

Action in motion and language: resistance, uptake and felicity conditions in speech acts

Anne Reboul, Institute for Cognitive Sciences, CNRS, Lyons, France

1. Introduction

Dilthey used the notion of *resistance* to explain how, during development, the child builds the idea of him/herself as a conscious agent: engaged in an action, the child becomes aware that reality may resist to his will and, hence, conscious of his/her own motion and intention. However, the very same notion of resistance can also be used in the development of the notion of an independent reality, as proposed by Williams (2004, 136): “The idea of a reality independent of us involve[s] an implication of resistance, resistance to the will”. I will also want to claim that resistance, as encountered not in physical acts, but as encountered in social acts, such as speech acts, can be the basis on which the child builds the notion of others as other minds, other selves, independent, though relevantly similar to him/her and of him/herself as a social agent. If this is right, it should be clear that it gives some support at least to Dilthey’s distinction between *explanation* (specific to nature sciences, without any psychological considerations) and *understanding* (specific to human and social sciences, which *must* appeal to psychological considerations).

To show that this is indeed the case, I will very quickly outline speech acts theory and notably the notion of felicity conditions, show how it incorporates some notion of resistance and point out that, once uptake is added to felicity conditions, a notion of resistance implying a psychological level becomes accessible. I will answer the alternative conceptions which have been put forward by externalist philosophers such as Burge or Millikan.

2. Speech acts theory

Austin (1962) famously introduced the notion of speech acts (acts performed with words) as a challenge to the logicist view of language proposed by such philosophers as Frege or Russell, who saw language as a collection of descriptive sentences which could be true or false. As Austin pointed out, however, there are plenty of sentences, including indicative sentences which do not describe states of affairs:

1. The cat is on the mat.
2. I promise that I will come tomorrow.
3. I order you to shut the door.

Though (1) does indeed describe a state of affairs, (2) and (3) clearly do not, being respectively a promise and an order. This led Austin to a first distinction between *constative* (descriptive sentences such as (1)) and *performatives* (non-descriptive sentences such as (2) and (3), which *act* on the world rather than merely *describing* it). It also led him to the idea that whereas constatives have *truth-conditions* and *truth-values*, performatives have *felicity conditions* and can be, or not, *successful*. However, further investigation led Austin to the view that this first distinction was too simple to account for the reality of language use and he substituted to it another distinction, between *illocutionary* (made *in* speaking), *perlocutionary* (made *by* speaking) and *locutionary* (speech production) acts. At this stage, he considered that all utterances, including those of constative sentences, necessarily corresponded to two speech acts, an illocutionary act (assertion, promise, order, etc.) and a locutionary act (the speech production of the utterance). A perlocutionary act (e.g., persuasion) could but need be performed. Searle (1983) also introduced the notion of *direction of fit*, which distinguishes between those speech acts whose success depends on a change in the world to adapt it to the utterance content (*world-word* direction of fit) and those whose success depends on the words being adapted to the world (*words-world* direction of fit). The first roughly correspond to performatives, while the second correspond to constatives. However, all illocutionary acts, whatever their direction of fit, have felicity conditions.

In addition to distinguishing among speech acts, based on their direction of fit, Strawson (1964) distinguished among world-word speech acts between those which are institutional (e.g., baptism, marriage, opening and closing session, declaring war, etc.) and those which are not. Obviously, conditions of felicity for the first prominently include facts about the speaker's official function. These are, clearly, part of the resistance of reality to such speech acts and that sort of resistance, though cultural and socially determined in nature, is very similar to the resistance reality offers to physical acts. Up to a point, the same thing goes for non-institutional world-word speech acts: for instance, to successfully give an order, the speaker must be in a position of power over his hearer, even though the basis of this position may not be institutional. There, again, the notion of resistance involved is highly similar to the resistance physical action encounters and can presumably be

explained without recourse to psychological considerations. However, as Reinach (1921), a precursor of Austin and the first discoverer of speech acts, pointed out speech acts are *social acts* in the important sense that they are essentially directed toward an addressee. This is indirectly recognized by Searle (1969) who enumerates felicity conditions for a number of speech acts and who includes a *Sincerity condition* to the effect that the speaker must be in the mental state implicated by the type of illocutionary act his/her utterance purports to perform. Over and above the sincerity condition, however, there is the fact that speech acts, at least non-conventional speech acts, act indirectly on the world by producing a mental state in their hearer: it is because the hearer accepts the speaker's authority and wants to comply that he does whatever is necessary to change the world in a way that agrees with the content of the speaker's order.

