Who's Afraid of the Perlocutionary?

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J.L. Austin's intuition that language should be treated as a domain of human action, rather than merely as a tool for the transmission of information, has been enormously influential. His analysis of speech acts continues to be widely utilised in a vast number of fields, from the philosophy of language to social and political philosophy, the philosophy of law, gender and literary studies, as well as a variety of social sciences including anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, media studies, sociology and psychology.

With the growing acknowledgment of the importance of Austin's work, and more generally of ordinary language philosophy (Baz 2012; Laugier 2013; Crary and De Lara 2018), attention has increasingly been paid to language's capacity to *act*. Yet the success of contextualism and the idea of performative utterance have contributed to the concealment of important potentialities in Austin's philosophy. In particular, they have downplayed its ambition to precisely describe the cognitive, perceptual, social and moral dimensions of our usages of language—and to analyse *all* forms of expression: not only descriptive and performative, but also emotive or passionate. Ordinary language philosophy does not aim to define the meaning of a word as the set of situations where it is apt, or as a list of established uses, but rather examines how meaning is *made* and *improvised* through its integration into conversation, practice and expressivity. It addresses language as something that affects us and allows us to affect others. In short, while the notions of performative utterance and illocutionary force are regularly mobilised, some crucial aspects of the 'efficacy' of language, of its capacity to act in and on the world (on others and on oneself), remain significantly underexplored: the domain of the perlocutionary (what is done not *in* but *by* saying something), both in its own right and in its complex relation to the illocutionary, is almost always neglected (Laugier 2017).

In this respect, one could say that Austin's project has been followed too literally, even by his critics. Indeed, in *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin claims that his main interest lies in the illocutionary act; his analysis of both the locutionary and the perlocutionary acts aims only to clearly demarcate and emphasise the importance of the illocutionary dimension of speech (Austin 1975, 103). Consequently, it is no surprise that, in the first four decades following the publication of Austin's lectures, scholars have focused almost exclusively on performative

utterances and illocutionary acts: the latter have been misleadingly considered as synonymous with speech acts (see, e.g., Searle 1969; Hornsby 1994), while the constative-performative distinction has been equated to the locutionary-illocutionary distinction. The perlocutionary has therefore been dismissed as unessential to the theory of speech acts (see, e.g., Searle 1968; Forguson 1973). During this period, the original ambition of ordinary language philosophy to focus on the actual uses of words in order to understand what they really *do* was forgotten. Searle and Grice, in their combined efforts to save the semantic model from Austin's attacks, essentially deprived the philosophy of language of powerful tools to account both for the contextual nature of the meaning of utterances and for our sensitivity to words—to the variety of things we do with words and to what they reveal to (and *about*) us.

Only a handful of scholars have drawn attention to the perlocutionary as a topic that deserves careful philosophical treatment in its own right (see, e.g., Cohen 1973; Davis 1979; Gaines 1979; Tsui 1987; Gu 1993). However, in the past few years, the perlocutionary has gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly following Cavell's breakthrough essay, "Performative and Passionate Utterance," in which he takes Austin to task for restricting his analysis of speech acts to the illocutionary (Cavell 2005, 155–91). Indeed, after Austin asks, 'How many senses are there in which to say something *is* to do something?' (Austin 1975, 94), he introduces a tripartite distinction between the locutionary act (saying something meaningful), the illocutionary act (what is done *in* saying something) and the perlocutionary act (what is done *by* saying something). Of course, while to say 'I warn you' (locutionary act) *is*, in the appropriate circumstances, to warn you (illocutionary act), and it may also exasperate or intimidate you (perlocutionary act), to say 'I exasperate you' or 'I intimidate you' will not *as such* exasperate or intimidate you. Yet, as Cavell argues, perlocutions constitute a dimension of our form of life as 'creatures of language' (Cavell 1988, 141) which plays a fundamental role in our ordinary exchanges of words and in every human encounter and expression.

Cavell's essay identifies passionate utterance as one of the central perlocutionary domains of language. Performative utterance, defined in *How to Do Things with Words* in relation to the illocutionary, cannot account for the improvisation and uncontrollability in human expression. If a performative utterance is, as Cavell writes, 'an offer of participation in the order of law,' then, perhaps, a passionate utterance is 'an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire' (Cavell 2005, 185). Cavell acknowledges Austin's effort to show how speech *does* things as well as *states* or *says* things, beginning with social actions such as marrying, betting,

christening and bequeathing. And Austin himself notes that utterances have further effects, ones he calls perlocutionary rather than illocutionary, and which can be named by verbs such as deter, convince, alarm, surprise, upset, humiliate (Austin 1975, 110, 118).

But what exactly are these perlocutionary effects? This is one of the crucial questions that the contributions to this special issue explore, since the difference between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary has so far been both constantly emphasised and systematically missed. The illocutionary act does something *in saying*; it has a force and is prone to felicity or infelicity. The perlocutionary act does something *by saying*; it has an effect and produces consequences. The difference between the two is both fundamental and all the more labile because the illocutionary act is itself 'bound up' with effects, but does not itself 'produce' them:

> So here are three ways, securing uptake, taking effect and inviting a response, in which illocutionary acts are *bound up* with effects; and these are all distinct from the *producing of effects* which is characteristic of the perlocutionary act (Austin 1975, 118, emphasis added).

