

THE WELL-TIMED SPEECH ACT: BOURRÉE FOR BACHE

by
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Speech acts, in order to be properly effected, must obey conditions of 'felicity', as stipulated by the Pragmatic Greats such as Austin, Grice, and Searle. In addition, there are lesser-studied, contextual constraints on speech acting, often conflated under the common denominator of 'situation'. Here, it is important to stress that the situation of acting not only is defined by its *spatial* context, but that speech acts also evolve, and are perlocutionarily realized, over *time*.

Introduction

It is by now commonly accepted that speech acts, in order to be 'felicitous', have to obey certain conditions; in addition, they underlie contextual constraints. Here, I want to highlight a property of speech acting that has perhaps attracted less attention over the years: the speech act as contextually depending not just on its spatial environment, but on the timely affordances (in past, present, and future) that play a decisive role in its realization and effect.

On sequentiality

This 'sequentiality' of speech acts (borrowing a term originally used in Conversation Analysis) denotes the way 'parts' of adjacent utterances influence one another. Thus, a 'greeting' such as 'Hi' is not 'valid' as a greeting's first 'pair part' unless ratified by the 'second part' of the greeting pair: 'Hi'.

This minimal sequence, 'Hi'-'Hi' (Harvey Sacks' classical example; 1992 1: 673), illustrates two things: one, no speech act is valid until recognized and ratified; two, the ratifying second part depends for its own ratification on the first part of the pair. In other words, there exists a kind of 'symbiosis' between the two parts of a conversational sequence: the first is not thinkable without the second, and the second receives its ratification from the first.

A conversation among pilots

As an example of how sequentiality works in conversation, one could take the exchanges that occur between aircraft and ground in the crucial seconds prior and subsequent to lift-off, as analyzed by Maurice Nevile (2006). In conversations between air traffic controllers and pilots, or between the pilots commanding an aircraft themselves, the placing and prefacing of utterances and their follow-ups are vital to a correct interpretation.

Consider the following interchange between a C/PF and his FO/PNF (C(aptain)/P(ilot)F(lying) and F(irst)O(fficer)/P(ilot)N(on)F(lying), respectively). In this connection, 'clear' means that the pilots have visual assurance that the area to the left, respectively the right, is completely clear of possible hindrances):

- 10 C/PF: clear on the left.
 11 (0.7)
 12* FO/PNF: and clear right.
 13 (0.7)
 14 C/PF: (°°okay°°).
 15 (4.9)

Regarding this interchange, Nevile remarks:

The *and*-preface makes salient the connectedness of the 'clear right' call to the immediately prior talk. It can present the two turns as tightly coupled, that they occur in a sequence as two parts of one task, and can make salient that the second turn in the pair is and should be heard as a second, as a turn that is not initiating a sequence and task but providing the talk to complete that task... In short, the second turn can be taken as a claim that the first turn was heard as 'clear', and so this new second talk is a task-completing call of 'clear' (Nevile 2006: 316).

In other words, the second turn is not interpretable in its own right: it must be heard, and *importantly*: executed, not just as a follow-up, but as a timely, necessary complement to a correct understanding of the entire sequence, in particular of the second turn itself, followed by its ultimate ratification ('okay').

A lost meal ticket?

It is not only in conversationally circumscribed, adjacent sequences that timing is vitally important. As Archbishop Trench expressed it, nearly two centuries ago:

Oh seize the instant time
 You never will
 with water that's once passed by
 impel the mill (1861)

For speech acting in general, timing the right moment of accepting/declining, requesting/granting, and so on may be decisive: an offer, not accepted on time, may be deemed to have been declined (or to have never existed as an offer).

Consider the following snippet of a 'real' conversation (from Peter Mayle's novel *Chasing Cézanne*). The situation involves a young photographer named Andre, who is staying at the same hotel in the South of France as Camilla, the editor of the fashion magazine for which he is freelancing. Camilla has just arrived from New York on the Concorde and is full of energy, making plans for the days ahead; Andre is visibly tired after a day of hard preparatory work. The following dialogue develops after dinner:

"You're fading, sweetie," Camilla said, as the bill was placed on the table. "Do you want to go to bed?" The waiter, whose English covered the essentials, raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

Andre looked at her. She looked back, with a half-smile that didn't reach her eyes. He had an uncomfortable feeling that an invitation had been extended. ... "I haven't had an offer like that for weeks". And then he laughed, and the moment passed. "Some more coffee?"