Forgetting the Sincerity condition, it seems that all, or most, of the felicity conditions given by Searle have to do with states of affairs in the world, not with mental states. However, Searle, interestingly, only gives felicity conditions for world-word illocutionary acts. He eschews words-world illocutionary acts, such as assertion. This is not surprising: words-world illocutionary acts are not as amenable to felicity conditions based on states of affairs in the world as are world-words ones. Indeed, it might be said that felicity conditions for words-world speech acts crucially include a perlocutionary effect, i.e. inducing in the hearer a belief in the content of the assertion. This was noted by Marty (1908, 284) for language in general: "Intentional speech is a special kind of action, which is essentially aimed at evoking certain psychological phenomena in the other person". Grice (1971) re-discovered this factor in his definition of meaning.

3. Grice and the definition of meaning

In 1957, Grice introduced a distinction between two kinds of meanings on the basis of a few examples:

4. Those spots mean measles.
5. The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.
6. Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that 'the bus is full'.
7. That remark, 'Smith couldn't get on without his trouble and strife', meant that Smith found his wife indispensable.

While the first two examples are examples of *natural meaning*, the last two are examples of *non-natural meaning* (or *meaning_{NN}*). They are described by Grice as having the two main features indicated in the following table:

NATURAL MEANING	NON-NATURAL MEANING
<i>x means/meant that p entails p</i>	<i>x means/meant that p does not entail p</i>
From <i>x means/meant that p</i> , one cannot draw any conclusion to the effect that somebody meant by <i>x</i> so and so	From <i>x means/meant that p</i> , one can draw a conclusion to the effect that somebody meant by <i>x</i> so and so

Table 1: Natural vs. non-natural meaning

The first feature is factivity, which can be defined as the fact that if it is true that *x* naturally means that *p*, then it is true that *p*. In *meaning_{NN}*, by contrast, it may be true that *x* means that *p*, without its being true that *p*. The second feature is being under voluntary control: *meaning_{NN}* depends on the agent's intention, while in natural meaning, there may be no agent and there is no intention anyway.

Though *meaning_{NN}* can be conventional, it need not be, as shown by (7) above, where 'trouble and strife' can hardly be considered as a conventional way of referring to anyone's wife. On the other hand, natural meaning is not restricted to signs, as shown in (5), where the budget is not a sign, but rather a cause. All of this leads Grice (1971, 442) to a definition of *meaning_{NN}*:

"A means_{NN} something by *x*" is roughly equivalent to "A intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention".

In other words, *meaning_{NN}* incorporates a notion of the speaker's intention as producing a (psychological) effect, but goes one step further in that it supposes that the effect is achieved through the recognition by the hearer of that speaker's specific intention.

Grice also introduced, in keeping with his mentalistic account of meaning, a variation on Ockham's razor, which he dubbed *Ockham's modified razor*, and which enjoins philosophers of language and linguists not to multiply senses more than strictly necessary. In other words, he choose a trade-off between semantic parsimony, as embodied by Ockham's modified razor, and psychological inflation, as embodied by the definition of *meaning_{NN}*. One obvious consequence of that choice, should it be a correct account of linguistic communication, is that the notion of *uptake*, which is one basic felicity condition for speech acts and which Searle (1969) considered as being solved by linguistic conventions, becomes a point of resistance in a sense that is germane to Dilthey's distinction

between explanation and interpretation, grounding in linguistic communication the necessity for psychological considerations in understanding, given the relatively opaque character of linguistic communication. One major point regarding decoding conventions vs. attributing mental states in linguistic interpretation is the case of implicatures, a notion, again, introduced by Grice (1989):

- 8. Anne has four children.
- 9. Anne has at least four children.
- 10. Anne has exactly four children.
- 11. Anne has four children and even five.

