

Speech-Act Theory, Dialogical Theory, Democracy

A. Scholtz, for “*Persuasion in Ancient Greece*”

Introduction

The point of this document is to clarify certain theoretical concepts examined in this course. Much of it is lifted more or less intact from my book, cited below, though most not.

These concepts are important, as they may help explain the classical Athenian democracy (461–323 BCE) as a *speech-based political system*, a hypothesis with which we shall be concerned throughout the semester.

To summarize, this document is meant to take readers through three basic points, each building toward a view of speech-based democracy, its dynamics and problematics:

1. *Speech acts*. Communication doesn’t just “say” things; it also “does” things, and insofar as it does things, it consists of *speech acts*. As we shall see, what speech acts do is, principally, modify social reality, i.e., create, alter, or end interpersonal relationships of one sort or another, and people’s understanding thereof.
2. *Sociality of language, dialogue*. This power of speech to affect social reality can be further elucidated through dialogical theory, which understands language as always social, always a *dialogue* of one sort or another, and the (re-)configuration of social units as a function of communication and its byproduct, *social evaluation*.
3. *Speech acts, dialogue, Athenian democracy*. Ober and Scholtz both propose we view Athenian democracy as a social and speech-based give-and-take: Ober, as a “dialectic,” where an elite class, while it concedes supremacy to the mass of Athenians, exercises leadership; Scholtz, as a “dialogue” wherein free speech cannot be made to work without the constraining effects of shared values and ideals constantly expressed and reaffirmed as socially unifying principles.

Speech-Act Theory

“With this ring I thee wed” — but shouldn’t that be, “With these *words* I thee wed”? Ring or not, don’t those words do more than merely state a fact? Don’t they as well *perform* that fact? And don’t they thereby change the way everyone concerned perceives the reality in which they all exist?

That, by the way (viz., “With this ring I thee wed”), is the classic example of a *speech act*, a saying that, in being said, *does* something. As elaborated by philosopher J. L. Austin, speech acts are utterances or any meaningful gesture or indication seeking to “make it so” or succeeding in that aim; they include declarations (of marriage, of war, etc.), commands, promises, prayers, even assertions insofar as these last are actions that state. In-

deed, any act of speech, insofar as it can do more than simply *mean*, can be termed a *speech act*. Perhaps the most radical form of speech act is the magical incantation, an act of speech intended to produce either the very effect it states, or somehow to empower the speaker or someone else; that, one can say, represents the speech act at its most elemental.

But whether or not we believe in magic, there is one kind of “magic” we are all implicated in, namely, *social reality*. By “social reality,” I mean shared perceptions of the world in which we exist — perceptions that, because they take shape through discursive sharing (i.e., through acts of speech), also articulate an array of *social networks*, both more “locally” (friends, family, school, work) and more “globally” (society, humanity), within which communication happens, plus the varied ways we navigate those networks. And it is social reality that real-life speech acts alter.

Why should speech acts matter for our course? Speech acts matter because of the implications they hold for the speech-based Athenian democracy of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. But before we get to that, we need to note that speech acts don’t do things in transparently obvious ways; they are, rather, hedged round with all sorts of qualifications and limitations, themselves social in character.

Content versus Force

In approaching speech acts, we need to start with a pair of concepts:

1. *Content* of utterances.
2. *Force* of utterances.

Content. Content should be a fairly obvious sort of concept; we can think of it as the words of an utterance and what those words mean. Thus any explanation of an utterance’s content (say, “The Eagle has landed”) should allow someone to reconstruct — quote or paraphrase — that content. (“What did So-and-So say?” “He said, ‘The Eagle has landed.’”)

Force. But there’s more to utterance than content. There’s what it does, its *force*. Thus if someone says, “The Eagle has landed,” that may, depending on context, be to suggest that we all pop the cork and fill our glasses. For we should all raise a toast to a safe and successful landing on the moon. (“The Eagle has landed” was what Buzz Aldrin said in 1969 to signal the first ever moon landing by human beings.) And that has to do the *pragmatics* of utterances, what they do and how. And it is with this last, the *pragmatics* or *force* of utterances, that speech-act theory is mainly concerned.

Constatives versus Performatives

Thus **speech-act theory** mainly considers how utterance can seek to “make it so,” and under what conditions. In so doing, it proposes *two ways* to study the impact of utterance, whether spoken or written:

1. **Utterance as constative**. I.e., as *informational*: “George Washington was the first president of the United States.” Such sentences possess a true/false dimension. So,

for instance, the sentence “George Washington was the first president of the United States” is **true**. (Ordinarily, questions can be understood as interrogative variants of constatives: they seek validation or completion of a given bit of information: “Did Mary read the book? Mary read the book. Who read the book? Mary read the book.”)

