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Haro Marchal, Amalia; Boogaart, Ronny; Garssen, Bart; Jansen, Henrike; Van Leeuwen, Maarten; Pilgram, Roosmaryn; Reuneker, Alex

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Joint Meaning of Speech Acts of Arguing

AMALIA HARO MARCHAL

*Department of Philosophy I
University of Granada
Spain
amaliaharo@ugr.es*

ABSTRACT: Argumentation is often described as a communicative activity. Assuming a Searlean approach to speech acts, Pragma-dialectics and the Linguistic Normative Model of Argumentation characterize it as a specific type of speech act. Recently I have argued that the Searlean approach assumed by both theories entails certain problems. To overcome them, I propose to distinguish two levels in the analysis of the illocutionary act of arguing. The first one is related to the speaker's utterance, while the second refers to the communicative exchange involving both the speaker and the hearer. This paper explores the idea that the meaning that can be attributed to the illocutionary act of arguing at each of those levels differs. I will argue that it is necessary to distinguish between the speaker's meaning and the joint meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing.

KEYWORDS: commitment attributions, illocutionary act of arguing, joint meaning, normative effects, two-levels of analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Argumentation is often understood as a communicative activity. Within this conception, and adopting a Searlean approach, Pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984) and the Normative Linguistic Model of Argumentation (henceforth referred to as LNMA) (Bermejo-Luque, 2011) characterize it as a specific type of speech act. This characterization entails, among other things, providing those conditions under which a speaker's utterance (or set of utterances) counts as an act of arguing. In the Pragma- dialectical model and LNMA, these conditions are formulated following Searle's (1969) account of speech acts. However, if a normative (or interactional) approach to speech acts is adopted, it seems necessary to account not only for these conditions related to the speaker's utterance, but also the illocutionary effect formulated by Austin (1962, pp. 115- 116) as the production of changes in the normative position of the participants of the communicative exchange brought about by the performance of speech acts and conceived as their rights, obligations, entitlements and responsibilities (Sbisà, 2006). According to the normative approach (Sbisà, 2006; Witek, 2015), speech acts are to be characterized by taking into account the way "they change the normative stances of interlocutors" (Corredor, 2023).

In order to account for these normative effects in the case of argumentation and, at the same time, incorporate the insights from Pragma-dialectics and LNMA, my proposal consists in distinguish between two levels in the analysis of the illocutionary act of arguing (Haro Marchal, 2023). While the former relates only to the speaker's utterance and the fulfillment of certain conditions, the latter refers to the communicative exchange where

both speaker and listener participate in the realization of the illocutionary act (2023, p. 482). However, the question of whether the meaning that can be attributed to the illocutionary act of arguing differs at each of the two levels remains to be explored. For any speech act, including the act of arguing, to be successfully performed, the speaker's utterance should be correctly interpreted by the hearer. However, this recognition of the meaning of the speaker's utterance (i.e., the speaker's meaning) by the hearer does not always go well. To account for this gap and following de Carassa & Colombetti's (2009) joint meaning account, I propose to distinguish between the speaker's meaning and the joint meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing. The former refers to the meaning attributed to the illocutionary act performed at the first level, while the latter represents the meaning jointly constructed by the speaker and the hearer at the second level, which may or may not align with the speaker's meaning. By accounting for the meaning of illocutionary acts within this normative framework, we can explain how the normative effects associated with the performance of any illocutionary act, including arguing, are produced.

2. TWO LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

The characterization of argumentation as a particular type of speech act can be done from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it can be characterized as an act as an act performed by the speaker, and on the other hand, it can be characterized as an exchange in which both the speaker and the hearer actively participate in the performance of the illocutionary act of arguing by means of which normative effects are introduced, i.e., the changes in the set of rights, obligations and entitlements of the participants of the argumentative exchange. The first perspective is the one adopted by both Pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984) and LNMA (Bermejo-Luque, 2011). Both theories adopt a Searlean approach in which for the speaker's utterance (or set of utterances) to count as an act of arguing some conditions must be met. These conditions are formulated in Searlean terms, such as the propositional content condition, the preparatory conditions, the essential condition, and the sincerity conditions (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, pp. 43-44; Bermejo-Luque, 2011, pp. 71-72).