Camilla tossed her napkin on the table and stood up. "Eight o'clock tomorrow. In the lobby."

Andre watched her leave the restaurant, a woman declined. (Mayle 1997: 34-35)

Camilla's question, "Do you want to go to bed", can obviously be interpreted in a variety of ways: she could be inquiring about Andre's physical state in order to make sure he is up to the task ahead of them; alternatively, the question could contain a sexual innuendo. As to the first option, Andre, the photographer who Camilla is supposed to be working with on an important project, has appeared a bit absent-minded over dinner; hence a question as to his being tired and wanting to go to bed, is entirely appropriate. The other option, possibly containing a sexual overture on Camilla's part

('come to bed with me'), is more in the line of a French male's assumptions and expectations; however, Andre parries the invitation by changing the subject and indirectly declining the implied offer ("Some more coffee?").

Obviously, the ambiguity of Camilla's question can only be resolved in the context of time. When he is alone again, Andre reflects on the situation and its possible outcomes; his "uncomfortable feeling that an invitation had been extended" makes him wonder if he had lost his employer's favors, "his meal ticket", perhaps even his job. But note that importantly, in the spatiotemporal, 'total situation', it is the temporal uptake that counts and, in the end, decides on the outcome of the situation.

As to Camilla's words, "Do you want to go to bed?", they did not represent an invitation *until* Andre had turned it down. We see how the invitation came only to light *sequentially*; the temporal progress of the conversation was an essential condition for the proper interpretation of the total context, of what Gu has called a 'land-borne situated discourse' which "is configured in terms of an ecological chain, i.e. one activity type depending on another for existence and reproduction" (2010: 87). In the same vein, the sequential view of speech acting underscores the importance of the users' discursal whereabouts: their speech acting needs to be anchored not only in space, but also in time, to simply make sense.

Unfriendly acts and symbolic inversion

More generally, even the nature of the speech act itself may change, following the march of time. An unfriendly act of belittling one's adversaries may be deflected back to its origin if the addressee(s) decide(s) to take the intended affront as a compliment, in an act of 'symbolic inversion', to use Barbara Babcock's (1978) term. Babcock presents the following characterization of this concept:

Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political (Babcock 1978: 14).

Below, I will discuss two cases in point.

The case of the gueux

In the following, historical case, we see how an inversion of *linguistic* norms and rules, as well as a perversion of *semantic* and *social* content, are all grounded in a temporal recalibrating of an intended speech act of 'putting down'.

In Brussels, in April of 1566, a deputation of lesser nobles approached the incumbent Governess-General of the Low Countries, Margaret of Parma (1522-1586), with a petition called 'Request of the Nobles' (*Smeekschrift der Edelen*), in which they petitioned for a less stringent application of the infamous *placata* ('placards', the royal edicts against heresy), and a moratorium on the summary executions of adherents to the new religion upon their condemnation by the hated Inquisition, and their delivery to the secular courts. The more than 300 nobles who were received in audience by the Governess that day did not carry any weapons or behaved in threatening fashions; on the contrary, they professed their continued allegiance to King Philip II of Spain (1527-1598), the sovereign ruler of the Low Countries, by petitioning his local lieutenant, Margaret.

Philip himself had left Brussels some years earlier, and now threatened to dispatch the feared and ruthless Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba (1508-82) to co-govern with (but in reality replace) the more lenient Margaret. One of the latter's counselors, the Seigneur Charles de Berlaymont, upon seeing the Governess much distressed by the presence of several hundred of her suzerains,

and the clear implications of their potential civil disobedience (in effect, the notorious iconoclastic troubles of 1566 erupted just a few months later), consoled his superior by uttering the now famous words: "N'ayez pas peur Madame, ce ne sont que des gueux" ('Don't have fear, Madam, they are no more than beggars'), perhaps alluding to the fact that the requesters had come to 'beg', rather than to 'demand' or 'threaten', as by their own words in the *Request*.