Note, however, that constatives are still speech acts. For, even if they do nothing else, they *assert*. Yet there is more to speech acts than assertion. . . .

2. **Utterance as performative.** Utterances can, as well, *perform*: contract marriages, make promises, enact bets, as in the following:

Speaker A: “I bet you ten bucks!”

Speaker B: “You’re on!”

Such sentences we call *performatives*; they possess what Austin calls a “**felicitous**”/“**infelicitous**” (effective/ineffective) dimension.

Number 2. above requires explanation. Note that the two sentences I use to illustrate performative utterance *do* something: *they enact a bet*. Of course, there is still a true/false dimension to the sentences: either speaker may or may not sincerely intend to honor the bet; either speaker may, in a sense, be lying. But if A and B have agreed to this bet, if they are actually in a setting appropriate for such a bet (e.g., they are watching a game), *if they both understand the conventions of betting and understand each other and are not just horsing around*, then *the bet is on*. Austin calls that not “true,” but “**felicitous**,” i.e., the utterance *worked*.

That reveals something very important about **performative utterance**: it can only be felicitous — can only work — in a *social setting*. Hence Austin’s rule A. 1. for performative speech: “There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect,” all of this occurring within the appropriate setting, between people who understand the procedure, and so on. I can say, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” but only under the right conditions (i.e., at a wedding, with me officiating) do my words carry the desired force. (Austin 14–15.)

By contrast, a **constative** (informational) sentence, at least according to Austin, remains unaffected by context: whatever the circumstances of its production and/or reception, the sentence “George Washington was the first president of the United States” is still true.

(But regarded as an *assertion*, the constative is likewise *social*: it goes “out there,” “there” being the set of actual or potential addressees it’s being sent to. As we shall see, dialogical theory extends speech-act theory in precisely that direction.)

Locution, Illocution, Perlocution

Three more concepts, then:

1. *Locution*, or the utterance itself, i.e., its *content*: “Don’t do that!”
2. *Illocution*, or the utterance considered from the perspective of its doing something. Thus “Don’t do that!” is a sentence commanding you not to do that. That’s what the sentence *does*: it *commands*. There are various categories of *illocution*

(various types of sentences carrying one or another variety of illocutionary force) beyond commands. There are *assertions* (sentences that state), *warnings*, *conjectures*, *demands*, *commands*, *agreements*, *apologies*, *greetings*, and the list goes on.

3. *Perlocution*, or the utterance considered from the perspective of its aim or intended effect. Thus the utterance, “Don’t do that!” does not in and of itself prevent you from doing that. But that’s what the utterance would like to see happen. Perlocution can, therefore, be understood as the *aim* of a speech act. It is, to quote the *OED*, “An act of speaking or writing which aims to bring about an action but which in itself does not effect or constitute that action, for example persuading or convincing.”

Why would the aforementioned matter? It helps us understand that:

- (a) While utterances can be considered merely from the perspective of grammatical and semantic *content*, i.e., as *locutions*,
- (b) utterances can as well be considered from the perspective of what they *do* and what they *aim* to do, i.e., as *illocutions* and *perlocutions*.

Now, it should be noted that speech-act theory has come under criticism for drawing an artificial distinction between “real” discourse — spoken speech acts — and imitated or represented discourse, as in writing generally (graphically represented speech) and fiction and drama in particular (dramatic dialogue as a kind of “pretend” speech).

But all that is really beside the point: a bet enacted in a novel, play, or movie still operates within a kind of reality, albeit a “dramatic” reality. Conversely, social reality can itself be understood as a “drama” always unfolding before us, a “story” into which we insert ourselves. Nor is orally spoken speech essential to the performative power of any given speech act. Don’t forget the meaningful gesture or the handwritten signature or its digital counterpart online. Indeed, all the aforementioned can prove felicitous so long as some socially validated formula has been fulfilled.

Hence Austin’s basic insight stands: sentences can **do things**, but only in settings shaped by **social conventions**.

How does that matter for us? It forces us to consider the following two questions and their implications:

1. What is the relationship between *speech* and *power*? — a question that clearly preoccupied the sophist Gorgias, not to mention the Athenian people, in that they (Gorgias and Athenians) clearly thought that speech, whether or not it had the power to *inform*, at least had the power to *persuade* and to *deceive*.

