

**GRAŻYNA OSIKA**

## **THE COMMUNICATIVE ACTS AS ACTION**

### **Introduction**

There is nothing new in formulating the communication process in the category of action. In such a way, J. Habermas has presented communication process in his concept of the theory of communicative action. Also symbolic interaction perspective in sociology forms the communication process in the terms of action. Such approach requires that some premises should be assumed. Each action, including communication, is of intentional character and fulfills certain functions. Firstly, all these functions should be characterized. Secondly, each action can be described by a definite system of notions. In case of this paper, the research instruments of J.R. Searle's action concept are imposed on communicative actions. Thirdly, each action has its own definite structure. The structure of communicative action is assumed to be founded on the speech act theory by J.L. Austin. Fourthly, each action is being performed in a definite situation that conditions its process. The analysis of the premises given above will show to what extent their performance is possible while applying the suggested research instruments. An attempt is made to combine a few of theories that have essentially contributed to the comprehension of communication process. The perspective presented in this paper seems to be essential as it makes possible to account for the whole communication act and not only utterances. As it occurs in everyday communication process,

it allows to interpret the meaning both of verbal and nonverbal messages thus making them more adequate.

## 1. Functions of communication

According to symbolic interaction theory the function of communication act is twofold. The first one, communicative function or informative function refers to understanding of what has been uttered, merely to the use of signs. The other function, that is performative one is fulfilled by changing the reality. In this case the communication act refers to the performance of the definite action. Distinguishing between those two functions can help understand ambiguities in the theories by J.L. Austin, J.R. Searle and J. Habermas that concern their debate on character of perlocutionary acts. In general, the speech act theory refers to performative function and the identification of this function was the basis for J.L. Austin to conceive of his theory of speech act. When we think of performing any action, we usually ask about the result. Probably, J.L. Austin introduced the notion of perlocutionary act into his theory with such an intention, as effect of speech. However, the notion of perlocutionary act appeared to be problematic because it is impossible to determine the clear rules for performance of this act. There's no propriety that would allow this act to be predictable. Thus, J.R. Searle decided to reject the notion of perlocutionary act and focused on understanding of the utterance which he called the illocutionary result. Illocutionary act is explained by means of convention, conventional relation that occurs between the utterance and intention of the speaker. Such approach can be assumed as the performance of the communicative function, as the illocutionary success is based on the recognition of conventional symbols. Yet, there is a question if such conceived effect is sufficient in case of analysis of performative function of the language. There is some doubt, due to the fixed correlation of acts, content of utterances and intentions, the example of which is the presence of indirect speech acts. We can presume that the utterance:

(1) *Do you have a watch?*

despite its literal meaning, means the same as the question :

(2) *Tell me, please, what the time is.*

It can be presumed that in both cases the intention will be understood in a very similar way so the fixed content of utterances does not seem to be so crucial. Such examples as those given above show that there is no need to invoke the conventional correlations of intention and content to explain the success of the speech act. J.R. Searle's approach to that problem eliminates some ambiguities. It is easier to describe the action of speech then, though it is possible due to putting some constraints on the speech act so it comprises only what can be described by conventionally determined rules and sentence content. In J. Habermas's theory, the central medium of language is

the illocutionary act which, as in J.R. Searle's theory, fulfills the communicative function. At this level all participants want to achieve the mutual understanding. The illocutionary act refers to the meaning while the perlocutionary act means intention and it is thought to get a certain effect. J. Habermas refers to instrumental strategic action. The illocutionary effect is obtained when the communicative function has been fulfilled, i.e. the hearer recognizes the meaning, accepts its claim and adjusts her/his actions, moreover, understanding what was said before is equivalent to knowing the conditions of approval of illocutionary act, that is the hearer knows the conditions of approving it as "yes". The coordination of actions is based on "*the world of life*" common for all participants. In J. Habermas's theory the illocutionary act is not related to grammatical forms as it is in J.L. Austin's or J.R. Searle's theories. In that case the illocutionary effect depends on the language function. According to J. Habermas there are three major types of language functions: constatives – while saying something, the speaker refers to the objective world, regulative – related to the social world and expressive – when the speaker refers to her/his own subjective experience. Each of these functions is expressed at the performative level of the language. J. Habermas is aware of idealization of communicative action premises, thus he supplements his concept with a theory of discourse that allows all participants to proceed the discourse on the basis of a consensus regarding the claims for validity dimensions.

