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UPTAKE AND CONVENTIONALITY IN ILLOCUTION

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to put forward a new way of conceiving of the conventionality of illocutionary acts, grounded in a new look at Austin's original ideas. While the indispensability of uptake has correctly been deemed to be a hallmark of illocution, it has also been taken as evidence of the intention-based nature of illocutionary acts as opposed to their alleged conventionality. After discussing the readings of the "securing of uptake" offered by Strawson and Searle and commenting on the consequently established divide between "communicative" and conventional speech acts, I claim that illocutionary acts are conventional, first of all, because they have conventional effects. I show that Austin took such effects to be essential to illocution and argue that the bringing about of conventional effects is bound up with the indispensability of uptake.

Keywords

illocutionary act, uptake, convention, Austin, Strawson

1. Premise

One of the classical problems in speech act theory is whether, and if so, how illocutionary acts are conventional. This paper addresses this problem and claims that the conventionality of illocutionary acts resides, first of all, in the conventional status of the effects they bring about. This amounts to a change in perspective, since the conventionality of illocutionary acts has traditionally been traced back to

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the conventionality of the means by which they are performed. There is one aspect of the received view that should be retained: that is, the indispensability (already stated by Austin) of uptake as a condition for the successful performance of illocutionary acts. But, while the role of uptake in illocution has usually been taken as evidence of the intention-based nature of illocutionary acts as opposed to their alleged conventionality, I reinterpret it as stemming from the conventional status of the effects of illocutionary acts: it is in order for an utterance to produce conventional effects that it needs to be understood as bringing about those effects.

Before coming to my own proposal, however, I will outline and discuss the views of the role of uptake in illocution put forward by such influential authors in speech act theory as Strawson and Searle, in order to show how the currently mainstream perspective has originated and the extent to which it has departed from Austin's initial project. Since Strawson's view of the role of uptake goes hand in hand with the introduction of some kind of a divide between two main sorts of illocutionary acts, one of which is conventional in the full sense of the word, the other intention-based, I will also devote a brief discussion to the various ways in which such a divide has been formulated and assess its overall significance.

2. The role of uptake in illocution

As is known, according to Austin:

“Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed [...] I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense [...] the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake.” (Austin 1962: 116-117)¹

This passage clearly takes the (successful) securing of uptake (and, with it, the actual occurrence of uptake) to be a necessary condition for the performance of an illocutionary act. Peter F. Strawson (in his 1964) correctly pointed out that the fact that illocutionary acts have the audience's uptake as a necessary condition is revealing of their peculiar nature. However, he used reference to this passage of Austin's to support his reinterpretation of Austin's illocutionary acts in terms compatible with Grice's (1957) theory of non-natural meaning, that is, as being characterized (at least in the most ordinary cases) by the presence of a complex intention of the kind described by Grice. So, his emphasis on the indispensability of uptake for illocutionary success assumes that the role of uptake in illocution is to be understood in connection with the intention-based nature of illocutionary acts. Besides, Strawson seems to make the further assumption that in writing

¹ References to Austin (1962) indicate page numbers in the second edition (1975).

“Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed [...]” (Austin 1962: 116)

Austin meant that the effect he is focusing upon, namely, uptake, is the only effect essentially connected with the performance of an illocutionary act.² In Strawson’s reinterpretation, an illocutionary act may achieve its audience’s uptake and (therefore) succeed in being an illocutionary act of a certain type, for example a warning, without thereby achieving any other effect. He appears to find it completely irrelevant to the issue that Austin also admitted of at least one other kind of effect as “connected” with or “brought in” by the illocutionary act (cf. Austin 1962: 115-116):

“The illocutionary act ‘takes effect’ in certain ways, as distinguished from producing consequences in the sense of bringing about states of affairs in the ‘normal’ way, i.e. changes in the natural course of events.” (Austin 1962: 117)

Also this further assumption made by Strawson is to be placed in the framework of his project of reinterpreting illocutionary force, insofar as possible, in terms of Gricean speaker meaning. Given the well-known divergences between Austin and Grice with respect to several philosophical problems (such as, to limit ourselves to issues in the philosophy of language, the relationship between felicity and truth),³ it should be clear from the very beginning that any project aiming to make sense of Austin in a Gricean framework, however valuable from a theoretical point of view, could not lead to a reliable clarification of Austin’s own views and might therefore miss some essential feature of the notions he wanted to introduce. This is (very sketchily) how Strawson argues in support of the reinterpretation of illocution he aims at:

- the uptake to be secured involves the understanding of the force of the utterance and therefore the recognition on the part of the audience of what the speaker intended to do in issuing it;
- if this recognition is necessary for the speaker’s performance of the illocutionary act to be successful, that is, for the speaker to actually perform that act, it is because her utterance expresses a complex intention of the type analyzed by Grice as “speaker meaning”, which has

² Strawson admits of cases in which even this may be doubted, but concludes that “the analysis of the aim of securing uptake remains an essential element in the analysis of the notion of the illocutionary act” (1964: 449).

