On Perlocutionary Act

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Abstract

This article focuses on the neglected field in speech acts theory – perlocutionary act. Through the analysis of the nature of language, we can see the importance of it and the characteristics of it. At last, this essay tries to raise the relatively complete definition of perlocutionary act.

Key words: Perlocutionary act; Characteristics; Definition

INTRODUCTION

In 1950s, the speech acts started to become the subject of language philosophers. Austin is the founder of the Speech Act Theory, and he isolates three basic senses in which in saying something one are doing something, and hence three kinds of acts that are simultaneously performed:

i) locutionary act: the utterence of a sentence with determinate sense and reference

ii) illocutionary act: the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional force associated with it

iii) perlocutionary act: the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentences, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterence

In the process of raising this theory, Austin especially emphasized on the importance of the purpose of speakers. So most linguists attached great importance to the illocutionary act. Thomas (1995, p. 51) even stated that "Today the term 'speech act' is used to mean the same as 'illocutionary act' – in fact, you will find the terms speech act, illocutionary act, illocutionary force, pragmatic force or even just force, all used to mean the same thing". At the same time, the research of perlocutionary act is gradually neglected. In fact, perlocutionry act is also very important in pragmatic study. In this essay, I will talk about some shallow opinions on the perlocutionary act.

1. AUSTIN'S STATEMENT ON PERLOCUTIONARY ACTS

Indeed, Austin made the emphasis on the purpose of speakers, yet this cannot represent that he considered the speech act and illocutionary force as the same thing. Conversely, in his *How to Do Things with Words*, he used one chapter to make distinctions between illocutionary and perlocutionary act. Grice once criticized that Speech Act Theory did not attach the importance to the effect, and Searle contended that the Speech Act Theory intentionally ignored the effect. But I think from the work of Austin, he never neglected the effect of the hearer on the action being performed by the speaker. On the contrary, he even distinguished two relevant effects that the perlocutionary effect may cause: the achievement of a perlocutionary object or the production of a perlocutionary sequel. Although, from his point of view, we may raise some question such as Austin mixed the perlocutionary act and the effect. Yet we can see the Austin's intention to distinguish the illocutionary act and perlocutionary act.

2. PERLOCUTIONARY ACT AND COMMUNICATION

Like CP, Attardo (1997) raised The Perlocutionary Cooperative Principle: Cooperate whatever goals the speaker may have in initiating a conversational exchange,

including any non-linguistic, practical goal. His principle consists 3 maxims:

a. If someone wants or needs something, give it to him.
b. If someone is doing something, help out.
c. Anticipate people's needs, i.e. provide them with what they need, even if they do not know that they need it.

This principle indicated the important element of perlocutionary act that the purpose of the speaker corresponds with the effect. But at the same time, we should pay our attention to some exceptions that many situations in communication violate this cooperative principle.

So here I'd like to summarize some situations of perlocutionary act in communication as follows:

i) The purpose of the speaker is completely understood by hearers and performs according to this purpose, i.e. produce the intended perlocutionary act of the speaker.

ii) The purpose of the speaker is not understood by hearers and naturally the intended perlocutionary act cannot appear. This situation certainly cannot achieve the illocutionary force that the speaker expected.

iii) The purpose of the speaker is understood by hearers, but the intended perlocutionary act does not appear because the hearers deliberately flout the communicative principle.

iv) The purpose of the speaker is understood by hearers, but due to some unpredictable situation, the intended perlocutionary act does not appear.

v) The purpose of the speaker is not understood by hearers, but because of the participation of other people (we call them unintended hearers) in the context, the illocutionary force can be achieved completely or partly.

From the above situations, we can distinguish two kinds of perlocutionary acts: the purpose of speaker and the factual effect. When the purpose of the speaker consists with the effect, this is not only the communication, but also the interaction. i.e. successful perlocutionary act. Otherwise, it is only an interaction, not a communication.

3. UNCERTIANTY OF PERLOCUTIONARY ACT

In certain context, the effect of perlocutionary act is conventional and ritualized, such as in the situation of some ceremonies or rituals. However, in everyday communication, there are a host of conditions that are not consistent with what the speakers have expected. Because besides the speaker's expectation, there is another factor we cannot neglect – the hearer's response. Interaction is a motion process of mutual action between speaker and hearer and even others' participation. In next part, I will focus on this subject. The production of specific speech acts or perlocutionary act depends on the cooperation of speaker and hearer in the communication, for the hearer is not passive and unconscious, but active and conscious. So the speaker and hearer in the communication should adjust communicative strategy and method in order to make the interaction proceed smoothly. For example:

Jim: Would you like to go with me to the concert. This will be a wonderful perfomance, I have a wonderful day in negotiation.

Kate: I'm tired after the whole day's work. And I have to prepare for my report for the conference tommorow.

Jim: I'm sorry to hear that. OK, I'll go myself.