Why not suppose, then, that there are conditions to be found for felicitous perlocutionary acts (Lorenzini 2015)? The fact that Austin avoids pursuing this task has two consequences. On the one hand, as we emphasised, the region of the perlocutionary has largely remained undefined and uncharted. On the other hand, the domain of the performative is usually constrained by the limits of social rules or conventions. Thus, Cavell's counter-proposal—to consider the perlocutionary as equally meaningful, and as performative, as the illocutionary— carries with it the promise to radically transform the analysis of performance in general.

The six contributions to this special issue aim to take seriously Cavell's proposal (albeit sometimes critically) and to strengthen the burgeoning philosophical and moral interest in the perlocutionary, while also returning to Austin's notions of performative utterance and illocutionary force in order to better clarify them and explore anew the possibility of consistently distinguishing illocutions from perlocutions. Two years after Cavell's passing, they thus pay homage to his work and his faithfulness to Austin's project.

In "Illocution and Understanding," Guy Longworth explores the connection between the successful performance of an illocutionary act (the act of telling) and the achievement of uptake (the audience's understanding of one's attempt to perform this act). Proceeding historically, Longworth discusses some of the main answers that have been offered to the question of whether understanding is necessary or sufficient for the successful performance of illocutionary

acts, arguing that the respective analyses of Searle, McDowell and Hornsby all build on Grice, whose approach can in turn be seen as a development of Austin's idea that understanding is crucial for illocutions.

Sabina Vaccarino Bremner's paper, "'When You (Say You) Know, You Can't Be Wrong': J.L. Austin on 'I Know' Claims," also elucidates some fundamental aspects of Austin's notion of the illocutionary act. Addressing the much debated and criticised parallel that Austin draws between saying 'I know' and saying 'I promise,' Vaccarino Bremner argues that such parallel has been consistently misunderstood in the literature due to the fact that most commentators have fallen prey to the performative-constative dichotomy that Austin repudiates. By contrast, Vaccarino Bremner shows that Austin's characterisation of the performative aspects of 'I know' claims rests on a sound commitment to the normative nature of ordinary language.

In "A Dogma of Speech Act Theory," Stina Bäckström addresses the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, arguing that far from being self-evident or easy to draw, it encourages a deeply problematic separation between the speaker's action and the hearer's affect. In order to show that we need to look more closely at how passivity and rationality can be reconciled in the reception of speech, Bäckström develops a reception-dependent conception of the act of telling—which she considers a paradigmatic case of illocutionary act—and concludes that it stands at odds with the received way of distinguishing the illocutionary from the perlocutionary.

In a similar fashion, but with a focus on the act of ordering, Martin Gustafsson's paper, "On the Distinction between Uptake and Perlocutionary Object: The Case of Issuing and Obeying Orders," problematises Austin's account of the illocutionary by examining his claims regarding the perlocutionary. Emphasising the difference between perlocutionary *object* and perlocutionary *sequel*, Gustafsson criticises Austin's distinction between perlocutionary object and uptake. Indeed, while in typical cases of ordering, uptake and perlocutionary object merge such that understanding and obeying an order amount to the same thing, when the order is subject to critical scrutiny or disobeyed, uptake and perlocutionary object are clearly distinct. Gustafsson thus suggests that Austin's conception of the illocutionary stands in need of substantial revision.

In "From Recognition to Acknowledgment: Rethinking the Perlocutionary," Daniele Lorenzini defends Cavell's idea that the perlocutionary deserves philosophical investigation in its own right. To show that such investigation is possible, Lorenzini offers a novel justification

of the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions which relies on the degree of predictability and stability of their respective effects. Differentiating between recognition and acknowledgment, Lorenzini argues that we need something more than recognition—the securing of uptake—to account for the success of perlocutions: namely, an analysis of the grammar of acknowledgment. The upshot of this analysis is the discovery of a distinctively moral dimension pertaining to the perlocutionary, one that has so far been overlooked in the literature on speech acts.

Sandra Laugier's paper, "Encounters of the Third Kind: Performative Utterances and Forms of Life," argues that the perlocutionary is crucial to the kind of description of ordinary language and reality that both Austin and Cavell strive to offer. Focusing on the case of excuses, Laugier defends and clarifies Austin's and Cavell's conception of ordinary language as the site of human expressiveness and vulnerability. For her, Cavell's rehabilitation of the perlocutionary is an extension of performativity, at odds with Austin's analysis of the performative dominated by established rituals and shared rules. Indeed, the human interactions or *encounters* named by perlocutionary verbs are not only governed by explicit social or moral conventions, but by a different order of rules: those of a shared 'form of life.' Laugier thus concludes that addressing the perlocutionary is necessary if one wants to offer a complete and accurate description not only of speech acts, but of human forms of life *tout court.*

We hope that this special issue will call attention to the philosophical richness of Austin's notion of the perlocutionary, drawing inspiration both from Cavell's work on passionate utterance and from Austin's own way of characterizing his project: 'The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating' (Austin 1975, 148).

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