³ There is clearly an attack on Austin as regards this theme in Grice (1989: 3-21).

to be fully transparent (that is, the speaker has to intend it to be recognized, and to be fulfilled thanks to its recognition);

- the illocutionary act can therefore be traced back to (one kind of) speaker meaning.

Intuitively, this line of reasoning appears to be more cogent if the production of uptake is taken to exhaust the effects that the illocutionary act brings about. Only with this additional assumption can the illocutionary act be completely reduced to one kind of speaker meaning. If the assumption that uptake is the only effect essentially connected with the performance of an illocutionary act is not made, the second step of Strawson's reasoning may be challenged, that is, the indispensability of uptake might be traced back to circumstances other than the transparent character of Gricean meaning intentions. So, insofar as Strawson's line of reasoning is taken to be convincing, the idea that uptake is the only effect essentially connected with the performance of an illocutionary act is itself implicitly reinforced.

Strawson's reading of the role of uptake in illocution was deeply influential on the subsequent developments of speech act theory. First of all, as we have seen, it was integral to his reinterpretation of illocutionary acts in terms of speaker meaning, which was then discussed and accepted with amendments by Searle (1969: 42-50) and renewed, in the framework of an inferential theory of speech acts, by Bach and Harnish (1979) (to mention two classics). Secondly, it allowed for a reformulation of the Austinian claim that illocutionary acts are conventional that opened the way to a divide between convention-based and intention-based illocutionary acts (which in turn implies that not all illocutionary acts are, strictly speaking, conventional). We will discuss this kind of development below. Thirdly, Strawson's assumption that uptake is the only effect essentially connected with the illocutionary act contributed to making the very idea of an effect or result brought about by the illocutionary act, other than its very understanding, fade away.

Strawson himself admitted of a core intention to produce an effect on the audience, other than uptake, as a part of the Gricean complex and fully transparent intention. But the role a Gricean core intention has is, arguably, that of a perlocutionary goal and is therefore not specific to illocution. John Searle, after discussing and criticizing Grice's conception of speaker meaning and its applicability to illocution, further stressed the role of uptake, that is, the hearer's understanding the utterance of the speaker, by making it not only a means for fulfilling the core intention within a complex Gricean intention, but also the content of the core intention itself:

“In the case of illocutionary acts we succeed in doing what we are trying to do by getting our audience to recognize what we are trying to do. But the “effect” on the

hearer is not a belief or response, it consists simply in the hearer understanding the utterance of the speaker” (Searle 1969: 47)

Searle calls such an effect “illocutionary effect”, as if the whole business of the illocutionary act were to bring it about, and he adapts Grice’s speaker meaning formula to illocutionary acts as follows:

“the speaker *S* intends to produce an illocutionary effect *IE* in the hearer *H* by means of getting *H* to recognize *S*’s intention to produce *IE*” (Searle 1969: 47).

This formulation certainly avoids the risk, inherent in any reference to Grice’s speaker meaning, to import perlocutionary goals (such as getting the hearer to believe something) into the illocutionary intention. But there is a price to be paid. The limitation of the effect of the illocutionary act to uptake is further emphasized: for Searle (1969), uptake is the only effect to which an illocutionary act must aim in order to be such, while any other effect is deferred to perlocution. Bach and Harnish (1979) take this same route, referring by “illocutionary effect” to the fulfilment of the illocutionary intention, that is, the achievement of uptake. For them too, whenever an intention the speaker has in issuing her utterance requires more than uptake in order to be fulfilled, it is to be considered as pertaining to perlocution. Thus such effects as sustaining a social or conversational situation and keeping it within mutually expected bounds, or as changing the terms or the course of the conversational exchange (Bach and Harnish 1979: 103), are characterized by them as perlocutionary. The result of these developments in speech act theory was an impoverishment of the heuristic potential of the notion of illocutionary act in the analysis of verbal interaction. No doubt also because of this, after the initial enthusiasm of the 1970s, so many scholars doing research on verbal interaction turned to other approaches.

3. The divide between conventional and intention-based illocutionary acts

As is known, Austin maintained that illocutionary acts are conventional acts (Austin 1962: 103, 107, 119). Partly on the basis of his reading of the role of uptake in illocution, Strawson (1964) argued against Austin that they are not necessarily such and that convention does not play any essential role in illocution. His line of reasoning about this problem may, with some simplification, be synthesized as follows:

- Austin has claimed that the illocutionary act is conventional “in the sense that at least it *could* be made explicit by the performative formula” (Austin 1962: 103);
- if Austin were thinking of the conventionality of language itself (that is, of the fact that the words of which the performative formula consists have conventional meaning), his remark would be trivial;
- however, the performative formula, thanks to its explicitness, secures the recognition on the part of the audience of the speaker’s intention to perform a certain illocutionary act;
- the conventionality of the illocutionary act, insofar as it is an essential feature of it, can thus be traced back to the transparency of Gricean intentions;
- in all cases in which illocutionary acts appear to be “conventional” in the minimal sense indicated by Austin they are indeed intention-based;
- if some illocutionary acts require extra-linguistic conventions, they may be taken to be conventional, but they form a particular class and their conventionality cannot be considered as a general feature of all illocution.