All examples of speech theories given above show that the questions concerning the language functions seem to be ambiguous. The question could be raised, as in the case of J. Habermas, why the communicative functions are to be constrained to those three ones mentioned above. Thus another interesting proposition, that introduced by R. Jakobson, can be taken under consideration. His model of the functions of language distinguishes following functions, in order:

- referential function – oriented towards the context,
- emotive function – oriented towards the sender/ addresser,
- conative function – oriented towards the receiver /addressee,
- phatic function – oriented towards the context,
- metalinguistic – oriented towards mutual agreement on the code,
- poetic – oriented towards the message itself<sup>1</sup>.

This classification not only comprises all functions given so far but also introduces some aspects that are useful for communication analysis with its non-verbal dimension whose example is a phatic function. The reference to reality is wider, as it is in the case of the poetic function where the sender just chooses the message she/he is the object of. Due to this wider reference there are some new dimensions, apart from the objective, social and subjective worlds.

There were compared two theories that describe the rules of speech act as well as J. Habermas's concept of communicative action. It seems important that J.L. Austin's approach to analysis of speech act accounts for the effect of the given utterance, even if it is impossible to determine the rules that condition this effect. J.R. Searle's theory solves this problem by rejecting the perlocutionary act. The effect of the given utterance is related to its understanding. J.R. Searle gives some rules that are to account for the

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<sup>1</sup> „Poetic function” shouldn't be taken literally. It is a kind of technical notion referring to the situation in which message is oriented to itself .

correctness of the utterance. Each action has its own separate rules, though with time J.R. Searle conceives five basic groups of speech actions (*Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, Declaratives*). However, it appeared that the realization of those rules is not always necessary for a given action to be performed. It can be assumed then that it is unnecessary to apply such a restrictive method. J. Habermas's approach seems to confirm this assumption. He limits J.R. Searle's categories to three types of language acts: constative, regulative and expressive. Each kind of action relates to the determined reality: objective, social and subjective. It does not cover all types of used references, though. In communicative actions we refer to the act of utterance itself, the code and the social relation during the interaction. Thus, the view on the communicative functions presented above, allows to capture metalinguistic dimension of the communicative actions.

## 2. Theory of action in relation to communication acts

Thinking of the communication in the category of action, evokes the application of structures that constrain the actions to communicative ones. Such analysis will be presented on the basis of the theory of the structure of action developed by J.R. Searle. According to J.R. Searle there are two factors in each action: physical one that relates to the material dimension of the action and the mental one. The mental factor refers to the intentional state that relates to a given action. The intentional state consists of a representative content of this state and it also means the willingness of doing something, thus it is related to a certain intention. It is so called psychological mode. Every psychological mode has its own condition of satisfaction. The effects of intentional states should be expressed in the categories of intentionality. In every act there should be designated factors as the content of the act, psychological mode together with the conditions of its satisfaction. Each element of the communication process which will be related to by all participants of the action, may become the content of the act. In this case the context, sender, receiver, contact, code and message is referred to. The references are related to the function that given act is to fulfill. The intentionality of our communicative actions can be recognized as a psychological mode.

In both Austin and Searle's approaches the recognition of intention was closely correlated with the use of illocutionary verb, a verb used in the first person, singular, present tense, indicative mode, passive voice or such verbs could be used in those forms with the same meaning of the utterance. There is about one thousand of such verbs in the English language. J. Habermas has simplified the use of language model to three categories such as: normative, for example promises; expressive - confessions and finally statements - constitutive usage of language. In the cases presented above the intention is related to the conventionally based grammatical forms. However, if we want to consider the communication act as the action, both verbal and non-verbal activity/behaviour, it seems impossible to assume J.L. Austin's, J.R. Searle's and J. Habermas's approaches due to the highly conventionalized rules of the communication act. This problem can be solved while applying the functions of

communication, such as referential, emotive, conative, fatic, metalinguistic and poetic introduced by R. Jakobson. Such approach allows to overcome the strictly linguistic interpretation of the communication process and simultaneously determine the categories of the communication acts. Each psychological mode is specified by the separate conditions of satisfaction. These conditions are dependent of the intention *Network* within which the given intention is performed. Every time the given, so called predominant, intention is performed, the other supportive intentions are initiated. The communication act in which the persuasive intention is performed (conative function), needs relating to the code, contact, context and sender. The intention *Network* is based on human abilities that are called the *Background* by J.R. Searle. The *Background* captures our representation of the reality. It allows us to interpret the intentional content or psychological mode, thus determining its range. It states the tendencies of obtaining the *Background*. It can be said that the *Background* makes the element of the context conditioning the process of the communication act. The *Background* abilities may refer to the communicative competence of the participants. The competences relate to the following spheres:

- instrumental – the use of effective means,
- interactive – the ability to play a role,
- social – the knowledge of standardization mechanisms characteristic of communicative actions,
- task-oriented – the ability to recognize the situation.