As Grice pointed out, the logical (and conventional) interpretation of (8) is (9). However, fairly frequently, it is interpreted as in (10) (its implicature). That this interpretation is not conventional is seen by (11) which shows that the interpretation in (10) can be negated without contradiction. This feature is called *defeasibility*.

However, conventionalist accounts, restoring conventionality to linguistic communication, have recently come back into favour, as we will now see.

4. Burge's Acceptance principle

In 1993, Burge published a paper entitled 'Content preservation', in which he claimed that the acquisition of information via linguistic communication (interlocution) is *a priori* (or in need of no empirical justification) and as direct as is the acquisition of information by perception. The first Burgean assumption, that information received through interlocution is as reliable as information received by perception¹, is formulated as an *Acceptance Principle*: "A person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so" (Burge 1993, 467, Burge's emphasis). However, information received through interlocution differs from information received by perception in being *a priori* — in the sense of being independent from experience — and, clearly, not empirical. The second Burgean assumption is that linguistic content is as directly accessible (or as transparent) as is perceptual content. These two assumptions are linked in that both are grounded in a presumption of rationality. Rationality, according to Burge, is directly linked to truth (both truthfulness and accuracy) and to in-

¹ Burge (1993, 467) does acknowledge that this is not, strictly speaking, exact: "Our reliance on others is more fallible than our reliance on perception". However, he sees interlocution as often enough sincere and belief as often enough true that this fallibility remain relatively marginal and is, anyway, limited enough not to overturn the Acceptance Principle.

telligibility. Thus, transmission of information via interlocution is both reliable and transparent. In other words, the speaker is not taken as ‘an object of interpretation, but rather as the source of information presumed to be understood without interpretation’ (Burge 1993, 487).

However, Burge acknowledges that Gricean implicatures are not amenable to that view of linguistic communication: “Understanding conversational implicatures *must* be justified, usually empirically” (Burge 1993, 483, note 21), which puts them apart from what he takes to be the common basis of interlocution.

5. Primitive certainties

According to Burge, transmission of information by interlocution leads to *a priori* beliefs, in the sense of beliefs which can be held independently of justification and the truth of which one is entitled to. Though information accessed by perception is also accompanied by an entitlement to truth, it is not *a priori* given the obviously empirical character of perception. What, however, is a belief one is entitled to? In a recent paper, Mulligan (in press) outlines the view of such “certainties” as it was articulated by philosophers such as Husserl, Scheler, Reiner, Wittgenstein, Russell and Ortega y Gasset, among others². Mulligan, following both Russell and Husserl, calls *primitive certainties* those basic beliefs we rely on in everyday life. They are not so much propositions we consider true as “the obtaining of states of affairs” (Mulligan in press, 4). They may be thought of as practical dispositions implicitly rather than explicitly entertained and are exempted from such epistemic mechanisms as justification or judgment. Though they may mildly differ from one individual to the next, and, maybe more importantly, from one culture to the next, at least as far as social conventions are concerned, they are, on the whole, widely shared among adults of a given culture. Though this does not mean that they always are true beliefs — and thus are not always knowledge in the epistemological sense of true belief —, they more often than not are indeed true.

It seems clear that Burge’s view of the information accessed through interlocution, as well as information accessed by perception, makes it a good candidate for primitive certainties. Apart from Burge’s opinion, there are two (additional) ways in which primitive certainties are linked to linguistic communication. First, linguistic conventions naturally find

² See Mulligan’s paper for a detailed discussion of the points of agreement and disagreement among these philosophers.

their place among primitive certainties as was noted by Scheler (1913/1955) reported by Mulligan; secondly, as Mulligan rightly remarks, Searle's (1983) notion of background assumptions used in interpreting language clearly resorts to primitive certainties³. Thus, primitive certainties are strongly linked with linguistic communication, both with its conventional aspects and with its inferential aspects. For Burge to be right in his view of interlocution, linguistic interpretation has to be mainly conventional and to resort mainly to explanation rather than to understanding, to return to Dilthey's terminology.