Strawson’s conclusion that only some illocutionary acts are conventional, while others are (merely) intention-based, is made possible by two interpretive moves, one of which draws on the reinterpretation of uptake we have commented upon in §2, while the other amounts to assuming that Austin, in speaking of the conventionality of illocutionary acts, was concerned with the conventionality of the means by which such acts are performed. This assumption is natural enough, since “conventional act” is easily understood to mean “act performed conforming to a convention”, that is, performed by means of some conventionally established behaviour, and some passages of Austin’s give support to this reading (even beyond the one cited by Strawson: cf. e.g. Austin 1962: 105). However, such an exclusive focus on the conventionality of the means by which the act is performed is never declared by Austin explicitly, so that it may well be the case that Strawson’s reading is missing something that for Austin was pertinent. We will come back to this below. For the moment, I would only like to observe that, as in the case of the tacit assumption that uptake is the only effect characteristic of the illocutionary act, here too whoever takes Strawson’s line of reasoning as acceptable is committed to the assumption that what is at issue when the conventionality of illocutionary acts is discussed, is the conventionality of the means by which such acts are performed.

Strawson's proposal to distinguish between convention-based and intention-based illocutionary acts inaugurated a conception of illocution in which illocutionary acts are no longer held to be essentially conventional and conventionality can no longer be invoked as their distinguishing feature. This encouraged intention-based views of illocution, by which I mean (very broadly) views of illocution in which at least one of the necessary conditions for performing an illocutionary act is the speaker's having an intention of a certain kind. More specifically, by attributing to the illocutionary intention the transparent character of Gricean speaker meaning, Strawson (as is correctly recognized by Harnish 2009) anticipated further developments of speech act theory, such as, in particular, the inferential theory of illocutionary acts of Bach and Harnish (1979), which also affirms a divide between intention-based or "communicative" illocutionary acts and conventional ones.

John Searle appears to have resisted at least some of the suggestions put forward by Strawson. His early speech act theory (1969), largely drawing on a view of language as a rule-governed activity, is in many aspects correctly described as fostering a convention-based view of illocution (cf. Harnish 2009: 12) and does not endorse the divide between conventional and intention-based illocutionary acts. However, I contend that Searle was not foreign to the turn of speech act theory towards a (broadly) intention-based conception of illocution. The notion of intention plays a central role in the analysis of the structure of illocutionary acts in his *Speech Acts* (1969); in particular, most of his rules for the performance of the speech act of promising (1969: 57-62) are formulated in terms of speaker intentions or other attitudes. Only the most general conditions (1) and (9), requiring "normal input and output conditions" and the availability of semantic conventions for illocutionary force indicators, are stated in terms external to the speaker; condition (4) is stated in terms partly external to the speaker, but only because it is concerned also with an attitude of the addressee. Conditions (2) and (3) are concerned with what the speaker "expresses" and "predicates" (which, in this framework, can be taken to be matters of attitude). Conditions (5), (6), (7) and (8) all require intentional states of the speaker.

Referring to speaker intentions and other attitudes as that which is to satisfy the conditions for the successful performance of an illocutionary act may be considered (as I have done in my 2002a) as marking a shift from an objective conception of the context to a cognitive one (or from externalism to internalism, as Harnish 2009 puts it). What characterizes an objective conception of context is that illocutionary successfulness (by which I mean the fact that the speaker actually accomplishes a certain illocutionary act: cf. the use proposed for the expression "success conditions" by Bach and Harnish 1979: 55) depends on how the world actually is as opposed to what attitudes are present in the speaker's mind and possibly in the minds of the audience. This was, with good approximation,

Austin's position, at least as regards those rules the violation of which engenders misfires or other flaws threatening illocutionary success. Austin also envisaged a sincerity rule, prescribing that the speaker have psychological states and attitudes appropriate to the procedure she is invoking, but violations of that rule are for him mere "abuses", which presuppose the act as performed nevertheless (Bach and Harnish 1979: 55 would reserve the label "felicity conditions" for conditions of this kind, since they are not required for success in performance, but for the nondefectiveness of the performed act). Searle agrees with Austin that insincere illocutionary acts, e.g. insincere promises, are performed nevertheless (1969: 62), but would not allow for performances devoid of certain other intentions; to this aim, he reformulates the sincerity condition for promising as follows:

"S intends that the utterance of T will make him responsible for intending to do A".
(Searle 1969: 62)

So, although he retains traces of Austin's preference for an objective context, Searle is on his way towards foregrounding a context consisting of intentional states of the speaker as that against which the illocutionary successfulness of the speaker's utterance is to be evaluated. His occasional oscillations in the direction of the world external to the speaker do not express the core tendency of his thought, which is revealed, rather, in his main addition to the Austinian rules: the "essential condition", that is, for promising:

"S intends that the utterance of T will place him under an obligation to do A".
(Searle 1969: 60)

What is essential for an illocutionary act of a certain type to be performed is whether the speaker has the right type of intention.

The intentionalist or internalist turn in Searle's work is confirmed, as far as I can see, in his further work. Harnish (2009: 18) finds Searle (1979) even more externalist than Searle (1969), observing that he lists a large number of dimensions according to which illocutionary acts can be described and classified and that among these, several are social in character and therefore external to the speaker's mind (pp. 10-16). But I believe it is a more significant fact, to the aims of an assessment of the general direction of Searle's work, that all of the three features of the illocutionary act which he chooses as the grounds for his classification, namely: the point or purpose of the type of act; the direction of fit between words and world; and the expressed psychological states (1979: 5), are matters of intentional states of the speaker and are therefore internalist in character. The first and main feature, the illocutionary point, is declared by Searle himself to reformulate the

“essential condition” of Searle (1969), which as I have already said, is satisfied by an intention of the speaker.⁴

So, it could be claimed that, after all, Searle converges with Strawson on the fact that intentions play the central role in illocution. But as regards the divide between conventional and intention-based illocutionary acts, Searle could not accept it in the forms proposed by Strawson (1964) or by Bach and Harnish (1979), which are incompatible with his intent to accommodate conventional aspects, insofar as possible, within the basically intention-based framework. However, in this connection too (whether because of direct influence or by following an independent but parallel path) he is not insensitive to the issues originally raised by Strawson. In fact, he too ends up isolating institutional speech acts from other illocutionary acts, by assigning them all to the newly introduced class of declaratives instead of scattering them throughout illocutionary classes as Austin had done (Searle 1979: 16-20).

Strawson’s conventional illocutionary acts are utterances which form part of a wholly convention-governed procedure and include such examples as: marrying, redoubling, giving out, pronouncing sentence, bringing in a verdict. Conventional illocutionary acts according to Bach and Harnish (1979: 108 ff.), besides being made possible by conventions, are all in various ways connected with institutions and include: voting, resigning, acquitting, marrying, christening, bequeathing, calling a runner out, finding a defendant guilty. Approximately the same acts fall into Searle’s class of declaratives, so that it can be reasonably held that the three groups, albeit characterized in different ways, are coextensive. Thus, it seems that the tendency to adopt, in some form, one and the same divide⁵ has spread around in the field of speech act studies beyond differences in theoretical framework and in the characterizations given to members of the two groups. This tendency is further confirmed by the presence of analogous divides, even without reference to Strawson’s proposal or to Searle’s classification, in the work of other philosophers who have been concerned with illocutionary acts. I would like to refer in particular

⁴ This point should be discussed further. It could be objected to my reading of Searle that in his (1969: 66-67) the essential conditions for some other types of illocutionary acts are stated without reference to the speaker’s intention. But those pages of Searle’s display conditions for the successful performance of illocutionary acts in an abbreviated form. And there is, in my opinion, ample evidence scattered throughout Searle’s works that the performance of an illocutionary act involves, for him, the speaker’s actually having an intention corresponding to the illocutionary point of his utterance (cf. e.g. Searle 1989: 548).

⁵ It might be objected that Strawson admits of a spectrum from a maximum of conventionality to an absence of conventions (Harnish 2009: 16). But, albeit admitting that Gricean intentions and conventional requirements may combine with one another in certain cases and to different degrees, he theorizes these two factors as distinct and even opposed in nature.

to James O. Urmson who, in his (1977), expresses his negative assessment of what he takes to be Austin's change of mind from the theory of the performative utterance to speech act theory and claims that performative utterances are a matter of conventional action, not a linguistic phenomenon, while speech acts are a linguistic phenomenon, which falls short of being action in the way in which performatives are such. So separated from "real" performatives, allegedly central cases of illocutionary acts such as asserting, telling and asking come down, as Hornsby (1988) has claimed, to "rhetic acts" consisting (roughly speaking) of the expression of truth-conditions with a mood, which are according to her "the basic significant linguistic acts" (Hornsby 1988: 46).