Take, for instance, Clytemnestra’s *pithou*, “obey!” in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (carpet scene).

- As a locution, its content is *pithou*, translated “obey!”
- As a *perlocution*, it is an utterance seeking obedience, which indeed it achieves

But what is it as an *illocution*? Especially within the context of the play, of Greek culture, of classical Athenian social-sexual politics, what dynamic does it tap in-

- to? How does it do what it does? And why is it “felicitous” in the play, i.e., successful?
2. What is the relationship between *speech itself* and *speech community*, that all important component of context? For if *force*, even *meaning*, is context-dependent (i.e., variable, depending on who is doing the talking and/or listening, and under what conditions), and if speech acts alter social reality, then the relationship between society and communication is necessarily complex and in need of close examination.

Finally, it is this social-performative aspect of the speech act that suggests deep and important connections between speech act-theory and its dialogical counterpart.

Sociality of Language, Dialogue (Vološinov, Bakhtin)

Modern dialogical theory owes a great debt above all to two Russians: Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Valentin Vološinov (also spelled Voloshinov, 1895–1936). The following discussion distills various strands in thought of those two, Vološinov in particular.

Dialogical theory proposes that language is inherently social; that *all* utterance, even writing, goes out to a respondent, whether actual or imagined, present or absent; that reception already shapes utterance even prior to the fact of reception. In addition, then, to the familiar definition of dialogue as a verbal back and forth between two or more discursive subjects (between speakers/writers addressing and responding to one another), dialogical theory proposes for discourse generally this back-and-forth or “dialogical” dimension, which, even when we’re dealing with monologue, needs to be acknowledged and therefore deserves study.

To start with, then, let’s break the dialogical speech act up into individual stages, distinct only in the abstract:

1. Production of utterance.
2. Reception of utterance. (i.e., by addressee.)
3. Evaluation of utterance. (ditto)
4. Response to utterance. (ditto)

Note, though, that numbers 2 through 4 are anticipated by speakers/writers even before they happen — that as I speak, I am already speaking in ways that take into consideration how you will react or respond. Indeed, at some level, *the mere act of speaking presupposes a respondent and therefore itself already responds*. Dialogue happens, then, not just as a verbal back-and-forth. It also happens as a complex feedback system. *It is inherently social in character.*

The implications of that are, I would suggest, profound. It means that no utterance ever stands still or can be adequately grasped in the abstract; it is always percolating through a social medium which it alters and which alters it. Thus *all* speech, spoken or written, even speech seemingly aimed at no one in sight, possesses a crucially *social* dimension: it aims to establish connections between discursive subjects (speakers/listeners, writers/readers), sort of like extending your hand to shake, or like an old-fashioned telephone operator connecting parties by plugging wires into a switchboard. Through dialogue we forge what Vološinov calls an “ideological chain”: social bonding through the sharing of

ideas, views, values, mindsets, etc. Meaning here is not stationary or absolute; it is continually transacted and re-transacted socially; *it evolves*. Through multiple speech acts, a speech-community takes shape, and with that, a shared consciousness grounding further dialogue. Key to the process is *evaluation*, the attitudinal stance one takes to what one sees, hears, experiences, reads. Evaluation registered in speech Vološinov calls “evaluative accent.” Through these accents, whether expressed intonationally, lexically, or otherwise, speakers convey their response to — whether they “connect” or fail to connect with — something someone else has said or done. Evaluation thus underpins the sociality of language. And ideology is, at base, social evaluation expressed through signs. (The foregoing summarizes and at times quotes *Concordia Discors* pp. 4–8.)

Here is where I think **dialogical theory** connects with **speech-act theory**. Dialogue, insofar as it operates at a social level, *does things*: it responds to and evaluates the utterance of another. And it is on the basis of those evaluations that a sense of community grows. Viewed dialogically, i.e., socially, any type of utterance thus becomes **performative**.

Which is not to deny that utterances *mean* things in the abstract, i.e., possess a relatively stable semantic-grammatical content. It is, rather, to move beyond the semantic box, to ask how an utterance resonates in the realm of the social.

Take, for example, the expression, “That’s sick!” In my day (long, long ago!), that would have been a way to express disgust. Nowadays, though, when a twenty-something says it to another twenty-something, it *can* mean, “That’s way cool!” But it can mean still more. By *reversing* the usual valuation of a word like “sick,” such a usage can suggest that speaker and addressee form, or belong to, a speech community privy to any number of similar revaluations (“sick,” “ill,” etc. in the sense of “good”). It stresses common ground, a shared vision of “good” and “bad” and the best way to express same, even as it distinguishes a privileged “Us” from an uncool “Them.”