The interpretation of the communication act as the action shows that it is possible to analyze the activities of such kind as the tool serving the performance of a given task or as a process that is an action in itself.

### 3. The structure of the communication acts

The J.L. Austin's speech act theory is used to describe the communication acts. It assumes that within each speech act there are levels of performing the activity. He mentions:

- locutionary act – it refers to meaning of the utterance, it is an act of saying something,
- illocutionary act – it is an act of what one does in uttering something. It is related to the usage of the illocutionary verb that includes intention of the performed act,
- the perlocutionary act – it refers to the effects, consequences the given utterance evokes.

Yet, it is impossible to transfer directly the J.L. Austin's elaborated structure. Firstly, because the speech acts consider the communicative situations as "one-way" utterances. The rules on the acts correctness are the clues for the sender/speaker, the illocutionary effect in J.R. Searle's or J. Habermas's theories refers to the understanding of the utterance by the receiver/hearer. Therefore, it is so little said there about the perlocutionary act which relates to the hearer; whereas the structure of the communicative

act has to capture its interactive character. Secondly, in this theory the occurrence of the speech act is subject to the use of the specific convention. If we assume that the approach to the communicative acts is to capture non-verbal acts, the range of the use of the conventional devices should be limited. While accepting the basic assumptions related to each level, that is

- locutionary act – refers to the device applied,
- illocutionary act – refers to the intention,
- perlocutionary act – refers to the effect.

The structure given can be transposed into:

1. Locutionary act in a *largo* sense refers to all communication media, both sent and received. From the receiver's point of view, it is not important at the beginning of the communication. There are verbal and non – verbal communication acts within the locutionary acts. These acts are received as entity and as such they are subject to further interpretation.
2. Illocutionary act refers to the intention the act is performed with. It relates to various kinds of psychological modes that make the basis of communication as its teleological base. Both acts, locutionary and illocutionary are invoked by the sender/speaker.
3. Perlocutionary act – refers to the receiver/ hearer whose interpretation of the message is manifested by a specific behaviour that indicates that the act is recognized and the extent of realization of satisfaction conditions. Perlocutionary act can thus be treated as an effect of the illocutionary act.

It is only the communicative experience, not a guarantee, that illocutionary intention will get its conditions of satisfaction. As the symbolist interactionists claim there is a possibility of negotiating the meaning. In this case it is an attempt of obtaining the satisfaction of a given psychological mode. It is possible due to the assumption that communication acts are of interactive character. It should be reminded that the initial conditions of satisfaction could be changed during the communication act. The act is of dynamic character – its participants modify their behaviours therefore the initial intentions and situation can change during communication process. Due to the feedback mechanism, all participants can take the decision whether to continue or finish the communication process. It depends on the realization of conditions of satisfaction which are modified during the action. Perlocutionary act relates to the receiver/hearer activity of understanding the illocutionary act performed by sender/speaker. We can assume that functions, that is, intentions which the receiver/hearer attributes to sender/speaker and then interprets the message are fundamentals of understanding. It is similar to the situation described by H. Plessner and concerning the possibility of interpretation of facial expression. The participants of the interaction assume that each of them has the active attitude towards the situation. A certain meaning, that of conscious reference to the situation, can be ascribed to this activity. It is interpreted by the receiver/hearer and due to the interactive character of communication, the interpretation can be verified in progress. The intention is manifested by the applied references:

- referential – context,
- expressive – sender,
- phatic – contact,

conative – receiver,  
metalinguistic – code,  
poetic – message.

The recognition of the reference determines the interpretation framework, eg. the utterance :

(1) *The world is as it is.*

Along with accompanying non-verbal message can be interpreted as:

- a description of the fact (referential function),
- a statement of someone's own emotions (emotive function),
- a way of starting the conversation (phatic function),
- a form of convincing someone, with the implied meaning that nothing can be done about it (conative function),
- an example of the sentence in a certain language (metaphysical function),
- an example of the expression about the nature of the world (poetic function).

The final meaning of the communication act can be captured by the situation in which it occurs. This situation constitutes the element of the communication act within which the act is initiated, carried out or interrupted. It makes the element that not only modifies the acts process but also undergoes the modification itself during the communicative action.

#### 4. Definition of the situation

“The situation makes those parts and aspects of the external world that are important for the inner world of the person acting in a given place and time”<sup>2</sup>. According to the approach of the symbolic interaction theory the situation is to be examined in several dimensions:

1. Cognitive dimension – refers to the recognition of the situation and meaning of the messages;
2. Communicative dimension – refers to the reason of communication act and is related to recognition of the power of illocutionary act;
3. Dramaturgical dimension – refers to the roles played by the participants during the communication process. They are dependent of the reason of communication and recognition of the situation. When the participant takes up the role, she/he can anticipate the partner's role, too.

