

Book Review: Marina Sbisà: Essays on speech acts and other topics in pragmatics

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Book Review

Marina Sbisà. *Essays on Speech Acts and Other Topics in Pragmatics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2023. vii + 327 pp. ISBN 978-0192844125.

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Marina Sbisà's *Essays on Speech Acts and Other Topics in Pragmatics* is a very fine piece of work, which does not only preach what it practices, but also practices what it preaches. It is firmly anchored in philosophy of language as a methodological framework for the analysis of actual speech and demonstrates that in the study of speech acts in discourse a complementarity between theoretical reflection and empirical exploration will lead to more refined results in analyses of speech acts as wholes as well as in those of their constitutive parts. The essays have been published before in various academic outlets (edited research volumes, the journals *Language and Communication*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics, Ethics & Politics*, *Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and Humanities*, and *Phenomenology & Mind*). It is the author's critical reflections on her own work which make evident that there is far more to a speech-act theoretic analysis of discourse than its stereotypical description as the so-called 'armchair' approach to pragmatics or the investigation of the metalinguistic lexicon. Marina Sbisà's critical analysis of speech acts in general and of illocutionary acts in particular and of their sequential organization presents fascinating insights into the processes and products of natural-language communication across contexts and discourses, which are spelled out in a clear and lucid manner. *Essays on Speech Acts and Other Topics in Pragmatics* shows that Austinian speech act theory and its adaptation to the constraints of discourse in context can be applied successfully to analyzing mundane everyday discourse. It provides the reader with the tools for eye-opening analyses of natural-language communication, of its effects and of the bilateral relations holding between speaker and addressee(s) by accommodating the needs of both the researcher who wants to look beyond their discipline and the graduate student who wants to learn about the complexities of pragmatics, speech acts and their application to discourse.

The *Introduction* paves the way for the book's constitutive chapters. They are recontextualized by Marina Sbisà herself with relevant background information, a reassessment of prior research and her present perspective on speech acts: "Those were the beginning of two trends in my research that are present and intertwined

also in this volume: theoretical interest in speech act theory and fascination with (or commitment to) the task of analysing discourse with the tools of philosophical pragmatics” (p. 13). Marina Sbisà’s “theoretical framework admits of the context-bound and intersubjectively based character of our use of language, tries to work on speech as action from within these limits, and aims to provide tools for a better understanding of what the texts we produce mean and do and why they mean and do just that” (p. 17).

Chapter 1, *On Illocutionary Types*, discusses the illocutionary act types of exercitives, commissives, verdictives and behabitives with respect to modal predicates: deontic obligation and ability, and epistemic possibility, certainty and knowing, reanalysing the standard speaker-hearer sequence of commissives as a three-step sequence (speaker – addressee – speaker). The author also discusses speech-act theoretical games. As succinctly spelled out in her introduction, Marina Sbisà’s analysis and reanalysis are anchored firmly in context-based investigations of naturally occurring speech, taking in a kind of co-construction approach, rather than the addressee perspective only.

Chapter 2, *Speech Acts, Effects, and Responses*, provides a fine-grained analysis of uptake and response and distinguishes them from perlocution, which is the case when the response confirms, defines or redefines the illocutionary force of a speech act. As in other chapters, one of the basic building blocks of Marina Sbisà’s Austinian approach to speech acts – deontic obligation – is addressed in the context of illocutionary acts producing conditional obligations, a phenomenon which can only be analysed to its full extent within a discourse framework and its sequential organization.

Chapter 3, *Ideology and the Persuasive Use of Presupposition*, is in line with Marina Sbisà’s research agenda, connecting relevant theoretical questions with the examination of mundane everyday talk. She clearly demonstrates not only that speech-act theoretic considerations can be applied successfully to the analysis of media communication, but that a complementarity between theoretical reflection and empirical exploration of natural speech may also provide us with more refined insights into natural-language communication and its effects on society. The focus of this chapter is on presupposition and presupposition accommodation, which are conceived as related issues. The discussion draws on the differentiation between objective context and participants’ take on context, adopted from Gauker. Marina Sbisà reanalyses presuppositions as assumptions which ought to be shared by participants, assigning them normative and deontic features. Presuppositions are taken to be default rules and thus are defeasible. Consequently, a presupposition can only be challenged once it is made explicit, and once it has been made explicit, it becomes an assertion whose communicative status can be negotiated.

Chapter 4, *Intentions from the Other Side*, examines meaning intentions in context. It moves beyond the received view of speaker intention and integrates the addressee explicitly in the analytic framework, arguing for ascription of intentions to the utterer by the audience. The audience perspective allows Marina Sbisà to consider meaning as interactionally constructed, or co-constructed in conversation-analytic terms. The analysis of non-natural meaning is informed by an audience perspective on the Gricean Cooperative Principle and described as ‘what are we to think of a speaker whom we take as being cooperative?’. This perspective assigns the CP and its maxims the status of default assumptions against the background of which meaning intentions, that is intentions ascribed to the speaker, are inferred. Meaning intentions can only be analysed successfully if the status of speaker, addressee and audience are addressed more fully. This is achieved by a profound examination of value and person, and of rationality. In her argument, rationality cannot be reduced to instrumental rationality, which is concerned with means-ends relationships. Rather, rationality has strict and intricate connections with value and is distinctively marked by a person’s argumentative activity.