If we reflect on all these divides and wonder what it is that they have in common, we notice that they place on the one side performances (speech acts performed according to conventions; speech acts that, by convention, bring about new states of affairs; performative utterances regulated by non-linguistic conventions); whilst, on the other side, there are uses of language that merely "express" or "communicate" (intention-based speech acts; speech acts expressing various attitudes of the speaker; communicative speech acts; "rhetic" acts in Hornsby's sense).

Theories admitting of such divides deal with those utterances that undeniably perform actions as with a "special" case (performatives, declaratives, conventional illocutionary acts), different from the regular cases of linguistic communication. Strawson makes this point with some diplomacy, as follows:

"Acts belonging to convention-constituted procedures [...] form an important part of human communication. But they do not form the whole nor, we may think, the most fundamental part. It would be a mistake to take them as the model for understanding the notion of illocutionary force in general [...]" (Strawson 1964: 459).

Urmson (1977) is more polemical, but the substance is the same. In these perspectives, when speech happens to be really action, it is not so because of its nature but in virtue of particular properties that, depending on the specific theory, belong either to the speaker (Searle 1989: 554), to a certain utterance type (which satisfies a convention: Strawson 1964; Urmson 1977; Bach and Harnish 1979: 109-10), or to a certain situation (whenever the changes brought about by the illocutionary act are credited to perlocution). The acceptance or accommodation of what is basically the same divide in different theoretical frameworks suggests that there is an underlying philosophical problem or perplexity: something that Austin wanted to question and attempted to disregard, but which appeared (and still appears) to most philosophers as something impossible to give up. I surmise that behind the divide between conventional and intention-based speech acts there lies the contrast between saying and doing, reborn within the very context of speech act theory. Of course, in a speech-act theoretical framework "saying" is never "pure"

saying (something to be taken into consideration quite apart from circumstances, purposes, audience etc., as Austin says in characterizing the “ideal” of the constative utterance in his 1962: 146): it is always at least expressing attitudes, or making and inviting context-sensitive inferences. But albeit expressing attitudes or making and inviting inferences are activities, they are cognitive, psychological activities, not actions bringing about effects on states of the world. We might think that their contrast with full-fledged actions is grounded in the reality of the facts investigated by speech act theorists. But there is no final reason to exclude the opposite, namely, that the contrast might be ultimately in the philosopher’s own eye.

Thus we may want to distinguish, with some oversimplification and disregarding for the occasion more finely-cut distinctions, between theories of language as a tool for communication and theories of language as a vehicle of action. In theories of language as a tool for communication, communication is most often represented as a kind of mind reading, speech acts as the expression of communicative intentions, illocutionary force as mood. Power relationships and matters of social organization, both at the macro- and at the micro-social level, are left aside and deferred to other disciplines. Austin appears to have sought a theory of language as a vehicle of action. He seems to view the widespread tendency to rely on such notions as expressing and communicating as a hurdle for his project, and indeed avoided using them in his descriptions of how speech works. This point could be otherwise made by claiming, as Petrus (2005) has done, that Austin’s illocutionary acts are not a matter of “communication” at all.

Of course that which is ordinarily called “communication” has to be dealt with within such a perspective too, but its focus is on action and, in the case of illocutionary acts, on conventional action. In this perspective, there is no reason to introduce the divide between conventional and intention-based illocutionary acts: rather, it would be crucial to give an account of illocution as essentially conventional.

4. The conventionality of illocutionary effects

I would like now to go back to Austin and consider a neglected aspect of his view of the conventionality of the illocutionary act. I take it that while the conventionality of the means, on which Strawson focuses in establishing the divide between intention-based and conventional illocutionary acts, is more apparent and may be symptomatic of the conventionality of an act, an act should be said to be conventional not so much on the basis of the means by which it is performed, but on the basis of *what it does*, namely, the kind of effect it is its job to bring about. It is arguable that for Austin, the illocutionary act was to be characterized as having a

conventional effect (Sbisà 1989; cf. also Doerge 2006a, 2006b). On this basis, we can make sense of Austin's claim that illocutionary acts are essentially conventional in a way other than the one suggested by Strawson and outline a new account of their conventionality.

Since it is not uncontroversial that Austin held illocutionary acts to have conventional effects (as we have seen in §2, starting from Strawson (1964) and Searle (1969) it has become customary to believe that he too took the securing of uptake to be the only effect essentially connected with the illocutionary act), I would like to cite two sources in support of my reading, namely, Austin's description of the illocutionary act's "taking effect", and his formulation of rule A1 for performative utterances. After considering each of these sources, I will put forward a sketchy account of what it is for an effect, and therefore for the act bringing it about, to be conventional.

