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## Political Discourse and the Theory of Speech Acts

Mirela Arsith<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The hypothesis from which we start of is that of political discourse, in its quality of practical discourse in order to be analyzed through the theory of speech acts, dominated by the use theory rule of meaning, which refers to the context of communication and human behavior. The theory of *speech acts* rise the issue of significance dependence, not the mere use of language, but the acting context of utterance, that the utterance fact, the latter not being a simple statement of something. J. L. Austin makes a first distinction between *constitutive statements*, which only say something, establishing a state of things, the truth of a fact and the performative utterances which are the performance of an action. Along with the locutionary act which manifests as utterance, as formulating sentences, the perlocutionary act, produced by the fact of having to say something, followed by the effects on a locutionary, either on the speakers, existing the illocutionary act, which is to commit *something* by enunciation, revealing a certain value and “force”: information, promise, demand, order, request, warning, advice, etc. By extending the characteristics of speech acts at the level of political discourse, we can say that it manifests itself as an entity resulting from the identical meaning of producing the statements that composes it, of *the illocutionary force marking the enunciation and the effects* by which it is achieved a certain performance.

**Keywords:** performative utterance; illocutionary act; enunciation

### 1. Introduction

The argumentative foundation from which we plan to start analyzing this issue is assuming communication as always being a major social and political fact, with an essential contribution in establishing the social order. The discourse is, simultaneously, a specific way of action, a way of representation, but also a linguistic approach that speakers act upon the world and especially on their peers. Political discourse, as a species of the genre, subsumes these traits. In this context, there should be approached the performative aspects of communication, J. L. Austin, an important representative of the “Literary” School at Oxford, in *How to do Things with Words*, made an initial distinction between *constitutive utterances* that just say something, establish a state of things, the truth of a fact and the *performative utterances* which are, by themselves, the performance of an action.

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, PhD, Dean of Faculty of Communication and International Relations, “Danubius” University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Boulevard, 800654 Galati, Romania, Tel.: +40.372.361.102, fax: +40.372.361.290, Corresponding author: [arsith.mirela@univ-danubius.ro](mailto:arsith.mirela@univ-danubius.ro).

## 2. When the Words Increase and Change the World

Stating a certain phrase generates simultaneously the accomplishment of three acts (Austin, 2003, pp. 23-26):

- (1) *the locutionary act* that manifests as utterance, as forms of sentences, in accordance with the grammatical rules;
- (2) *the illocutionary act*, which is to commit *something* through enunciation, revealing a certain value and “force”: information, promise, demand, order, request, warning, advice, etc.;
- (3) *perlocutionary act*, which is produced *by* having to say something, followed by *effects* on the *alocutionary* or on the speakers;

Language carries a *perlocutionary force*, which is manifested by the effects obtained simply *by* saying something: that of being able or not to influence through enunciation, to be warned or being misled, to determine or to prevent a decision or action, and for the limit, the performance itself of being understood by the *alocutionary*.

In the conception of J. L. Austin, words are part of the world. Words are not objects, as any other other. We use words, and what makes them useful “objects” is their complexity, the fact that they can be built in refined instruments for modeling the world. Ordinary language contains all the distinctions men have thought it useful to make and it participates in updating and creating realities, whenever it is used in speech. Using words, people talk about facts.

*By extending to the level of discourse*, we can say that it represents the dynamic unity between the production of statements that create the illocutionary force of the utterance by which it is achieved a certain performance and perlocutionary action, to the extent that the three aspects of the speech act are codified and regulated according to paradigms, so to the extent in which they are “identified and reidentified as having the same meaning”. (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 100) Therefore, through the discourse it is manifested intentionality, the specific human act of establishing meaning and value to the “world” that it expresses.

American philosopher John Rogers Searle, resuming the classification of illocutionary acts, identifies firstly the twelve issues that determine the differentiation of illocutionary acts, which can be grouped into three categories:

- (A) differences concerning the purpose of illocutionary acts: engaging the speaker, persuading the *alocutionary*, assessment, etc.;
- (B) differences regarding the adequacy of the words in the world and the world into the words;
- (C) differences caused by the psychological states of the speaker: motivation, confidence, desire.