The Governess-General promised to take up the matter with the King, and in the meantime loosened some of the strictures against the 'Evangelicals'; whereupon the nobles, celebrating their successes over a festive meal, *impromptu* organized by the resourceful Hendrik van Brederode, adopted the negative epithet *gueux*, 'beggars', as their *nom de guerre*, calling themselves in Dutch *Geuzen* – a name that ended up being the common appellation of all the various bands of insurgents that proliferated across the Low Countries in rebellion against the Spanish. The formal rebellion started two years later, after the arrival of Alba, and Margaret's resignation in 1567, when the leader of the uprising, William, Prince of Orange and his troops invaded Dutch territory in 1568. This became the official date for the outbreak of the 'Eighty Years' War' between Spain and the Low Countries, in which the insurgents, hereafter all called 'Geuzen', often played a decisive role.

What we have here is a case of the earlier mentioned 'symbolic inversion' (Babcock 1978) by which the (human) target of a defamatory label attributes positive value to a negatively intended speech act. In the case of the 'Geuzen', what was meant to characterize the requesters in a derogatory fashion, became the emblem of their now official, (self)recognized status as 'insurgents', in the modern vocabulary of counter-terrorism.

It is important to recognize the role of the *temporal* dimension in this process. With the progress of time, the movement that the 'gueux' represented became less and less of an insurgence, and more and more a successful, heroic rebellion against an oppressive foreign

regime. The Dutch 'insurgents' became 'freedom fighters', and the arch rebel, William of Orange (1533-1584; nicknamed 'The Silent') would hereafter be commemorated as the 'Father of [his new] Fatherland' (in Dutch: *Vader des Vaderlands*), regardless of his originally German pedigree.¹

Barack Obama and his 'care'

In our own recent history, we have seen how political adversaries often try to characterize the others' activities as stupid, vacuous, illegal, and so on (or even unconstitutional), by adorning them with epithets intended to evoke associations of a negative kind. During the 2012 US Presidential elections, the Republicans, opposing Obama's health care reform, ridiculed him by collectively branding the proposed policies as 'nanny care', in the GOP tradition of rejecting any kind of government intervention in the needs and lives of its citizens. Similarly, Obama's vision of government was derogatorily dubbed the 'nanny state', viewed as the embodiment of weak-minded ideas about the position of the powerless individual vis-à-vis the state's overpowering authority. In the Republican philosophy, governments would be well-advised to leave the individual citizen to 'live free or die' (as the US State of New Hampshire has it in its official motto – in the context, perhaps better read as 'free to live or die').

A particular instance of this personalized vituperative labeling was the invention of the term 'Obamacare' to denote and denunciate everything having to do with Obama's efforts to provide health care for all Americans – efforts that were not in any way palatable to the Republican mindset. 'Obamacare' quickly became the beloved invective of the right-wingers, especially those making up the ultra-conservative Tea Party fraction within the Republican ranks. Not a 'town hall' meeting passed without slurs containing reference to 'Obamacare' being offered and embraced by those who wanted to

be identified as pure-blooded members of the 'Grand Old Party'. The term 'Obamacare' itself came to serve as a shibboleth stamping the user as an inveterate and refractory Republican, one who wanted nothing more ardently than 'having Obama fail', in the words of the Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives, John Boehner – a mantra that was repeated incessantly, almost serving as an incantation, straight from the initial days of Obama's first term.

In October of 2012, during the second Presidential debate between Obama and his contender, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, the viewers who were lined up to watch this *bourrée* of speech acting and re-acting, witnessed a turn of the dance that was as unexpected as it was different from the previously enacted scripts. When attacked by Romney, who routinely had used the 'Obamacare' label to brand his competitor's stance on health care issues as un-American, inasmuch as it sought to decree what citizens ought to do for and by themselves, Obama had an epiphany. Realizing what was at stake, rather than dodging the Republican "slings and arrows", he decided not only to neutralize the negative act and its implicit slurs, but turn it around and invert its polarity. By adopting 'Obamacare' and charging it with his own, positive values, the President was able to stem the tide of invective by "taking arms against a sea of troubles – and by opposing, end them" (*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 1). What Obama said, in reply to Romney's disdainful mouthings, was that he "actually had come to like that word [Obamacare]", thereby depriving the label of its venomous sting and making it into an *epitheton ornans*, a decorative, even laudatory, adstruction of his efforts to create a system designed to provide obligatory health care for all Americans. Here, it certainly helped Obama that in June of the same year, Chief Justice John Roberts of the US Supreme Court, had, in an unexpected volte-face, ruled that the Affordable Care Act did not conflict with the US Constitution. Roberts' ruling upheld the provisions (or most of them) that had been introduced by Obama under the law.