In this conversation, Although Kate completely understood the purpose of Jim that he invited her to the concert. But she had something more important to do and declined the invitation. The intended perlocutionary act of Jim did not appear. And Jim also understood Kate's meaning, so he adjusted his communicative strategy and go to the concert himself.

From the above statements, we can see that whether the speaker's purpose can successfully achieved or not depends on the mutual understanding and cooperative attitude between speakers and hearers. Because we cannot ignore another important factor: the participation of unintended hearers in communication.

4. PARTICIPATION OF UNINTENDED HEARERS

Austin regarded the locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act as a kind of intentional and unintentional act. He thought the perlocutionary act must have some results. Gu criticized Austin's definition and gave his own definition "perlocutionary should be the effect on hearers of locutionary acts and illocutionary acts." But I think his definition is also not all-round. Because there existed the communicative phenomenon that the participation of unintended hearers which greatly affects the process of communication. And the above statements in last part, we can say the perlocutinary act is also influenced by the mutual understanding of speakers and hearers. So I think the perlocutionary act can be defined as follows: "Perlocutionary act is the result of speaker's utterence on three relevant parts in communication – speaker, hearer, and other unintended hearers in the context".

5. FOUR TYPES OF PERLOCUTIONARY ACTS

Perlocutionary act can be divided into expected and non-expected on the speakers' communication intention. There

are four types:

Firstly, speakers' intention was fully understood by the listeners or others and they will work following this intention, which means that speakers' perlocutionary act were generated. Since most of the language communication follows the cooperative principle, this is the most familiar case.

Case 1:

Host: It's cold in here.

Guest: I'll turn on the air conditioner.

The host turned on the air conditioner after he finished his words. His words and action make the guests' expected perlocutionary act come true. This action also can be done by the attendants or who fully understood the host's intention. What need to mention is that the perlocutionary act could be linguistic or non-linguistic.

Secondly, the speaker's intention has not been obedient understood, the speaker will not be made the desired behavior. Sometimes this situation is because the listener does not understand the meaning of the speaker's discourse; listen to the words of people did not act within the power of illocutionary.

Case 2:

A: Is this coffee sugared?

B: I don't think so. Does it taste as if it is?

In Case 2, the purpose of A's words was to blame B's careless. He wanted B to apologize, however B thought it was asking so he did not fully understand A's communication intention and brought the expected perlocutionary act. This situation was caused by the misunderstanding on perlocutionary act. For example

Case 3:

A (to fellow passenger on a long-distance coach): Ask the driver what time we get to Birmingham.

B (to driver): Could you tell me when we get to Birmingham, please? Driver: Don't worry, love, it's a big place – I don't think it's possible to miss it!

In Case 3, the driver understood B's inquiry intention, however he misunderstood the meaning of "When" in B's words. Hence, his answer is obviously improper. The expected perlocutionary act did not come true. In real language communication, the speakers always self-examined their own behaviors, adjust strategy and continue or end the language communication.

Thirdly, the speaker's intention was fully or partially understood by the listener; however the listener did not work in that way. Therefore there was no expected perlocutionary act. The situation that communicators violated cooperative principle happened quite often in real communication. That is the perception of Grice's theory.

Case 4:

Puyuan: Why did not you go?

Fanyi: Where (on purpose)?

Puyuan: Doctor Ke is waiting for you, did not you know?

Fanyi: Doctor Ke? Who is Doctor Ke?

Puyuan: The doctor you used to see.

Fanyi: I have had enough medicine. I do not want any more!

Puyuan: What about your illness?

Fanyi: I have no illness.

In the scene, Fanyi knew clearly that Puyuan commanded her to see the doctor, however, she went against his intention on purpose. Even though Puyuan tried a lot to persuade her, she did not accept it finally. Since the listener intended not to cooperate, the listener's perlocutionary act did not come true.

Finally, the speaker's intention was not been understood by the listeners, however, due to the involvement of other attendants in the communication, speaker's expected perlocutionary act came true. For example,

Case 5:

Husband: dear, there is a long hair on the floor.

Wife: really? What is there to be surprised at?

Mother in Law: Sorry, I cleaned the room today.

Husband's intention was to blame wife's careless, however the wife thought it was funny to let her know there was a hair on the floor. But the mother in law fully understood son in law's intention. She apologized immediately since she remembered that her daughter mentioned before that the son in law has cleanliness. So the husband's perlocutionary act engendered his expected perlocutionary act.