John Rogers Searle, taking into account these differences, reached to *five basic categories* (Searle, 1972, pp. 52-56) of these types of speech acts:

- (1) *representatives*, that say “how things are”, engaging the speaker to achieve the adequacy of the words to reality; these speech acts can be evaluated according to the values of truth, even if they are not outright statements;
- (2) *directives* that are used by the speaker to determine the interlocutor to do something; they can have the illocutionary force of a suggestion, but a pleading or order, of an advice, a recommendation; the world must comply with words; a subcategory introduced by the philosopher is that of the questions,

which he considers them as being attempts of the speaker inciting the allocutionary to respond, that is, the determine it to fulfill an act of language;

(3) promises (commissives) whose enunciation requires the speaker to a future course of action, to follow an adequacy of the world to words; by these illocutionary acts, the locutionary is committed to do things in the future;

(4) expressive, which expresses a psychological condition specified in sincerity, about the state of things revealed in the propositional content; these acts ignore an adequacy relationship between words and things, they express their attitudes and feelings; the truth of the expressed proposition is assumed;

(5) *statements* that have its specifics in achieving the correspondence between propositional content and the reality, with in extra-linguistic institutions; by such actions there are caused changes in reality, and the adequacy between both directions, from the words to the world and from the world to the words; “the declarations cause a change in the status or position of the object or objects to which the reference is achieved only on the basis that the statement was completed successfully.” (Searle, 1972, p. 57); the statements assume that to the constitutive rules of the language it should be added a system of rules that belong to an extra-linguistic institution (e.g. church, the legal system), in which the speaker and the allocutionary occupy a certain position; to pursue the fulfillment of illocutionary acts in institutional situations, it is not sufficient the linguistic competence and the fact establishment, but it becomes necessary to appeal to an authority in order to decide on what are the facts; their evaluation and decision reveals a submission of the utterance to reality, a situation in which the statements coincide with assertive statements or modeling the reality, according to certain value-normative paradigms.

The values of success or failure of the illocutionary acts are the following, in terms of illocutionary logics:

(a) *the truth or falsity of assertive*, referring to their propositional content that can be true in certain worlds and false in others;

(b) respected or violated commissives; an illocutionary commissive act is respected only if the speaker turns the propositional content into the truth, assuming and fulfilling the future course of action represented by the commissive; otherwise, the committed illocutionary act is *violated*;

(c) fulfilled or unfulfilled directive; a directive illocutionary act is fulfilled if and only if the allocutionary makes the propositional content true, fulfilling the future course of action which the directive represents; otherwise is unfulfilled; There are ways that leave out the allocutionary the option to refuse and others, an option which the recipient does not have, the only choice being obedience; between fulfilling an order or keeping of promises and the truth of a statement there is a significant formal difference: a statement is true while the propositional content is managed in the direction of matching the word-world; an order is fulfilled and a promise is kept only if the agent brings success towards matching the world-word, the “order and the promise instituting as causes, but also as ways” (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 97);

(d) the success or failure of statements; since the successful performance of the declaration conditions the propositional content of truth, a successful statement has a success matching.

In the universe of statements, the illocutionary goals are met with different degrees of strength; this differentiation is possible by using performative verbs, which make possible the illocutionary forces group in three classes:

- (a) the class of strong performatives: to command, to insist, to give orders, etc.;
- (b) the class of intermediary performatives: to request, to ask, etc.;
- (c) the class of weak performatives: suggest, advise, recommend, etc.; when the speaker wants to make a weak commitment, he does it indirectly, sometimes as a denial of a strong commissive “I intend to do it, but I cannot promise anything.”

### 3. Political Discourse, a Language Macro-act

The political discourse aims, par excellence, an action in concrete meaning, reaching to cause behaviors of the following type: vote or abstention, membership, street demonstrations and so on. This kind of discursive intervention is, by its nature, a recruiter vocation; it is “open”, seeking to maintain the adherence of the audience who already shares her choices and values, but he also seeks to conquer the “hesitant” or to cause “changings of mind”, seeking to determine the adherence of a larger segment of the population.