Chapter 5, *Presupposition, Implicature and Context in Text Understanding*, tackles another very prominent topic in speech act theory and in pragmatics, teasing out the differences between presupposition and implicature and formulating them in clear-cut terms: Presuppositions convey that a certain content has to belong to the representation of context, irrespective of whether it already does belong to it or not, and implicatures aim at bringing about updates of the representation of context either by contributing to the content of assertions or by suggesting supplementary information. Another important difference is that implicatures typically require inferences going beyond the linguistic context.

Chapter 6, *Illocutionary Force and Degrees of Strength in Language Use*, investigates the multi-dimensional nature of language use. It examines mitigation and reinforcement in a speech-act theoretical framework, analysing different conceptions of illocutionary force. According to Marina Sbisà, each illocutionary force is connected with the expression of an inner state not only with respect to the kind of act expressed, but also with respect to its intensity. The author argues that because of the discreteness of the constitutive acts of a speech act, its illocutionary effect and the speaker’s definite communicative intention, which is inferred by the hearer, the standard conception of speech act is not compatible with mitigation and reinforcement. Austinian speech act theory’s differentiation between three different kinds of effect – securing of uptake, production of conventional effects, and inviting of a response or sequel – allows for different strengths of illocutionary force regarding commitment of the speaker, assignment of modal values to addressee, and perlocutionary goals. Mitigation and reinforcement are thus reanalysed as

intensifying illocutionary force with the effect of a language-triggered introduction of changes in the interpersonal relation.

Chapter 7, *Speech Acts in Context*, approaches the multilayered and multifaceted phenomenon of context as regards the status of felicity conditions as possible context categories and speech acts as context-change. Marina Sbisà discusses the differences between given context and constructed context, limited and unlimited context, and objective and cognitive context, and their impact on the conceptualisation of a speech act-as-a-whole and of its constitutive parts.

Chapter 8, *Cognition and Narrativity in Speech Act Sequences*, puts the focus on the connectedness between speech act and conversation. To address the issue in a comprehensive manner, Marina Sbisà considers sequentiality as a fundamental dimension of speech acts. She demonstrates her claim with telling examples from everyday discourse as well as with a reanalysis of the constitutive parts of speech act theory, arguing for response as a necessary condition in speech act theory.

Chapter 9, *Two Conceptions of Rationality in Grice's Theory of Implicature*, frames the Gricean CP from an audience perspective and analyses rationality, one of the fundamental premises of pragmatics, accordingly. The CP is thus a presumption that receivers make and that is rational for them to make. It may, as a presumption, enjoy universal applicability, if conceived as a pillar against which participants may give and infer as full an interpretation as possible of what they say and what they are told at a particular stage in the discourse. Participants are rational insofar as rational communicative behaviour maximizes understanding, and they are rational because conversational implicature is calculable. These calculations may not always be fully conscious but rather be considered a sub-personal, sub-automatic calculation, especially in the case of generalized implicatures. It therefore seems more plausible to conceive conversational implicatures – be they generalized or particularized – as co-constructed by rational participants in interaction: “A course of behaviour is rational if it is characterized by the agent’s non-accidental use of effective means, or of means he or she believes to be effective, for achieving his or her goals” (p. 175). Argumentative rationality supplements the means-goal perspective with argumentative reasoning. This is not only required for the calculation of a conversational implicature, but also for accounting for a participant’s actions, should they be challenged.

Chapter 10, *How to Read Austin*, provides a fine analysis of the Austinian speech act in *How to Do Things with Words*. Starting with a just-to-the-point analysis of the performance of an illocutionary act and the securing of uptake, and the perlocutionary act’s intended and unintended consequences, Marina Sbisà argues that participants “perform more than one action with one and the same gesture, insofar as that produces more than one effect” (p. 188) and draws the conclusion that “Austin seems to have considered agency as justly ascribed responsibility: there is agency

whenever it is fair to ascribe to an agent responsibility for a certain outcome” (p. 188). Against this background, “the whole locutionary-illocutionary-perlocutionary distinction should not be read as a distinction between gestures (whether physical, psychological, or both), but rather, as one among the kinds of effects for which speakers may be ascribed responsibility” (p. 189). As with her other chapters, Marina Sbisà demonstrates that the explicit integration of an audience perspective leads to more refined results in both theoretical and data-based analyses.

Chapter 11, *Uptake and Conventionality in Illocution*, addresses the received intention-based approach to illocution and its shortcomings. It argues for assigning illocutionary acts the status of conventional acts, as their conventionality resides in the conventional status of the effects they bring about. In line with Austinian felicity conditions referring to conventional procedures and conventional effects, conventionality should be reanalysed on the basis of means – that is language in speech act theory and pragmatics – and on the basis of the effects illocutionary acts bring about. The question of what happens with multiple recipients and multiple and contrasting receptions is an issue which the chapter does not address fully, but which Marina Sbisà – among other scholars – would describe as pluralism of communicative action.