I have argued that, despite the explanatory virtues of the Searlean framework adopted by these models, it also presents certain issues (Clark, 1996; Sbisà 2009), namely, it attributes a mere passive role to the hearer regarding the performance of the illocutionary act, and the normative effects associated to the act are not taken into consideration (Haro Marchal, 2023, pp. 486-487). In order to address these issues, I propose to adopt a normative (or interactional) approach to speech acts (Caponetto & Labinaz, 2023; Corredor, 2021; Sbisà 2007) according to which speech acts can be characterized as social actions. Moreover, in this framework speech acts are characterized taking into account the way they change participants' normative positions (Corredor, 2023), i.e., their rights, obligations, and entitlements (Sbisà, 2006).

Adopting this approach, I consider that a suitable strategy to overcome the problems of the Searlean approach while keeping the virtues of Pragma-dialectics and LNMA consists in distinguishing between two levels in the analysis of the speech act of arguing (Haro Marchal, 2023, p. 482). At the first level, to determine whether the illocutionary act of arguing has been successfully carried out, it is only necessary to take

into account the speaker's utterance and the fulfilment of certain conditions (Haro Marchal, 2023, p. 490). On the other hand, at the second level, to know whether the illocutionary act has been successfully carried out, it is necessary to take into account the speaker's utterance, but also the hearer's response. This is so because the hearer's response shows how they have interpreted the speaker's utterance (Sbisà, 1992, p. 101; Haro Marchal, 2023, p. 491) and also whether the normative effects associated with the act of arguing have been produced, rendering the act successful.

3. JOINT MEANING OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS OF ARGUING

In argumentative exchanges, individuals participate in mutual recognition and change of their normative stances. At the second level of analysis, for the act of arguing to be successful, the associated normative effects must be produced. Therefore, accounting for how these effects are brought about is essential. Following Sbisà's (2009) proposal, I argue that the recognition of these effects by both the speaker and the hearer is crucial. To hold someone accountable and to determine the obligations and rights they acquired by means of the act, it is important to reconstruct not only what that person intended to communicate, but what was actually communicated. This seems to be especially relevant in cases involving commitment attributions, such as the fallacy analysis and identification (Lewiński and Oswald, 2013).

In order to account for the distinction between the meaning that can be attributed to the illocutionary act of arguing at each level, I will draw from Carassa and Colombetti's (2009) joint meaning theory. In their paper "Joint meaning", Carassa and Colombetti (2009) present an approach to the meaning of speech acts in which their goal is to reconcile two apparently conflicting intuitions. The first one is that what a speaker means is just a function of their communicative intuitions, independently of what the hearer does, and even of the actual existence of a hearer. The second is that, when communication is carried out successfully, the resulting meaning is, in an important sense, jointly construed by the speaker and the hearer (2009, p. 1837). To do this, they distinguish between the speaker's meaning, understood as a personal communicative intention, and the joint meaning, understood as a joint construal of speaker and hearer. They define the joint meaning as a type of propositional joint commitment, that is, a commitment of a speaker and a hearer to the extent that a specific communicative act has been performed by the speaker (2009, p. 1851). Furthermore, joint meaning is regarded as a deontic concept, which means that it entails obligations, rights, and entitlements, and cannot be reduced to personal beliefs or personal intentions (2009, p. 1837).

But how can this approach be applied to the case of argumentation? In my view, in order to determine whether the normative effects associated with the successful performance of the illocutionary act of arguing have been produced, it is necessary to characterize the meaning of the illocutionary act of arguing at the second level as a joint construal of both the speaker and the hearer, and not only in terms of the speaker's communicative intentions (i.e., as the speaker's meaning of the speaker's utterance), as it would occur at the first level. It is the joint construal by the speaker and the hearer what determines what was actually communicated, and not just what was intended to be communicated.

In order to illustrate the idea that the meaning of the speech act of arguing is different at each level, let's consider the following example from a scene in the movie "When Harry met Sally". This dialogue is an example that Laurence Horn (2004: 5) analyzed concerning the difference between conversational and generalized implicatures. In this presentation, it will be used as an example of argumentation. Harry is talking about his woman friend Sally with his friend Jess:

- (1) a. [Jess:] If she's so great, why aren't YOU taking her out?
- b. [Harry:] How many times do I have to tell you, we're just friends.
- c. [Jess:] So you're saying she's not that attractive.
- d. [Harry:] No, I told you she is attractive.
- e. [Jess:] But you also said she has a good personality.
- f. [Harry:] She has a good personality.
- g. [Jess:] [Stops walking, turns around, throws up hands, as if to say "Aha!"]
- h. [Harry:] What?
- i. [JESS:] When someone's not that attractive they're ALWAYS described as having a good personality.
- j. [HARRY:] Look, if you were to ask me what does she look like and I said she has a good personality, that means she's not attractive. But just because I happen to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either. She could be attractive with a good personality or not attractive with a good personality.
- k. [Jess:] So which one is she?
- l. [Harry:] Attractive.
- m. [Jess:] But not beautiful, right?