Speech Acts, Dialogue, Athenian Democracy

What does that have to do with democracy, specifically, classical Athenian democracy? Let us not forget that democracy in fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athens happened in public fora and through the medium of public speech. Speech itself cannot, therefore, easily be factored out of the equation.

But how did that work? According to Josiah Ober, author of *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, the **masses**, which is to say, the majority of those who made up the Athenian *dēmos*, the male-voting citizenry, held sovereignty both in fact and in theory. In a sense, they were at all times in the “driver’s seat,” though in practice, they delegated advisory-leadership functions to a wealthier, better educated, less numerous **elite** class. Ober sees this mass-elite interaction, conducted mostly through the medium of public speech and response thereto (crowd-response to public speech, voting bills up or down in assembly, a variety of rewards or punishments awaiting the popular or unpopular leader), as **dialectical** in character, in other words, as a sort of ongoing conversation or negotiation between quasi-interest groups, leaders and led, to define the role each was to play with respect to the other.

But insofar as the back-and-forth of public speech enacted *political* and therefore *social bonds* (note that the *polis*, a collection of citizens, represents, if nothing else, a social grouping), it can be viewed as both **dialogical** (in the Bakhtinian-Vološinov sense) and **performative** (in the Austinian sense).

And note that *dialogical* connections (see above) were often forged via *topoi*, what for the purpose of this discussion I'll define as "commonplace" sentiments speaking to commonly held assumptions and values. That will have been **political rhetoric** at its most fundamental.

But there's the rub. Remember how Austin specifies that speech can only **perform** in certain kinds of settings where certain conventions are agreed upon etc. etc.? Thus dialogue cannot happen, discursive connections cannot be forged, except under conditions where certain ground rules apply, where "common denominators" enable discussants to interact socially and verbally — where, for instance, speakers persuade addressees that they endorse a commonly held vision despite disagreement as to particulars.

Still, in a pluralistic society, any such points of agreement can also limit or constrain discourse, as when public speech is shaped with a view to appealing to the "lowest common denominator" (simplistic, sometimes bigoted, but widely held views). And that inevitably has the effect of *limiting* discourse. Certain ideas, sentiments, etc. are presumptively disapproved of, treated as forbidden, taboo; others, as obligatory if speakers want to be listened to. *Ideology, both a precondition for and byproduct of dialogue, paradoxically inhibits it.*

Bakhtin's term for that is **centripetal discourse**: discourse that literally "seeks the center," that tries to force the whole conversation onto one track — normative discourse intolerant of a plurality of views. In its least desirable manifestations, it can be thought of as the downside to *homonoia*: "same-mindedness" (consensus, concord) viewed as social-political conformism. Its opposite is **centrifugal discourse**: discourse that literally "flees the center," i.e., pluralistic discourse, under democracy, ordinarily a good thing, except perhaps when it gets so out of hand that it becomes *conflictive*, leading, potentially, at least, to *stasis*, civic discord

And though it might seem that, with centripetal and centrifugal discourse, we are dealing more with extremes than means, those are, I would suggest, dynamics at all times operative within dialogue, political and otherwise. For how can it be dialogue if it is always saying exactly the same thing? But how can dialogue say anything at all unless constrained by some kind of common ground? For if there can be no common ground, then either we are simply talking past one other, or else we are talking at one other in a dangerously conflictive fashion.

What does that have to do with classical Athens? Athens was, of course, pretty much a mono-ethnic, mono-cultural society, not everyone's idea of the sort of place for world views to collide and sparks to fly. Indeed, Athenians valued consensus, and felt it the bedrock of their democracy. But think of Socrates. At least as presented in Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates' style of philosophizing alienated people: it challenged their beliefs at a level too fundamental for them to tolerate; it was judged to be excessively *conflictive*; it came across as *antisocial discourse*. Socrates was, therefore, tried for impiety and condemned

to death — that in a *polis* renowned for the value it placed on free expression. Put differently, dialogue was and remains a tricky business.

In our course, we shall be examining democratic discourse as, among other things, just such a tricky negotiation — democratic dialogue, then, neither as a discordant cacophony nor as a euphonious symphony, but as a complex back-and-forth forging ties which it simultaneously subjects to stresses and strains.

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