

Introduction to special issue of *Language & Communication* on ‘Group Speech Acts’

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Collectives ranging from informal groups to organizations and institutional actors of various kinds routinely voice their opinions, express their feelings, make assertions, testify, give orders, raise demands, pass laws and verdicts, declare wars or states of emergency, and so on. They sometimes do so by literally speaking as a group, in unison, as when, for example, a group shouts their demands at a demonstration. But they also do through the speech of their representatives, who may speak for the group in their role as their leader or spokesperson.

Despite the ubiquity of group speech acts and their importance for our social and political life, there has been scant work on them until quite recently, with the exception of the pioneering work of Justin Hughes (1984) and Antonie Meijers (2007). This is despite the fact that both speech act theory and the field of collective intentionality have been flourishing in recent times. But neither speech act theorists nor theorists of collective intentionality have devoted much interest to group speech acts. A chief motivation for organizing the ‘Group Speech Acts’ workshop in Vienna, of which this Special Issue is a product, was the thought that these two groups should be brought together for joint work on this topic. But other groups and theoretical traditions are equally relevant. In the phenomenological tradition we find an early interest in groups and collective intentionality as well as in speech acts. Theories of deliberative communication and argumentation seem to be about groups jointly making up their minds and committing to the result in their speech, even if this isn’t necessarily conceptualized in terms of group speech acts. In social epistemology, too, several scholars have recently explored group testimony and group assertion. Meanwhile, in contemporary culture, there is a great deal of interest in the politics of social identity, which raises such questions as whether and when one is speaking as a member of certain groups, or is addressing others as such members, even when one is not formally a representative of the relevant group, and, if so, what consequences this may have.

Against this background, certain questions about group speech acts naturally suggest themselves. Approaching things from the point of view of speech act theory, the most basic question is whether group speech acts can be accounted for in the basic framework of (some version of) speech act theory, which is still mostly reliant on the traditional opposition between illocutionary force and propositional content, despite recent criticisms of this force-content distinction (see e.g., Hanks 2015; Recanati 2019). This question is especially pressing since,

naturally construed, group speech acts stand out through their speakers or subjects, but it is not clear whether and, if so, how, the identity of the speaker(s) relates to or interacts with the force and content of the speech act.

Another question concerns what approach to speech act theory would best accommodate group speech acts. Here we might distinguish normativist speech act theories, that seek to account for illocutionary force in terms of a normative status, or a normative position a speaker takes up by performing a speech act, from more psychologically oriented intentionalist theories, that seek to account for force in terms of the expression of psychological states. Might one of these approaches be better placed to explain group speech acts? If one thinks, for example, that ascribing psychological states to groups is problematic because it requires a notion of a “group mind” or something similar, one can take this to be a reason to prefer a normativist account in terms of the responsibilities or other normative statuses that accrue to group members through a group speech act.

A related distinction can be drawn between individualist or ‘monological’ theories of speech acts, according to which the force of a speech act is determined by the speaker alone, and ‘dialogical’ theories, according to which at least some kinds of force also require an appropriate uptake on part of the hearer. Several feminist philosophers of language have used dialogical approaches to argue that certain ideological climates and power relations can interfere with audience uptake and hence make certain speech acts ‘unspeakable’ for certain speakers, thus ‘silencing’ them (see, e.g., Langton 1993; Hornsby 1995). This raises the question of whether similar phenomena affect group speech: can power relations and social conditions silence the speech of a group, whether addressed to individuals, to another group, or to an institution like a court?

Recent work in social epistemology on group testimony also raises important questions concerning group speech acts (see, e.g., Lackey 2014, 2018; Tollefsen 2007; Fricker 2012; Faulkner 2018). We routinely acquire knowledge from the testimony of different kinds of groups—from the weather bureau’s forecasts, from the statements of commissions of inquiry, from the assertions of scientific research teams, etc. —but what is it that gives these speech acts their epistemic credentials? Does the epistemic credibility of a group’s statement reduce to the credibility of the group’s spokesperson, or does it depend in some way on the epistemic competence of the whole group?

From the perspective of collective intentionality, several further questions concerning group speech acts arise. Theories of collective intentionality can be fruitfully divided into ‘subject’, ‘mode’ and ‘content’ approaches (Schweikard & Schmid 2013), based on what is seen as collective in collective intentionality. Subject approaches (Gilbert 1990; Schmid 2009) embrace

the idea that there can be ontologically irreducible collective subjects of intention, belief and other attitudes, while mode accounts (Searle 1990; Tuomela 2013) suggest collective intentionality is a matter of individuals holding such attitudes in a special kind of ‘we-mode’. Content approaches (Bratman 2014; Ludwig 2016), by contrast, insist that there is no need to posit irreducible collective subjects, nor special collective ‘modes’ of intentionality, and that collective intentionality can be explained entirely with reference to the content of what individual people intend, believe, etc. One fundamental question is whether this division between approaches can fruitfully be applied to accounts of group speech acts. Roughly, a subject approach to group speech acts would hold that groups themselves can be speakers, while a mode account would explain group speech acts in terms of special modes in which individual speakers speak such as the we-mode, or role-modes (Schmitz 2018) such as the mode of a spokesperson. A content approach would deny that groups can speak for themselves, or that individuals can speak for others in a we-mode, insisting instead that group speech can be reduced to what individuals say *of* groups.

Another theme from the collective intentionality literature that is likely relevant for understanding group speech acts is that collective intentionality takes place on different layers or levels. Various theories of collective intentionality distinguish the small-scale we-intentionality of informal groups from the large-scale intentionality of formally organized groups and institutional reality, such as that of corporations and government. There has also been some interest in joint attention and joint bodily action, which can be located at an even more basic level than the shared beliefs and intentions of small-scale we-intentionality. It seems safe to assume that the mechanisms by which speech is meant and understood as group speech are importantly different between a shared joint attention context, the context of shared propositional attitudes such as intentions and beliefs, and the institutional context with its formalized rules and formalized role differentiation.