I will now examine how the analysis of the illocutionary act of arguing differs when we take into account the different meanings that can be attributed to the act at each level. From LNMA, the analysis of the example would be the following. By means of (1c), Jess asserts that Harry meant that Sally is not very attractive. By means of (1e), Jess asserts that Harry told him that she had a good personality. Jess implicitly asserts that, if Harry told him that she had a good personality, then Harry meant that she's not very attractive. Jess adduces that Harry said that she had a good personality as a reason to conclude that he meant her to be unattractive. The argumentation, according to the Linguistic Normative Model of Argumentation, would be constituted by (1c) and (1e) together with the implicit assertion.

As we can see, the only thing that we need to consider in order to know whether the act of arguing has been happily performed in the first level of analysis are the speaker's utterances. On the other hand, from the second level, it is necessary to also consider the hearer's response, which shows how the speaker's utterances were interpreted by the hearer. That is, we need to consider Harry's responses, which allow us to determine whether the meaning of the illocutionary act has been jointly construed and hence whether the normative effects associated with the illocutionary act of arguing have been brought about. However, at the level of the communicative exchange, the second level of analysis, in order to know whether the speech act of arguing that the speaker was intending to perform was actually carried out by means of (1c) and (1e) (and the implicit-inference claim), it is necessary to take into account the hearer's response that shows how Harry has

interpreted or recognized Jess's act. This allows us to determine whether the normative effects associated with the successful performance of the illocutionary act (at the second level) have been produced. Harry's response (1f) shows that, in the first place, he was interpreting Jess's utterances as mere assertions. This joint construal of Jess's illocutionary act, whose intention was to perform an illocutionary act of arguing, is not taken up or accepted by him. By means of (1i), Jess makes explicit the implicit inference-claim, what supports his implicit assertion, rejecting Harry's interpretation of his speech acts as mere assertions. And by means of (1j), Harry shows that he accepts or takes up Jess's utterances as an illocutionary act of arguing (although he questions the warrant).

As it can be observed, the analysis of the example differs in accordance with the level of analysis at which we situate ourselves. While at the first level the meaning of the illocutionary act is accounted for as dependent solely on the speaker's communicative intentions, at the second level it is characterized as jointly construed by the speaker and the hearer, determining, as pointed out, what is communicated and not merely intended to be communicated. Following Sbisà (2009), I consider that it is the communicative exchange, and not merely the speaker's utterance, what makes possible the production of normative, illocutionary effects (and their recognition) that results in a successful illocutionary act arguing at the second level of analysis. As I previously mentioned, according to the normative framework of speech acts, illocutionary acts are social actions whose performance introduce changes in the rights and obligations of the participants of any communicative exchange, including the argumentative ones. In this regard, it is important to stress that in order to consider an individual responsible for what they have done or interpreted, and in order to determine what are the obligations and rights acquired by them and their interlocutor by means of the performance of the act, it is important to reconstruct the meaning of their illocutionary act, i.e., what that person actually communicated. And this is what the distinction between the speaker's meaning and the joint meaning within the two different levels of analysis allows us to do.

4. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, a suitable strategy to avoid the problems of the Searlean account assumed by LNMA and pragma-dialectics consists in distinguishing between two levels in the analysis of the illocutionary act of arguing. In addition, the distinction between speaker's meaning and joint meaning of an illocutionary act of arguing within the two levels of analysis allows us to account for what constitutes a successful illocutionary act at each level, and how the normative effects associated with successful illocutionary acts of arguing are produced. Furthermore, this distinction seems to be particularly relevant for accounting for those cases involving commitment attributions. Therefore, it remains to be investigated whether this distinction between the speaker's meaning and the joint meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing can shed light on cases such as fallacy analysis and identification (such as the straw man fallacy) (Lewiński and Oswald, 2013), or instances where language norms relate to some kind of injustice phenomena (Zenker et al., 2023), such as the case of discursive injustice (Kukla, 2014) or speech affordances (Ayala, 2016).

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