We believe that the political discourse maintains and exploits all the features of speech acts:

- (1) *contextual determination*, that reveals social, spatial - temporal conditions of enunciation, and peculiarities of the interlocutor to whom the speech is addressed;
- (2) the intentionality, which concerns the proper interpretation by the interlocutor of the speaker's intention of communication;
- (3) the action dimension, which emphasizes the ability of the political discourse to change the state of the world, to produce changes;
- (4) conventionality, which assumes a set of “conditions for success” of discourse in attention, which are conditioned by the circumstances of utterance, the status and intentions of the speakers and allocutionary, but also the effects pursued by utterance.

### 4. Applications

In our opinion, political discourse can activate all components of any illocutionary forces. To argue in favor of this assertion, we propose the analysis of some reference sequences from political speeches:

- (1) “That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons [...]” (Urofsky, 2000, p. 166); we consider that this fragment of “Emancipation Proclamation”, stated by Abraham Lincoln in the fall of 1862 has illocutionary force of a *declaration*, since it would cause a profound change in the American social-political reality; the correspondence between propositional content and this reality is achieved within the presidential institution; the state of affairs represented by the propositional content contains the US President’s belief that the situation presented is in force, it is true in the universe of the statement; thus we can identify the existence of an assertive commitment in achieving the illocutionary declarative point, with a double adequacy direction: to change the world and to represent the world as changed;

(2) “The nation has startled with pride when it heard what its soldiers have achieved at Bir - Hakeim. The brave and pure children of France have just written, with their blood, one of the most beautiful pages of glory!” (De Gaulle, 1970, p. 73); this fragment reveals an *expressive* illocutionary force, that expresses a psychological satisfaction/pride; the propositional truth content is assumed and there is no adequacy direction; we are able to highlight a strong psychological commitment that requires the political speaker to move from the psychological state of joy to the psychological state of indebtedness;

(3) “*Therefore, instead of making pacts of this kind with your political opponents, pacts which were not even always loyal, you must gain the prestige necessary for free elections, which allowed the country to be true to express its wishes in this Parliament as well.*” (Iorga, 1981, p. 299);

In this speech sequence uttered by Nicolae Iorga it is revealed illocutionary force of the *directive*; the degree of strength of illocutionary goal is expressed through a weak performative, “recommending”; the position of the speaker, a parliament member addressing his peers, does not allow the call to a stronger, prescriptive, performative, as we can see in the following passage: “All Americans should enjoy the privileges of citizenship, regardless of race. And they will receive those privileges of citizenship, regardless of race” (Urofsky, 2000, p. 251); the US President Lyndon B. Johnson, using the moral authority of the presidential institution, performs simultaneously a directive and commissive commitment: the speaker asks an adequacy of the world to the words, assuming also the involvement in fulfilling the future course of action;

(4) “*In our sphere of our attributions we work with all means to unify as soon as possible as possible all the institutions and laws of the United Principalities. We will consider the most scrupulous for that to this major reform we work closely together in understanding with the ministry in Bucharest, as such, increasingly more, the union would become an achieved factor*”. (Kogalniceanu, 1967 p. 228)

Mihail Kogălniceanu formulates with the illocutionary force specific to commissive, the commitment of achieving a fundamental political program, involving the commission of future actions; thus committing himself, the political speaker cannot be honest without believing that would keep the agreement; the achievement of the commissive illocutionary point, by taking political efforts of institutional strengthening of the *Principalities’* Union creates, necessarily, a reason for the speaker to perform the promised actions, and sufficient reason for his faith that he will achieve it.

The political discourse as a specific form of communication, takes its essence and it establishes as a force producing meaning, and also reality. Partisan political message conveyed through speech must be repeated constantly, but at the same time, it we must exclude the possibility of the alternative or contradictory messages (Arsith, 2005, p. 238), in order to ensure the sustainability of influence.

## 5. Conclusions

Through this approach, inspired by the theory of speech acts, we aimed at proving that, by valorification, on the level of discourse, the illocutionary force components at the level of the speech is pointed out as the actional function of the language and, from this perspective, all human reasoning on the facts, decisions, beliefs, opinions and values are no longer regarded as “listening the logic of the Absolute reason, but they are seen in their actual liaison with affective elements, with historical valuations and practical motivations.” (Eco, 1982, p. 199)

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