Chapter 6

THE POINT OF DISSERTATION: AUSTIN'S APPROACH

Comparisons of both the same sentence in different contexts and of different sentences in the same context led us, in the previous chapter, to see that a dissertation act can co-occur with an illocutionary act. The discussion also implied that two dissertation acts (just as two illocutionary acts) are mutually exclusive, which will be dealt with more explicitly in chapters 8 and 9. On methodological grounds, these might be sufficient criteria to establish that the distinction between the two types of acts is basic, specially if our main aim is to solve the coding problems mentioned in the first part of the thesis. However, due to the centrality of the notion of speech act, the distinction has to be substantiated in terms of the points of illocution and dissertation, too. This is the main purpose of the present chapter.

Austin's proposition that when we speak we perform acts has as a consequence the separation of three domains: words, actions, and acts. This will be considered in order to highlight the point of illocution: the creation and modification of the conditions for the interpretation and social judgment of action. The point of dissertation will be shown to be different, namely, the creation and modification of knowledge.

The discussion will point to further developments of the implications and applications suggested so far. It will, for example, show that, if the teacher is going to pay attention to the relationships between sentence, context and acts, he should also consider the meaning of actions. This will, in turn, involve a proposal that we distinguish situational from contextual language teaching on the basis of commitment to do.

Doing

Words do. This is what Austin tells us from the first moment[1]. And this was the starting consideration of many developments in discourse analysis. It will, therefore, be convenient to begin here by asking ourselves what we mean by "do". Besides, in this way we would be faithful to the main method of analytic philosophy (the school to which Austin belonged).

One way to approach the problem is by posing a simpler question: how do words stand *vis-a-vis* action? Let us attempt to answer it.

If the chain of sounds that form a string of words encounters a sleeve that is being rolled up, the sounds will alter the course of the sleeve very little, almost not at all. By comparison to the moving mass of cloth, the momentum of the air puffs that constitute the sounds is extremely small in magnitude. And it is even smaller when compared to the muscular force of the fingers that drive the sleeve.

However, if the sleeve's being rolled up is interpreted as an offer to wash the dishes, and the words are interpreted as a declinatin of that offer, then the action of the fingers will probably stop. The act of declination is comparable with, and can be opposed to, the act of offering.

The question of how words stand to actions does, then, seem to have two answers: 1) very weakly and 2) through their interpretations. The first answer focuses on words as action, or rather, on the causal concatenation of physical events that originate with the action of uttering words. The second answer depends on the fact that both words and actions are given social meanings, that they are seen as acts.

In their interpretation as acts, words and actions can be paired. We can, for example, say that "Good bye" and waving your hand are equivalent. We can also say that an action is the reply to a string of words, a smile to a compliment, for instance. Conversely, with words we respond to actions, *eg* with "thank you" to being given a cup of tea. In this sense, words and actions are mutually conditioned.

It is not, as behaviourists believed, that actions cause words according to natural-law-like principles. Rather, it is that action-acts provide conditions under which certain speech-acts are appropriate, and others inappropriate. And people often choose to be appropriate; but they also choose to be inappropriate. It is in the nature of the rules of social interaction that they may be broken.

Just as action constrains words, words have consequences for action. Sometimes one has to do certain things after certain words have been pronounced, in order not to be rude. Even more drastically, unless they have been properly sanctioned by words, certain actions are forbidden. Examples of these situations are, respectively, passing the salt after a request and entering a house without having been invited.

Sometimes there is a tendency to think that actions are more basic than words, and that therefore, a proper understanding of words presupposes a proper understanding of actions. It is even suggested that the principles that govern language have to be derived from the animal drives, or from the material needs of society, that move us into action. It is, for example, said that linguistic structures ultimately reflect economic structures, or that language is essentially an instrument that, so to speak, emerges from the non-linguistic functions it serves.

While it might be true that human beings most often perform acts that will enable them to achieve or avoid actions, and while it is certainly true that action realizations of acts cannot violate material or biological constraints, it should be stressed that actions do not operate directly on words. The social meaning of actions is not transparent; actions have to be interpreted, and interpretation of actions is as complex as interpretation of words.

In some circumstance rolling up your sleeve will mean an offer to do the washing-up. But in others it will mean a challenge to fight. And sometimes it does not mean anything: you simply do it because it is hot, or for many other reasons. Clearly, if an action interacts with a stretch of language, it is because that action has acquired meaning, a meaning which was not inherent to it. Consequently, we must be very careful about any proposal which attempts to locate explanations of language outside the study of language itself, in zoology or economics, for example. We must be careful about functionalist explanations, however insightful they might be — and they are often very insightful —.