Sequentiality and polarity

By cleverly reversing the negative labels' polarity, both the historical leader of the Dutch *gueux*, Hendrik van Brederode, and the American Presidential candidate Barack Obama evinced the importance of the notion of *sequentiality* when assessing and understanding acts of speech. In fact, no speech act on its own can 'do' anything; as I have argued earlier (Mey 2001, 2009), all speech acts have to be *situated* in space *and* time. Moreover, as Robert Sanders has recently remarked, even if we recognize that a speech act's communicative intention is a *cognitive* state, it would be wrong to assume that this is "a private state that belongs uniquely to individuals" in space and time (Sanders 2013: 113).

With regard to *space*, the common concept of 'co(n)text' (understood as the textual ('co-') or physical ('con-') environment of a speech act – a distinction originally due to the late János Petöfi, 1971: 224) has by now been well established as a firm and inescapable condition for success or failure of a particular act. As to *time*, subsequent acts of speech (not only the primary speaker's, but also including those by other participants) are instrumental in determining the value of the act in question. For instance, if a person offers me an ironic congratulation on an accomplishment of mine which I perhaps never thought of as praiseworthy, I can turn the irony into a neutral remark, or even a word of praise, by accepting it as such. It is the same tactic that characterizes much of Eastern martial art: by accepting the opponent's move and turning it into one of one's own, one is able not only to deflect the threat, but make it into a force working to one's own advantage, through simply using the momentum involved in the other's act and turning it around. In this way, ironic (and even sarcastic, or regularly defamatory) expressions lose their force (their 'intentional point', in speech act terminology), when taken up as having been executed in good faith – which is exactly what Obama did when he

accepted the negative labeling of his ACA law, 'Obamacare', and turned it into a positive predicate.

From now on, Obamacare would mean just that: a legal action successfully undertaken by a US President to take care of one of the most urgent needs of American society: affordable access to health maintenance and the curing of diseases. In this case, too, the sequentiality of speech acting proved to be a major factor in deciding the act's force, extending all the way to its perlocutionary effect – in the actual case including Obama's successful November 2012 bid for a second term as US President.

Conclusion

"Speech acts, in order to be effective, have to be *situated*; that is to say, they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized" (Mey 2001: 219). The notion of 'activity type', which originally was developed as a classificatory device for distinguishing between various types of speech acts in their 'natural' surroundings (Levinson 1979, 1992), has been turned on its head by invoking the *situation* as the prime environment and vital condition for all of our speech acting.

This essentially pragmatic concern is reflected in the work of numerous other scholars as well, such as the earlier mentioned Yueguo Gu (2010), whose '*land-borne situated discourse*' is strongly reminiscent of my situated speech act (aka. 'pragmatic act'). Similarly, Istvan Kecskes has developed a theory of '*situation bound utterances*', in which he insists on the importance of the situation for understanding and handling speech activities (Kecskes 2000). In Canada, François Cooren and his co-workers have recently (2013) emphasized the role that the spatial environment plays in speech acting, by defining a 'hybrid' pattern of interaction between humans and their 'objects'; the same emphasis on 'embodied practice' as a

condition on understanding interaction is found in the work of Inger Mey (2012), whose dissertation characterizes the interaction between laboratory researchers and their objects as essentially 'dialectic and dialogic', to use an expression dear to Bakhtin (1984: 183; see Morson & Emerson 1990: 130-133). And finally, the writings of Robert Arundale and his co-workers (2002, 2005) bear out the importance of understanding the situation as one of a *dialectic inter-agency*, in which the speech actors not just obey the conditions under which their actions can take place, but participate dialectically in constructing the very situations of their use.

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Notes

1. Compare: "*ben ic van duytschen bloet*", 'I am of German blood', as the second line of the Dutch national anthem, composed in William's honor by another 'Geus', Philips of Marnix, Lord of Saint Aldegonde, has it. Unbeknownst to himself, Marnix put words in his hero's mouth that would continue to be an embarrassment to the Dutch, especially during the German occupation (1940-1945), when the controversial first eight lines of the *Wilhelmus* were routinely substituted by the hymn's sixth, less politically charged, stanza.

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