Chapter 12, *Illocution and Silencing*, examines whether speech act theory may serve as an instrument for the critical analysis of power relationships. The focus lies on illocutionary acts and on how they may affect people’s rights, their obligations, and their legitimate expectations or commitments. While the standard view sees silencing as depriving people of the right to perform speech acts, Marina Sbisà shows that an analysis of silencing would need to account for ineffective speech acts. She illustrates this with an ineffective refusal in saying ‘no’ in sexual intercourse and argues for that ‘no’ to count as illocutionary failure. In Austinian terms, illocutionary failure is a case of misfire. Here, the ‘no’-saying person is not recognized as in a position to refuse.

Chapter 13, *The Austinian Conception of Illocution and Its Implications for Value Judgements and Social Ontology*, compares the mainstream illocutionary act as the expression of communicative intention with Austin’s approach and the A1-rule in which illocutionary acts are described as having conventional effects. Illocutionary acts are thus endowed with a social dimension, including social agreement by speaker and their audience. As in chapter 11, conventionality is analysed in the means-effects frame and refined by conceiving conventionality as repetition of patterns. This allows the effect brought about to be defeasible within an argumentative sequence. What is more, uptake may be analysed as intersubjectively shared and thus as bilateral, and illocutionary effect may be analysed as reflected in a change in interpersonal relations and their deontic status. The results of the

theoretical reflections are illustrated with typical effects of Austin's illocutionary classes from a bilateral perspective.

Chapter 14, *Varieties of Speech Act Norms*, assigns constitutive rules, maxims and objective requirements the status of default conditions. Constitutive rules organize procedures or routines that are repeatable and recognizable. They are conventional and thus can be annulled or made undone. Should participants act in disaccordance with the respective constitutive rules, the speech act to be performed is infelicitous. Maxims encode regulative advice for optimal speech act performance. They are non-conventional and can thus be infringed on or violated. Objective requirements set standards of assessment that the speech act performed should meet, irrespective of the perspective of the participants. They are non-conventional and can be inter-subjectively adjusted to particular constraints at a particular stage in the interaction, for example by accounting for an inappropriate realisation of a speech act. In line with Marina Sbisà's approach to the theory and practice of speech act theory, she illustrates her theoretical considerations with three telling examples of the illocutionary acts of promise, advise and congratulate, and closes the chapter with a discussion of assertion.

Chapter 15, *Ways to be Concerned with Gender in Philosophy*, addresses critiques of gender through the lens of discourse analysis and of essentialism, which pave the way for examining gender issues in discourse from an intersubjective-recognition perspective. That is to say, subjects – and their gendered and other discursive identities – recognize other subjects – and their gendered and other discursive identities – in interaction and ratify them by default with an acceptance. Should one or more of the brought-along identities not be accepted by another subject, the identity-in-question would need to be made explicit in the discourse. Only then can its status – like that of a presupposition – be challenged and negotiated in the interaction.

Chapter 16, *Assertion among the Speech Acts*, argues for the terms of speech act and illocutionary act not to be considered as interchangeable. This is because speech act is broader than illocutionary act. Assertion is thus not a speech act, but an illocutionary act to be conceived within the assertive family. All different kinds of assertion involve judgment, and all are concerned with the production and transfer of knowledge which entitle the hearer to further assertions and the speaker to the defence of the assertion, should it be challenged, via providing evidence in an argumentative sequence. Assertion thus is a procedure which has conventional effects.

Chapter 17, *Illocution and Power Imbalance*, discusses the social and societal impact of speech acts within the class of exercitives. These acts may bring about formal or institutional changes of status, they may establish rules, they may be used to realise directive acts, bring evaluations and recommendations, warnings,

announcements and explanations into the discourse and contribute to the construction of institutional and everyday-life authorities in discourse.

Essays on Speech Acts and Other Topics in Pragmatics by Marina Sbisà is an extremely valuable and original piece of work for any student, scholar or researcher interested in the huge fields of speech act theory, pragmatics, and discourse pragmatics. It successfully brings together Marina Sbisà's theoretical considerations and empirical explorations of natural-language communication, critically assessing taken-for-granted premises, shedding light on their use in the research community and reanalyzing them against the background of participants in general and the audience in particular. This requires speaker intention to be supplemented with intention ascription and with the ascription of responsibility. Saying is thus supplemented with default ascriptions of responsibility and agency with a focus on outcomes, not on 'where it comes from'.

There is a clear structure to the book as a whole and to each chapter. The reader is guided in their journey through the book, and recurring topics are connected and recontextualized from varying perspectives. *Essays on Speech Acts and Other Topics in Pragmatics* is an excellent piece of work which provides convincing evidence that the whole – that is the chapters read in the context of this book – is more than the sum of its parts.

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Anita Fetzer is Professor Emerita at the University of Augsburg, Germany. Her main interest is in pragmatics and discourse. She has published numerous books and papers on different issues in these two disciplines and beyond.