In sum, if words are seen as actions, they are barely comparable to other actions. But if words and actions are seen in their interpretation as social acts, then we are dealing with interactive entities of the same kind.

It is probably convenient to see the distinction between actions and acts in a wider context. Different people shake hands differently, for a number of reasons which do not matter here. A careful observer could, for example, record brief and long, or soft and strong, handshakes. A more detailed observation would reveal various possible directions of his hand, *eg* horizontal, or almost vertical facing downwards. Likewise, the thumb could point towards the other person's face or towards her elbow. However, when we report a handshake we often ignore such details. In fact, they are almost always forgotten, because they are irrelevant to the meaning of the action as a handshake act.

Using a distinction originally proposed by Pike (1954), we might perhaps say that the word "handshake" represents *emic* sameness in the face of *etic* divergence. The distinction can be seen as a generalization of the opposition between 'phonemic' and 'phonetic' (see Pike 1993). This captures the fact that from a point of view the first and second consonants in "paper" are the same, but from another they are different; phonemically both are *p*-sounds, but phonetically the first is aspirated (at least in some dialects) while the second is unaspirated. Whereas the etic statement tells us what the sounds are like, the emic statement tells us what the sounds count as. Likewise, a physical description of a hand-written word (including false strokes and adornments) is an etic account of it, and a list of the letters it consists of, or a transcription of them into a standard type, is an emic account.

In a similar fashion, to refer to bodily movements as actions would be to focus on them as etic phenomena and to refer to them as acts would be to consider them in their emic dimension. Hence, one might say that to talk about acts implies adopting a semiotic or semiological approach. Following Locke, Pierce (1940), Morris (1938) and others have shown the need to consider the nature of signs in general and, therefore, of "patterned communication in all modalities" (Sebeok 1964). According to this view, "transactional systems involving sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste" (Sebeok 1964: 5) operate on common principles, and at some fundamental level ought to be studied by one science, which they call 'semiotics'. In a somewhat parallel (and probably independent) develop-

ment, Saussure said language was comparable to "a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc." and "a science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable...I shall call it *semiology*. Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them" (Saussure 1915: 16).

Looking at acts from an emic or a semiotic perspective might indeed be illuminating. For example, several of the acts we have mentioned could be seen as exemplifying Peirce's distinction between types and tokens (for a clear exposition of these concepts, see Lyons 1977: 13). Two physically different handshakes are two tokens, or two instances, of the same type. Moreover, that "the relationship of instantiation involves the recognition of identity relative to some purpose or function" and "it cannot be specified in terms of a certain degree of physical or perceptual similarity" (Lyons 1977: 15-16) is as true of language signs as it is of action-acts, which we saw when rolling-up the sleeve was discussed.

Of direct relevance to language teaching is that certain body signs form systems that are comparable to semantic fields (for this concept, see Lyons 1977: 250), and that they can vary from one culture to another, as fields vary from language to language. Thus, in some countries looking and not looking at the speaker count as paying and not paying attention, but in others they mean requesting and not requesting the floor, which could produce missunderstandings in intercultural communication (Lars 1989 and Lars 1992). One would add that looking and not looking are in complementary but also variable distribution; for some communities, an oblique gaze is looking, but for others it is not looking, just as a certain shade of colour is already purple to some and still violet to others.

There is, however, an important limit to the emic or semiotic views. Not all action-acts are members of conventionalized semiotic systems. Handing Mary's violin to Virginia after she has asked to borrow it counts as lending the violin only because Virginia had made the request, and not because handing violins conventionally means lending violins. As we shall see presently, this is of paramount importance to the notion of speech-act.

What is important to retain here is that actions and acts belong in qualitatively different levels, and that acts are, by definition, meaningful. They may be so

because they form part of an already existing system of signs or because they have acquired meaning in a context where speech plays a decisive role. In any case, answering our second question, it is acts, not actions, that words relate to and are like.