4.1. The "taking effect" of the illocutionary act

Austin (1962: 116-118) distinguishes three effects that, he says, are connected with the illocutionary act, the first of which is the securing of uptake. The third, inviting a response, is not relevant for the aim of an essential characterization of illocution, because Austin himself says that it belongs only to certain kinds of illocutionary acts. The second effect is introduced as follows:

"The illocutionary act 'takes effect' in certain ways, as distinguished from producing consequences in the sense of bringing about states of affairs in the 'normal' way, i.e. changes in the natural course of events..." (Austin 1962: 117)

I admit that this passage is rather mysterious. The characterization of the effect at issue is mainly negative and, therefore, says little about it. The "normal" way of achieving an effect is through the production of changes in the natural course of events, that is, by natural causation. But it is not said what the "non-normal" way of achieving an effect consists of or what kinds of effects, presumably consisting of the bringing about of states of affairs, can be achieved that way. Austin gives only one example of an illocutionary act's "taking effect", and not a very helpful one: the naming of a ship. The effect of such an illocutionary act is, intuitively, that the ship receives a name, but Austin illustrates its effectiveness by remarking that certain subsequent acts such as referring to the ship by another name "will be out of order" (1962: 117). The example is clearly one of a conventional act, and not a common, everyday illocutionary act such as commanding, warning, apologizing. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the "taking effect" Austin is illustrating only characterizes conventional acts and (since not all illocutionary acts are conventional) is not a general feature of illocution. This might explain why

Strawson (1964) did not pay attention to this passage. However, Austin does not introduce “taking effect” as the peculiarity of certain illocutionary acts only (as he does in the case of the third kind of effect he specifies, the inviting of a response), but as if it were a general feature. Moreover, it would not be fair to interpret him, or anyone else, using criticism of his views to support the interpretation. After all, Austin might have chosen this example in his lecture just because it is a clear, uncontroversial case of the kind of effect he invites his audience to focus upon (this is not the only case in which he proceeds this way: also performative utterances are introduced by him as an uncontroversial case of speech that is action, while the goal is clearly to extend this idea to far less uncontroversial cases). So, we can use the example to characterize the kind of effect that, according to Austin, illocutionary acts “take”. The effect of the naming of a ship consists of a change not in the natural course of events but in norms, that is, in something belonging to the realm of social conventions: a new norm is enacted, as it can be seen from the assessments of people’s relevant behaviour that may stem from the norm. The moral to be drawn is simple: to extend this idea to other illocutionary acts, we should look at changes in states of affairs belonging to the same level of reality as norms. Such are, for example, assignments or withdrawals of rights and licenses, assignments of obligations or waivers, undertakings of commitments. Indeed, a large number of illocutionary act types have effects that can be described in such terms (cf. Sbisà 1984; Doerge 2006a, b) and it is moreover possible to describe this way the effects of illocutionary act tokens (cf. Sbisà 2001). Even for a type of illocutionary act that is explicitly invoked by Strawson to show that *not* all illocutionary acts are conventional, that is, warning (1964: 440), there is, quite intuitively, a state of affairs which is brought about and can be described in terms similar to those introduced above: it is a state in which the addressee, or anybody else in the community, is no longer allowed to take the speaker as responsible for some mishap or trouble, related to the content of the warning, in which the addressee might incur.

To clarify Austin’s passage on “taking effect” more thoroughly, however, it should also be explained how it is possible to bring any effect whatsoever about in a way other from natural causation. The most plausible explanation for this aspect of Austin’s claim is that he had in mind the contrast between a natural chain of causes and a human intervention which may introduce a break in it. When an effect is conventional, the state of affairs it brings about cannot exist without some kind of human intervention or decision. Somebody has to take a certain attitude towards the utterance, take it a certain way, accept that it has brought about a certain state of affairs or agree upon what has been brought about. So, the naming of a ship does not cause the ship to have a name by initiating a simple chain of natural causes, because in order to achieve an effect of the kind at issue - the creation of a norm -

it is at least necessary that what the speaker does and says be socially accepted as having that effect.

4.2. From conventional procedures to conventional effects

In explaining how performative utterances work, Austin spells out the rules they must follow in order to be free from those defects he calls “infelicities”. This is the first rule he specifies, rule A1 (the violation of which would make the alleged performative utterance null and void):

“There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances...” (Austin 1962: 14, 26-28)

Here Austin, in requiring that there exist a conventional procedure in order for the performative utterance to be at all such, explicitly specifies that the relevant kind of procedure is to include a “conventional effect”. Thus, he suggests that it is typical of the procedures of which performative utterances are part, that they are not mere rule-governed sequences of words or gestures, but give rise to effects of a conventional kind.