If groups can be speakers in a strong sense, the question arises as to whether they also have the same sort of authority that individual people have over what they mean by their words and what attitudes they thereby express—what is commonly known as ‘first person authority’. In other words, is there first-person *plural* authority? And since Moore’s paradox—the fact that it seems absurd to assert something like “It is raining, but I don’t believe it is raining,” even though it does not seem to involve a contradiction—is generally thought to turn on the attitudes one expresses, there is also a closely related question about whether there is a first-person plural version of Moore’s paradox. Both questions have been raised by Hans Bernhard Schmid in a series of papers (2014a; 2014b; 2018). They essentially concern the issue of how far the parallel

between individuals and groups as subjects who speak their minds and mean what they say can be taken.

All papers in this volume take up one or several of the themes just introduced. The papers by de Vecchi, Ludwig, Schmid, Schmitz and Paterson all centrally address the fundamental issue of in which sense groups can be speakers. Paterson takes a normativist line, which identifies speakers in terms of the responsibilities they undertake rather than their intentions, while the others defend different versions of an intentionalist position. Ludwig and de Vecchi both focus on the proxy speech acts of spokespersons, Ludwig more from the point of view of the analytical, de Vecchi from that of the continental tradition. Schmid argues that not all group speech can be understood on the spokesperson model, and Schmitz suggests that we should abandon the force-content dualism to understand it. Corredor provides an Austinian, broadly normativist, account of group deliberation. Leo Townsend presents an account of the silencing of group speech, and Aaron Bentley discusses how the social identities speakers have as members of informal groups, for example, as men, affects the meaning of their speech. In the following, we briefly characterize all contributions.

In ‘Group speakers’, Grace Paterson reflects on a range of group speech acts in order to develop an answer to the question of what makes someone the speaker of a given speech act. Against the dominant intentionalist approach to speakerhood, she develops and defends a normativist alternative that she calls ‘speaker responsibilism’. What group speech acts show us, she argues, is that harbouring communicative intentions is neither necessary nor sufficient for being the speaker of a speech act; instead, what makes someone the speaker is a range of normative facts about who is responsible for the act.

Kirk Ludwig begins his paper ‘What are group speech acts?’ by developing a taxonomy of group speech acts that distinguishes irreducibly collective speech acts such as joint agreements or greetings from group proxy speech acts. The central cases for the latter category are ones where a spokesperson speaks on behalf of a group. Ludwig goes on to provide an analysis of such speech acts in terms of the notion of a ‘status role’, which in turn is explained through status functions and constitutive rules. He also addresses some objections to his account and some complications such as whether and when a spokesperson may also speak in her own right rather than just simply for the group.

Francesca de Vecchi’s contribution ‘Proxy speech acts: a particular case of plural agency’ also focuses on proxy speech acts, but from a point of view inspired by the phenomenological tradition, and in particular the work of Adolph Reinach. She argues that proxy speech acts are instances of plural agency irreducible to collective agency. They are spontaneous *position takings*

which involve different agents acting at different times and with different degrees of authorship and authority. The temporally extended unity of a proxy act thus integrates multiple layers of agency.

Hans Bernhard Schmid's contribution, 'Groups speaking for themselves: articulating first-person plural authority', defends the view that groups themselves can be speakers from the point of view of an intentionalist subject approach. He argues that groups do not need to enlist and authorize individuals to speak on their behalf in order to speak. Building on his previous work on first-person plural self-awareness, he claims that the illocutionary authority that groups have to speak for themselves is based on first-person plural self-awareness of the relevant collective illocutionary intention.

In 'Force, content and the varieties of subject', Michael Schmitz argues that to account for group speech acts we need to rethink the fundamentals of speech act theory and abandon the recently much attacked dualism of force and content. Speech acts do not merely represent what is, for example, asserted or ordered, they also represent these positions and their subjects, including group subjects. On the basis of this representationalist proposal, Schmitz proposes an account of the speech act of inviting a joint commitment and attempts to answer to Schmid's questions whether there are plural forms of 1st person authority and of Moore's paradox.

In 'Deliberative speech acts: an interactional approach', Christina Corredor develops an account of group deliberation. She adopts the framework of Austinian speech act theory, emphasizing the normative statuses—the obligations and rights—that coparticipants in deliberation mutually assign and recognize. She explains how deliberation regulates turn-taking and the assignment of the burden of proof and argues that the speech acts of arguing and of making a proposal are central to deliberation. Making a proposal is analyzed as an instance of Austin's speech act category of verdictives. When the coparticipants conclude deliberation by agreeing on a course of action, this is an exercitive speech acts that entails a joint commitment.

Leo Townsend's paper, 'Group assertion and group silencing', examines how group speech acts can be unjustly impeded or disabled. Focusing in particular on the view of group assertion recently defended by Jennifer Lackey, he argues that this kind of speaker-centric approach obscures the phenomenon of 'group silencing'. Townsend illustrates this phenomenon with an example from international environmental law, of an indigenous community that is silenced because of a lack of uptake on the part of its audience.

In 'Social identity, group speech, and negotiated meaning', Aaron Bentley explores 'group speech' in a different sense, namely the way informal group membership (such as being a member of the group *men*) can affect the meaning of a speaker's speech. Bentley argues that the meaning of a given speech act must sometimes be determined through a process of negotiation

between speaker and audience, and that the audience's reaction to the speaker's social identity can be relevant to this process of negotiation. In this way the fact that a speaker is a member of a certain (informal) social group can play a crucial role in determining the meaning of his speech acts.

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