6. Millikan's trade-off

Millikan's view of linguistic communication, though it acknowledges more fully than does Burge's the diversity of speech acts, is very similar to Burge's. However, it is much more developed and notably includes an account of linguistic conventions and of language interpretation. Though her position differs from Burge's in that she clearly sees perception as a more complex process than he does, and as including inferential process, yet she also sees linguistic interpretation as akin to perception in that, even when it is indirect, it does not either during the interpretation process or as the origin or the result of that process include any attribution of mental states by the hearer to the speaker. And, as we shortly will see, Millikan does not share Burge's view of conversational implicatures as something special.

Let us begin with conventions. Millikan disputes Lewis' (1969) view of conventions as somehow implying mental states. According to her, conventions are mere reproductions of (patterns of) actions with certain functions, their satisfying those functions being the reason for their reproduction. Thus, conventions are not so much prescriptive rules as lineages, on a par with lineages of biological reproduction. Just as typing individual animals is tantamount to placing them in the correct biological lineages, typing word tokens is a matter of placing them in the correct linguistic lineages. Linguistic conventions have coordinating functions and can concern syntactico-semantic constructions as well as individual words.

Though up to that point, there is no obvious difference between Burge and Millikan, the first major difference occurs in that Millikan sees linguistic conventions as giving rise to widespread ambiguity, which seems in direct contradiction with Burge's view of linguistic

³ Searle gives the example of ordering a hamburger in a fast-food restaurant and notes that one does not expect to be given a ten foot long hamburger encased in resin.

communication as directly intelligible. This widespread ambiguity comes from the very account Millikan gives of the most obvious case, i.e., lexical ambiguity. According to her, when the same linguistic token, e.g., *bank*, is the object of several conflicting conventions, leading to different meanings, one explanation is that there has been a splitting of the original linguistic convention linked to the corresponding linguistic type, with both linguistic lineages separating: “Tokens of the same word that have taken on different senses are words with a common lineage some distance back, but whose lineages have now separated” (Millikan 2005, 35). This in itself is innocuous enough, but the multiplication of ambiguity is triggered by Millikan’s rejection of Ockham’s modified razor. Notably, she accounts for conversational implicatures along the same lines by a splitting of the original lineage which linked the linguistic stimulus to an original meaning (the literal, logical meaning) forking toward the new meaning (the implicature). Coming back to our example, the original lineage linked (8) to (9). This original lineage then split in two different links, the first one between (8) and (9) and the new one between (8) and (10). In other words, utterances allowing of implicature interpretations are (semantically) ambiguous between the logical and the implicature interpretations. Compare with the Gricean account where the sentence is not ambiguous (its single meaning is the literal and logical one in keeping with Ockham’s modified razor) and where the implicature is inferred on the basis of the mental states the hearer attributes to the speaker to explain the speaker’s choice of utterance. Where Grice is semantically parsimonious (he postulates a single meaning), Millikan is semantically inflationist (she is ready to multiply meanings and linguistic conventions). Where Grice, on the other hand, is psychologically inflationist (he sees linguistic interpretation as rife with mental states attribution), Millikan is psychologically parsimonious (she rejects any psychological intrusion in linguistic interpretation). Thus, it seems that there is a choice between two trade-offs: Millikan’s trade-off which balances psychological parsimony with semantic inflation; Grice’s trade-off which balances psychological inflation with semantic parsimony. Depending on whether one adopts Millikan’s or Grice’s, one will or will not ground in linguistic interpretation Dilthey’s distinction between explanation and understanding: Grice justifies the distinction, Millikan does not.

However, Millikan’s liberalism regarding ambiguity forbids her to see linguistic interpretation as a simple process guided by convention: it could only do that if conventions bi-univocally linked one meaning with one linguistic type, but that is clearly impossible given her account of ambiguity. Neither is it possible, on her view, to restrain ambiguity to a limited number of utterances: clearly, ambiguity is ubiquitous. Thus a straightforward account

of interpretation — presumably very near to Burge’s view — according to which it proceeds by decoding linguistic tokens following linguistic conventions cannot be what she has in mind. Rather, before a simple decoding process can apply, the hearer must determine what convention he/she should use, in Millikan’s words, which lineage the linguistic token concerned belongs to. However, given Millikan’s view of perception as a complex process involving presumably inferential processes, this does not contradict her view of linguistic interpretation as akin to perception. Yet, it is a moot point whether her view allows her to see, as does Burge, information transmitted through interlocution as somehow resorting to primitive certainties. A further but not central question is whether her view of linguistic conventions is compatible with them being primitive certainties: can we really take them for granted, in either production or interpretation, given ubiquitous ambiguity? To say the least, this does not seem obvious.