It might be objected that rule A1 belongs with performative utterances as opposed to illocutionary acts, and cannot therefore be cited to support the claim that Austin took it that illocutionary acts have conventional effects. But Austin intended to transfer his analysis of the rules for the successfulness of performative utterances to illocutionary acts in general, as he says or implies on several occasions. If there is any need to provide evidence, here is some:

- (1) Defects of illocutionary acts are called by Austin infelicities (or “unhappinesses”: cf. e.g. 1962: 106). Since infelicity has formerly been introduced as the typical illness of performative utterances, this (at least) suggests that illocutionary acts and acts performed by issuing performative utterances belong to a same kind;
- (2) That a certain act can be performed by using the verb that names it in an explicit performative formula is used by Austin as a criterion for distinguishing types of illocutionary acts (1962: 150).
- (3) The types of acts that are cited as examples of acts performed by means of performative utterances appear also in the final list of illocutionary acts (Austin 1962: 151-162).
- (4) Last but not least, the theme of the indispensability of uptake is already present in the first chapters of Austin (1962), when it is said that

performative utterances can achieve the conventional effect envisaged by the procedure to which they belong only if they are so received by the relevant audience (1962: 22-23).

If rule A1 is meant by Austin to apply to illocutionary acts in general, then he is also committed to the claim that every illocutionary act involves a conventional effect. It is quite natural to identify the effect “taken” by the illocutionary act in the “non-normal” way we have discussed above with the conventional effect of the procedure in which the illocutionary act consists.

4.3. From conventionality to the securing of uptake

So far, I have argued that, according to Austin, illocutionary acts have conventional effects. Now I have still to discuss in greater detail in what sense these effects are “conventional”, and how it is that they are brought about. Here Austin has little to say, apart from an interesting set of handwritten notes⁶ which insist on the peculiarity of actions performed by means of performative utterances to be liable to annulment in ways barred from standard physical actions. I have commented on these notes in my 2007, reaching the provisional conclusion that there is a particular kind of defeasibility (due to the discovery of infelicities of the “misfire” kind) which may be held as a hallmark of conventional effects. Here, I will shift from the interpretation of Austin’s writings to a simple theoretical proposal which I take to be respectful of the conception of the illocutionary act he has outlined, but, of course, goes beyond it.

We have seen in § 3 that, in commenting on a passage of Austin’s in which Austin (apparently focusing, in this case, on the means by which illocutionary acts are performed) comes close to defining what it is for an act to be conventional:

“[...] conventional, in the sense at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula” (Austin 1962: 103)

Strawson argued that a mere appeal to linguistic conventions would be irrelevant and that the use of performative formulas has, rather, to be connected with the indispensability of uptake and with the Gricean transparency of illocutionary intentions. Partially accepting Strawson’s remark, but keeping closer to Austin’s perspective, I would say that if we admit of the illocutionary act’s conventional effect, there is an easy connection we can make between conventionality and availability of an explicit performative formula: explicitness

⁶ Conserved in Oxford together with the manuscript of *How to Do Things with Words*.

helps produce that social agreement without which the act's conventional effect cannot be brought about. The explicit performative formula forces such an agreement by drawing on the use of a lexical element which, since it belongs to the language of the social group within which the act is designed to be performed (and the utterance designed to perform it is issued), cannot avoid being understood by any competent member at hearing distance. From this, of course, it does not follow that the illocutionary act is *not* (essentially) conventional. Quite to the contrary, explicitness helps just because there is a conventional effect that is to be brought about. I suggest that the feature of the conventionality of illocution that Austin's remark about the availability of performative formulas should be taken to highlight is that the bringing about of conventional effects depends on agreement about their coming into being among members of the relevant social group. This is why the securing of uptake is required. This is also why Austin, in the few examples he makes, shows an inclination towards considering *actual* uptake (as opposed to the mere intention to secure one) as the standard requirement (1962: 22-23, 116).

This way of understanding the conventionality of illocutionary acts does not assign a primacy to explicit performative utterances and, moreover, does not require that the means by which the illocutionary act is performed be conventional in a strong, extra-linguistic sense. It does not assign a primacy to explicit performative utterances, because what is indispensable for the achievement of the conventional effect of the illocutionary act is that the effect which the utterance is designed to produce be indicated clearly enough to be identifiable and possibly agreed upon. It does not matter how it is indicated: this job may be done by performative formulas in the canonical form (first person present indicative active of a performative verb), by ritual performative formulas (established by extra-linguistic convention, and displaying various *ad hoc* linguistic forms), by illocutionary force-indicating devices of various kinds as well as by content-based and context-based "indirect" strategies. Whether we need inference or mere pattern recognition in order to understand these indications is an important issue which I cannot discuss here. I am particularly interested in the hypothesis that the understanding of illocutionary force may be based on pattern recognition, for two reasons. The existence of shared patterns of conventional action (which are cultural facts and can be expected to be linguistically encoded at least up to a certain point) could account for the "accepted conventional procedure" of Austin's rule A1 without binding us to an obsessively rule-governed view of how illocutionary acts are performed.⁷ Moreover, patterns may be cognitively processed in different ways, for example by means of Gestalt-like mechanisms, but also, if needed (as in

⁷ It seems to me that the understanding of the conventionality of illocutionary acts proposed by Millikan (1988) in her own naturalized framework goes in this direction.

the case of unfamiliar patterns, gravely incomplete display, and other complications), inferentially, which would assign a legitimate role to inferential theories of illocutionary force understanding.