6. TWO ASPECTS OF PERLOCUTIONARY ACT

The Goal of Speaker and the Actual Effect Conversation is a kind of face to face communication for two or more people. During general language communication, all the participants of conversation follow some common principles, which will help them to be understood by each other. Grice pointed out that, conversation is restricted by certain conditions. The reason why conversation between people is not a string of incoherent words is that all the speakers obey the same goal and cooperate with each other. He named this as cooperative principle. Attardo came out with the Perlocutionary Cooperative Principle. Cooperate in whatever goals the speaker may have in initiating a conversational ex-change, including any non-linguistic, practical goal. This principle includes three rules:

1. If someone needs or wants something, give it to them.

2. If someone is doing something, help out).

3. Anticipate people's needs, i.e. provide them with what they need, even if they do not know that they need it.

Attardo's perlocutionary cooperative principle revealed two important factors of perlocutionary act: Speaker's intention is consistent with actual effect. A host of facts

proved that even though people's speech act differs in thousands of ways, most of the speech act can be transmit in time and get the expected results. However, there are also many speech acts are either being discontinued or being frustrated to lose the goal in conversation exchange. Dexing Wang pointed out that perlocutionary act includes both expected results and un-expected results, which are uncertain. Austin differentiates two kinds of perlocutionary act: achievement of a per-locutionary object and the production of a perlocutionary sequel. Perlocutionary goal means the intention of speakers. For example, some speaker wanted to persuade the listener to do something; however, the listener did not take notice of the speaker at all and even threw him out of the door. This is not the speaker's expected results but the final actual results the speaker got. However, this example is very extreme. In many situations, the reason why speakers can get their expected results is because the listeners and speakers intents to take a cooperative attitude in conversation exchange. Davis discussed many possible results which might come out in conversation exchange. He indicates several possible results of "there is a spider on your lap."

A) You know what I mean "there is a spider on your lap."

B) You know I just want to scare you.

C) I want to scare you.

Gu criticized Davis method and added another five possible results:

A) The listener was too scared when she heard the word Spider to even have a look at her lap to see whether there is a spider or not.

B) Though the listener did not see spider, she was frightened by situational reflection. She believed what the speaker said were true.

C) The listened was not frightened in the very beginning. She thought the speaker lied to her on purpose. When she saw the spider on her lap, she was frightened.

D) The listener was not being frightened because she thought the speaker was joking. In fact, the speaker took a joke indeed.

E) The listened was not frightened but very happy since she is a fan of spider collection. From this we can differentiate two perlucotionary acts: the goal of speaker and the actual effect. When speakers' goal and actual effect are consistent, we regarded it as conversation and communication. In this case, speech act turned out to be a successful perlocutionary act.

Otherwise, there is only conversation no communication, which means no effect or counter effect.

Case (1) Tom in-cited Bill to rob the bank, which meaned Bill adopted Tom's goal of robbing the bank. In another word, Tom's original intention caused the expected perlocutionary results from Bill.

Case (2) Tom asked Bill to rob the bank. Only when Bill determined to rob the bank, Tom's perlocutionary act was successful.

Case (3) Tom incited Bill to rob the bank, but Bill could not get the right tools, so he gave up his plan.

If the words could be accepted, the expected listener's behaviors were not a necessary condition, which was because the perlocutionary results in fact did not happen. Hence, in this sentence, the only way to change Bill's attitude is the speaker's intention, which is just like to change attitude by a successful persuasive speech act. This is a kind of perlocutionary result. Likewise, if a promoter wanted to promote some product to consumer, he had to try all his best to introduce product's capability, quality and benefit act. However the consumer did not buy this product, which was an unsuccessful perlocutionary act since this communication did not generate expected effect. A successful perlocutionary act is that speaker's intention will come true in real communication, which is called a successful communication. In each communication of speech acts, the speakers and listeners are both very key; however, the latter ones are more important in perlocutionary act analysis. Although whether the perlocutionary act was successful or not depends on how the listeners reflected on the speakers' intention, the speakers goal and the extent of completion also need to be considered. However, the speaker's original intention is still regarded as perlocutionary act.

7. NON-LINGUISTIC SIGN IN PERLOCUTIONARY ACT

Sometimes, perlocutionary act can be achieved without language. In natural verbal communication, the participants of communication do not just focus on language, they make complementarities by using vocalization character, body agony, dumb show, gesture, facial expression, signal and voice and act, or making use of communication scene factors. For example, if the participants of communication want to show welcome and greeting to their counterparts, they do not need to say "Hello" or "How are you?" a warm hand shaking would be fine. Alarm whistle can let running vehicles get out of the road. Chinese people express yes or agree by nodding and no or disagree by shaking their heads. Nodding and shaking are kinds of non-linguistic feedback, which could be one time action or sequent action. For the naughty kid, you do not need to blame him loudly to stop his bad behavior, just frown, shake your heads, wink at him or show your forefinger to warn him.

All these actions will probably stop his bad behavior. The naughty boys are afraid of teacher's severe gaze. Only teachers' staring or a gesture might take effect of stopping bad behavior and educating. Sometimes, the speakers can achieve their expected goal by using proper intonation. We have to admit that due to the differentiation of geography, nationalities, religions and culture traditions,

non linguistic sign has different explanation. Gesture is just like verbal language, which shows nationalities' specific characteristic to a great extent.

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