never being made explicit, it underlies Bach and Harnish's project of spelling out the system of presumptions that makes the performance and the understanding of speech acts within the communicative interaction possible. Moreover, it proves to be essential in Bach and Harnish's specification of the explanatory value of the SAS:

Its explanatory value, we suggest, is twofold. (1) From the point of view of the hearer, to go through an inference in the pattern of the SAS is in effect to provide himself with an explanation of the speaker's utterance: to explain *S*'s utterance is to identify the intention with which it is issued. (2) From the standpoint of psychological explanation, the organization of ingredients in the SAS provides a framework in terms of which the ability of hearers to identify speakers' illocutionary intents can be described and ultimately explained. (1979: 89)

Leaving apart the psychological plausibility of the SAS, which is not my concern here to establish, it is the first part of the characterization that interests me. According to Bach and Harnish, the pattern of inference that the SAS represents is one that «yields *justified* identifications» (1979: 90-1, emphasis mine) of the speaker's illocutionary intentions. While defining the illocutionary act Bach and Harnish claim:

To *express* an attitude in uttering something is, in our conception, to *R-intend* that the hearer take one's utterance as *reason* to believe one has the attitude. (1979: 39, the second emphasis is mine)

Whether literal, nonliteral, or indirect, an illocutionary act must be such that if it is to be performed successfully and felicitously, the speaker can *reasonably* expect it to be identified by the hearer. (1979: 80, emphasis mine)

By virtue of Bach and Harnish's appeal to the notions of reason, rationality, and justification, I think that making the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality explicit within the inferentialist account of speech acts proves to be plausible. Moreover, making this presumption explicit would throw light upon the notion of conversational appropriateness to which Bach and Harnish appeal to in order to explain how the search for nonliteral and indirect illocutionary intentions is triggered, which does in fact have a flavour of circularity (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 65). To this end, the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality can be regarded as the ultimate reason for a hearer to search for a contextual and conversationally appropriate interpretation of the speaker's utterance, since in a communicative interaction such a presumption is always preserved.

As to the specific aim of this paper, i.e. to sketch a possible way to account for the normative dimension engendered by the performance of speech acts *within* an inferentialist framework à la Bach and Harnish, the relevant feature is represented by the fact that the presumption about the interlocutor's rationality involves a set of expectations about the interlocutor's communicative behaviour (i.e., that it be *rational*), and of constraints on one's communicative and practical behaviour. My suggestion is thus that this set of expectations and constraints be regarded as the basic form of rights and commitments involved in the performance of speech acts. The notion of normativity I am committed to is ultra-minimal, and further work would be needed to fully spell out this hypothesis, but I think it could be a promising starting point to account for the more complex configurations of deontic powers associated with speech acts. Part of the task of spelling it out would be an elucidation of the notions of «commitment», «taking responsibility» and their connection with that of «expressing an intentional state», in the direction indicated by Harnish (2005).

References

AUSTIN, J.L. (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2nd ed. edited by J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, 1975.

BACH, K. AND HARNISH R.M. (1979) *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

GRICE, H.P. (1957) Meaning. *The Philosophical Review* 66: 377-88. Reprinted in Grice 1989, pp. 213-223.

GRICE, H.P. (1975) «Logic and Conversation», in P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics. Vol. III. Speech Acts*, Academic Press, New York, pp. 41-58. Reprinted in Grice 1989, pp. 22-40.

- GRICE, H.P. (1982) «Meaning Revisited», in N.V. Smith (ed.), *Mutual Knowledge*, Academic Press, New York, pp. 223-43. Reprinted in Grice (1989), pp. 283-303.
- GRICE, H.P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- GRICE, H.P. (1991) *The Conception of Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- GRICE, H.P. (2001) *Aspects of Reason*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- HARNISH, R.M. (2005) «Commitments and Speech Acts», *Philosophica* 75, pp. 11-41.
- HARNISH, R.M. (2009) «Internalism and Externalism in Speech Act Theory», *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 5, pp. 9-31.
- KISSINE, M. (2011) «Misleading Appearances: Searle, Assertion, and Meaning», *Erkenntnis* 74, pp. 115-129.
- KORTA, K. AND PERRY, J. (2006) «Pragmatics», in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), edited by E.N. Zalta. URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/summ2011/entries/pragmatics/>>.
- MORENCY, P., OSWALD, S. AND DE SAUSSURE, L. (2008) «Explicitness, Implicitness and Commitment Attribution: A Cognitive Pragmatic Approach», *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 22, pp. 197-219.
- RECANATI, F. (2003) «The Limits of Expressibility», in B. Smith (ed.), *John Searle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 189-213.
- SBISA, M. (2001) «Intentions from the Other Side», in G. Cosenza (ed.), *Paul Grice's Heritage*, Brepols, Turnhout, pp. 185-206.
- SBISA, M. (2002) «Speech Acts in Context», *Language and Communication* 22, pp. 421-436.
- SBISA, M. (2006) «Two Conceptions of Rationality in Grice's Theory of Implicature», in E. Baccarini and S. Prijic-Samarzija (eds.), *Rationality of Belief and Action*, Filozofski Fakultet u Rijeci, HDAF, Rijeka, pp. 233-247.
- SBISA, M. (2007) «How to Read Austin», *Pragmatics* 17, pp. 461-473.
- SBISA, M. (2009) «Uptake and Conventionality in Illocution», *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 5, pp. 33-52.
- SEARLE, J.R. (1968) «Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts», *The Philosophical Review* 77, pp. 405-424.
- SEARLE, J.R. (1969) *Speech Acts. An Essay in Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- SEARLE, J.R. (1975) «Indirect Speech Acts», in P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics. Vol. III. Speech Acts*, Academic Press, New York, pp. 59-82.

SEARLE, J.R. (1986) «Meaning, Communication, and Representation», in R.E. Grandy and R. Warner (eds.), *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 209-226.

SEARLE, J.R. (2001a) *Rationality in Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

SEARLE, J.R. (2001b) «J.L. Austin (1911-1960)», in A.P. Martinich and D. Sosa (eds.), *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 218-230.

SEARLE, J.R. (2010) *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

SPERBER, D. AND WILSON, D. (1986) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. 2nd edition, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995.

STRAWSON, P.F. (1964) «Intention and Convention in Speech Acts», *The Philosophical Review* 73, pp. 439-460.