5. How to achieve a (conventional) illocutionary effect

So, I propose to read Austin's remark on conventionality as availability of a performative formula, cited in § 4.3, as suggesting that what is revealing of the conventionality of the illocutionary act (understood as the conventionality of its *effect*) is the need to secure uptake. A conventional effect is such insofar as it comes into being by being agreed upon by the relevant members of a social group. This agreement is made possible by the securing of uptake. That is, it is because we understand that the speaker's utterance has the force of a promise that we take it that *ceteris paribus* (namely, unless infelicities leading to annulment are discovered) she is committed to a certain further course of action. It is because we understand that the speaker's utterance belongs to the procedure of naming a ship that we take it that *ceteris paribus* the ship has got that new name. It is because we understand that the speaker's utterance has the force of a warning that we take it that *ceteris paribus* she should not be attributed responsibility for whatever may happen to us in connection with the warning's content. Under this respect, there is no substantive difference between so-called "conventional", institutional or ritual cases and informal, conversational ones. There are differences in the degree to which certain more specific requirements about the form of the uptake are relevant: for example, in institutional and ritual cases it is more important that members reach awareness of how the act performed should be *named* (was that *marriage*? did the president *resign*? was that the *closure* of the session? was that a formal *promise* or only an emphatic expression of intention?), while in informal, conversational cases the problem is not so much to understand how the act should be *named*, but to have a sense of the setting of rights, obligations and the like that it is designed to bring about, and to be ready to act upon it.

Of course, there are many other open questions about uptake and its impact on the conventional effects of the illocutionary act. What exactly should the "uptake" of a certain illocutionary act (token) consist in? Whose uptake should be secured? What happens to the illocutionary act, and to its conventional effect, if uptake is not achieved, or if actual uptake does not correspond to the speaker's expectations? What about misunderstandings or instrumental misinterpretations? Can uptake be multiple (different participants may take an utterance in different ways) and what happens to be "done" in such cases?

I maintain that uptake need not be present in an explicit linguistic form, or as a full-fledged thought in the mind of the addressee. Of course it should always be

possible to make explicit, by means of further linguistic utterances, how a certain utterance has been taken: we often do so, for example, in reporting conversations. But in many cases uptake consists in a tacit agreement, that is, either is made manifest in the audience's response (insofar as people act and speak upon what they take has been done up to that point), or holds by default (if there is no reason to doubt that the relevant participants have heard and no second-turn or third-turn repairs have been initiated).

As to the relevant participants, this would be a field for applied speech act theory. It depends on the kinds of illocutionary acts and on the structure of the social context whether the speaker should care to secure the addressee's uptake (as in the case of warnings), or the uptake both of the addressee and of certain ratified bystanders (as in the case of many ceremonial performatives), and when the uptake of ratified bystanders may supplant the failure to achieve the addressee's own uptake. In various kinds of semi-formal social interaction, moreover, there is a recognized "director" (the compère in talk shows, the psychotherapist in group therapy sessions) who is granted more conversational rights than other participants, not only in allocating conversational turns, but also, as the analysis of stretches of such conversations easily shows, in ratifying or refusing to ratify other participant's illocutionary acts.

A major theoretical problem is what happens if uptake is not achieved, or in case of multiple and contrasting receptions. For theories taking illocutionary acts to be intention-based, the reply is easy: what is relevant to the performance of the illocutionary act is that the speaker intends to achieve the hearer's uptake. Also Petrus (2005), while defending the conventionality of illocutionary acts and proposing to connect it with uptake, argues that it is mistaken to assign the primacy to actual uptake, which might be arbitrary or just wrong, and fosters a normative view of uptake as the way in which, in consideration of the utterance and its context, the utterance *should* be taken. In the perspective proposed here⁸, since uptake (whether actual or reasonably "secured") decides, in the immediate context at least, what has been done by an utterance (what illocutionary effect it brings about, what illocutionary act has been performed in issuing it), it would be crucial to elaborate principled ways to establish what is to count in actual cases as the required interpersonal or social agreement.

I would like to stress, in conclusion, that these open problems and complications about how to achieve a (conventional) illocutionary effect, on which I cannot dwell longer here, witness the ample applicability, to formal situations as well as to informal ones, that a perspective on illocution grounding conventionality in uptake may have.⁹

⁸ Backed by my own empirical research, see e.g. Sbisà 1992, 2002b.

⁹ Ancestors of this paper were read at the University of Cincinnati in 2002, at the University of Sheffield in 2005, and at the International Conference "Tra pragmatica e linguistica

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