But the final — and possibly lethal for Millikan’s account — question is whether one can trade off semantic inflation with psychological parsimony.

7. Trading off semantic inflation for psychological parsimony

The first thing to do is to investigate more closely how both trade-offs, Grice’s and Millikan’s, work. Let us sum up these two trade-offs as follows, where A represents Grice’s position and B Millikan’s position:

A. Semantic parsimony \Rightarrow Semantic underdetermination \Rightarrow Psychological inflation

B. Semantic Inflation \Rightarrow Semantic overdetermination \Rightarrow Psychological parsimony

It clearly is possible to trade off, as Grice does, psychological inflation with semantic parsimony. What this implies is to acknowledge, as Grice does, at least implicitly, widespread semantic underdetermination, which is solved through an interpretation process which relies on mental attribution and whose success is assessed relative to speaker’s intention. However, the question of whether it is possible to trade off, as Millikan proposes, semantic inflation with psychological parsimony is far more difficult to answer. On the face of it, it might seem that semantic inflation should correspond to a reduction of semantic underdetermination, indeed to something like semantic overdetermination, and hence eschew the need for psychological considerations in the interpretation process. But does it? What is the difference between semantic underdetermination and semantic overdetermination and what consequences does either have for the interpretation process?

In semantic underdetermination, the decoding process, constrained by linguistic conventions, delivering what is generally called *sentence meaning*, is not enough by itself to determine *speaker's meaning*, i.e., the 'message' the speaker intended the hearer to recover and is certainly not enough by itself to secure the effect that the speaker intended to produce in the hearer. In other words, there is a remaining part of interpretation which has to be accessed through non-codic means, a part of meaning which escapes linguistic conventions. That part of meaning is recovered through inferential processes. In semantic overdetermination, there is no reason to think that there is a part of meaning which escapes linguistic conventions. Thus inferential processes are not needed to complete the decoding processes. Speaker meaning, under semantic overdetermination, cannot exceed sentence meaning. However, the decoding processes, given semantic overdetermination, cannot yield a single sentence meaning. They will frequently lead to several sentence meanings, each of which could be the speaker's meaning. It is in the choice of the correct sentence meaning that inferential processes will come into play and this is why this conventionally based semantic overdetermination can hardly be counted on in the linguistic communication processes, i.e., cannot be seen as among primitive certainties.

Yet, what this shows is nothing more nor less than the fact that both semantic parsimony and semantic inflation ultimately lead to inferential processes in linguistic interpretation. The question is whether semantic inflation can be balanced by psychological parsimony or whether, as does semantic parsimony, it leads to psychological inflation. A first step in answering this question is to determinate what the notion of "correct sentence meaning" above means. In other words, what is the criterion of the *correct* sentence meaning? What allows us to say that the interpretation process has been successful? There seems to be only possible answer: the correct sentence meaning is the one that coincides with the speaker meaning.

But, clearly, that criterion is lethal to any trade-off between semantic inflation and psychological parsimony, at least if psychological parsimony is understood, following Millikan, as completely excluding any attribution of mental states in linguistic communication. This is because speaker meaning is defined *on a psychological basis* as the meaning *intended* by the speaker. Thus, one could imagine seriously reducing the psychological contribution to the interpretation process, but eliminating it all together appears to be just plainly impossible. Hence, one cannot entirely eliminate attribution of mental states from the interpretation process. But if this is the case, then Millikan's is no trade-off: there is no

way of balancing semantic inflation with psychological parsimony. What semantic inflation gets you is semantic overdetermination plus psychological inflation. In other words, the true consequences of the positions of Grice and Millikan are as follows, where A represents Grice's position and B Millikan's:

A. Semantic parsimony \Rightarrow Semantic underdetermination \Rightarrow Psychological inflation

B. Semantic inflation \Rightarrow Semantic overdetermination \Rightarrow Psychological inflation

The remaining question which I will briefly discuss is how inflationist psychological inflation has to be given semantic parsimony.