All these dimensions overlap with each other. The participants of the communicative action need to refer to all the dimensions at the same time. It enables them to coordinate simultaneously the activities and verify them at the cognitive, communicative and interactive levels. The understanding of the intention does not always mean its approval as the effect of the determined communication act. This situation is described by J.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Hałas, *Spoleczny kontekst znaczeń w teorii symbolicznego interakcjonizmu*. Lublin: Wyd. KUL, 1987, p. 98.

Habermas in the category of approval or refusal of validity dimension claims. The situation provides the basis for realization of conditions of satisfaction and at the same time it is also subject to changes during the communicative action and verifies the established terms. In drama language, we can say that the situation is like a stage on which all communicative actions occur and these actions change simultaneously the character of the situation. That is why it can be said, following the interactionist symbolists, that the action due to its changeable character and thus changeable terms of achieving the goals, requires the continuous defining of the situation. The situation provides also the criteria of the evaluation of actions, especially in case of possibility of undertaking the strategic actions, which are, in J. Habermas's theory, related to perlocutionary acts and they make non-authentic actions. The communication acts theory rules out the possibility to burden the perlocutionary with the strategic connotation. However, there are situations described by J. Habermas as "integration of the means typical of illocutionary act in the contexts specific to strategic interaction"<sup>3</sup>. It happens when the communication is not sincere. There is a double "dominating" intention then. One of them is of explicit character, the other which is implicit one shows the real function of the act. It is noticeable in case of persuasive communication where the conative function is concealed under explicitly represented functions but verifying role of situation is disclosed.

## 5. The most important features of the communication act

The theory of the structure of communication act by Searle constitutes a framework of the approach presented here. The set of media that are accepted and recognized by the receiver/hearer as information are assumed here as physical factors. It relates to verbal and non-verbal signs. Functions that fulfill the communicative actions are assumed as mental factors. There are following functions:

- referential function
- emotive function
- conative function
- phatic function
- metalinguistic function
- poetic function

The reference typical of each function constitutes the content of action. The function is interpreted in the category of intention that accompanies the specific kind of communicative action and each intention appears in the Network of other intentions. Each of them relates to the determined and typical conditions of satisfaction that are dependent of the Background and situation in which the communication occurs. The communicative competence of the participants is meant to be the *Background* that depends on the level at which the communicative instruments are mastered, roles

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<sup>3</sup> J. Habermas, *Teoria działania komunikacyjnego*. Warszawa: PWN, 1999. Vol. I, p. 483.

anticipation abilities, knowledge of social and cultural determinants and capability of recognition of the situation. There are following spheres within the *Background*:

- instrumental sphere – recognizing the media,
- interactive sphere – recognizing and playing the roles,
- social sphere – recognizing the mechanisms typical of the given social group,
- task-oriented sphere – recognizing the situation.

Within the communication act there are several levels of performance of a given action. Each act consists of locutionary and illocutionary acts that are related to the activities performed by sender/speaker and perlocutionary act performed by receiver/hearer and related to the interpretation of illocutionary act. Such approach is different from that one presented by classical speech act theories. It makes possible to capture the interactive character of communication acts. The receiver/hearer is treated as a co-author/creator of the communication act, firstly, because she/he interprets the message, secondly, because her/his interpretation influences the sender/speaker that acts according to it and becoming the hearer. The recognition of the sender's/speaker's intention, which is possible due to the specific references to each function, makes the basis of message interpretation. As for the references, it is the context for the referential function, the sender/speaker for the emotive function, the contact for the phatic function, the code for the metalinguistic function and the message for the poetic function. These references constitute the interpretation framework for each group of signs that are meaningful to the receiver/hearer. The feedback mechanism ensures the coordination and enables illocution to match perlocution. Each communication act is set in a situation in which it is performed. It is possible due to the recognition of conditions of satisfaction put by the sender/speaker for the given communication act. The receiver/hearer can fulfill these conditions or make the sender/speaker modify them. The sender's evaluation of the possibility of realization of conditions is decisive. The situation and the participant's roles are assumed to be the criterion for evaluation. The task of the situation is to verify the meaningful content of the acts because the participants take the attitudes towards the situation and they conceive the reference system on the basis of situation. This verification concerns also the changes of actions that are taken in a result of changes of the situation. The situation is a place where the communication acts are performed, made objective and the course of the communication process is modified. The situation has the cognition dimension at which the participants determine its area. The communicative dimension constitutes the background for the interpretation of the illocutionary force. The dramaturgic dimension refers to the recognition of the roles played by participants. In this approach the communication act is defined as a dynamic process of continuous interpretation of behaviours of participants against a background of the situation that is recognizable by them.

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