8. Putting a limit to psychological inflation: Sperber & Wilson's post-Gricean view

Going back, one could characterize the Gricean view (in an admittedly extremist version) as an Humpty Dumpty kind of theory of meaning⁴ (henceafter *meaning_{HD}*) and Burge's view as a Grand Academy of Lagado view⁵ (henceafter *meaning_{GAL}*). Interestingly, Millikan's view could not be seen as fostering *meaning_{GAL}*, though as clearly her view is hostile to *meaning_{HD}*. Setting aside temporarily the fact, demonstrated above, that Millikan's view cannot push psychological parsimony to the point of a total rejection of psychological intrusion of attribution of mental states, does semantic parsimony condemn us to anything like *meaning_{HD}*?

There have been two ways of answering that question. The first one, adopted by so called *neo-griceans*, such as Horn or Levinson, is, on the face of it, very near to Millikan's view: according to them (see e.g., Levinson 2000), though most implicatures at first entail attribution of intentions to the speaker, grammaticalisation occurs, leading to a default, lexically triggered, implicature interpretation, where speaker's meaning does not enter (i.e., it limits psychological intrusion by fostering semantic inflation). The second one, proposed

⁴ As the reader will doubtless remember, in *Through the looking glass*, Carroll (1970, 269) attributes to Humpty Dumpty, a nursery character, the following view of meaning: "“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said (...) “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less””.

⁵ In *Gulliver's travels*, Dean Jonathan Swift (1960, 203) describes the linguistic reformation project of the Grand Academy of Lagado, which aims at abolishing words: “An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on”.

by Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995), though it limits psychological intrusion, does not favour semantic inflation. Rather, Sperber & Wilson defend semantic parsimony, and explicitly profess semantic underdetermination, thus defending a partly inferential view of meaning, which nevertheless acknowledges linguistic conventional meaning (subject to Ockham's modified razor) more clearly than does the Gricean account. However, according to them, though psychological considerations play a role in linguistic interpretation and production, they play a limited role as long as linguistic communication proceeds smoothly: they thus recognize that linguistic communication is a social act, as do Marty and Reinach, but limit the role of psychological considerations to speaker's intentions and to the result of the interpretation process, which takes a metarepresentational form, to the effect that the speaker intended to communicate to the hearer this or that informational content (in other words, speaker's meaning is the criterion of a successful communicative act). This, in effect, is what I have claimed is necessary for Millikan's account. It is only in cases where linguistic communication fails that psychological considerations intervene in the inferential process as premises. However, on Sperber & Wilson's view, it is possible to balance semantic parsimony — inherited from Grice — with a relative psychological parsimony — limited psychological intrusion — while on Millikan's view, one will have both semantic inflation — over the board ambiguity — and a brand of semantic parsimony at best identical with Sperber & Wilson's. I leave it to the reader to decide which account is the most parsimonious on the whole.

A final point: on Sperber & Wilson's account, as long as linguistic communication proceeds smoothly, both linguistic conventions and the premises used in the inferential processes which complement them — and which are taken from general world knowledge — are part of primitive certainties. The fact that psychological considerations intrude as part of the production process (in the form of speaker's intentions) and shape the conclusion of the inferential (interpretation) process, giving it the form of a metarepresentation may well not detract much from a view, such as Burge's, making it akin to perception.

9. Conclusion: resistance in speech acts and Dilthey's notion of understanding

Dilthey proposed a distinction between *explanation* and *understanding*. That distinction rests on the necessity, for human endeavours, to be accounted for in (partly) psychological terms, something which is not necessary for physical facts. He took it as justifying a

double epistemology, with explanation as the epistemological basis of nature sciences, while understanding would be the epistemological basis of human sciences. Without committing myself to the double epistemology, I do think that Dilthey's distinction is founded, presumably at least for linguistic communication, possibly for most human actions, of which linguistic communication is only a part. This is because linguistic communication, though fairly transparent, does imply opaque considerations, of a psychological nature, which, however limited, are uneliminable. It thus offer a (psychological) resistance to sheer human will.

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