This leads us to see that Austin's idea that uttering words is doing things is initially a metaphor. That is to say, it is literally false. We do not build houses by uttering words; we build them by putting objects together with our hands. But the force of the metaphor makes us see that uttering words is, in some respect, like using our hands: both speaking and moving our bodies can have, and do have, actions as consequences. As seen in Part I, according to Austin, among the felicity conditions for illocutionary acts, among the conditions that have to obtain for an utterance to count as the successful performance of an act (a procedure), we have, the inauguration of consequential conduct:

> (Γ.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further
> (Γ.2) must so conduct themselves, subsequently.
>
> (Austin 1962: 15)

Putting it more simply, words lay obligations. Actions cause actions and words bind us to act. So, both can be initiators of further activity. This is the simile behind the metaphor.

So, "words do" means words require us to perform actions. These are, then, interpreted as complying acts. But, therefore, an action-act will necessarily have an effect on the conditions created by illocutionary acts: by fulfiling the obligation, the obligation will be removed. The simile has led to its converse: if speaking is like carrying out actions, then carrying out actions is like speaking. The metaphor is double: saying is doing, and doing is meaning.

Coming from another angle, we have seen again that the idea of speech-acts carries with it the idea of action-acts. The point, a second time, is that word and action meet as equals in the terrain of acts (*ie* in discourse). But we have gone a step furher: word and action interplay in a game of obligations. Doing involves

creating obligations. Let us take this another step ahead. Could doing involve other deontic[2] interventions? My answer is yes. A promise and an order do indeed create obligations. But other acts which are listed in Austin's (provisional) classifications (Austin 1962: 155-158), such as consent or give, do not make certain further acts obligatory; they make them permitted. Still others, like degrade, demote or veto, make acts forbidden.

So, an illocutionary act effects further activity because it creates deontic conditions. In Chapter 8, I shall use this idea to develop a view that solves the kinds of problems identified in the first part of the thesis. I will add other elements. I will, for example, include the allowed actors, which are central to the felicity conditions mentioned in Chapter 3 (and have not been discussed here). I will also consider non-complying acts. Besides, I will take into account that deontic outcomes are often the joint product of two or more speakers. But at this point illocution is sufficiently well characterized to be contrasted to dissertation, and the contrast will be useful afterwards.

Dissertation

Invitations, offers and declinations can be said to inaugurate consequential action. But a definition, a generalization or an observation cannot. The former are deontic interventions and the latter are not.

A definition can be involved in an illocutionary act that affects the conditions for action, such as a prohibition. This is clear in the law. But the definition should not be confused with the prohibition, because not all definitions are associated with prohibitions, and not all prohibitions involve a definition. More generally, if the conditions under which an utterance is interpreted as a given illocutionary act are modified in such a way that the interpretation no longer obtains, the associated dissertation act will not necessarily vary, as was shown in the last chapter.

What has to be pointed out here is that dissertation acts cannot be paired to action-acts, in the way that illocutionary acts can. We cannot find actions which are equivalent to generalizing, for example. Nor can we find dissertation acts which are appropriate responses to actions, in the way that thanking was ap-

propriate to being given a cup of tea. The converse, action as response to dissertation seems to be possible in a limited way: there are certain gestures which can indicate approval or disapproval of what is being discussed. But it cannot be said that such gestures carry on dissertation, in the way that action does carry on illocution. A consideration of this difference will throw light on the nature of dissertation acts, and will be undertaken presently.

It is now convenient to see that the fact that dissertation acts cannot be paired to action-acts does not mean that dissertation does not affect action. It does, because with words we talk and think *about* actions, just as we talk and think about other things. This is a third answer to the pivot question of this chapter: "how do words stand *vis-a-vis* actions?" Words denote actions, just as they denote objects. And with words we refer to actions, just as we refer to objects. Furthermore, with words we can predicate properties of the actions we refer to. That is to say, by referring to and predicating of actions, we express propositions about them. We say that such action is so-and-so.

To complete this third answer, let us point out that the acceptance or rejection of propositions about actions (and indeed about many things) has consequences for the plans according to which we execute actions. For example, if one accepts that running a marathon requires an enormous amount of training, and if one also accepts that one does not have much time for training, then one will decide not to run the Mexico City Marathon. Let us underline that this is very different from being forbidden to run the marathon.

But if we are reminded of Searle's distinction between question and answer (Searle 1969: 22-23), it will be clear that what we accept are not pure propositions, in the sense "accept" has in the previous paragraph. We accept assertions; and we could speak of a question as a suspended assertion. Furthermore, from the evidence provided in ESP studies of the phenomenon unfortunately called 'hedging', there is perhaps a continuum of mitigated assertions between the suspended assertion and the full assertion. With expressions such as "it seems that", the speaker can manage not to fully commit himself to the truth of a statement. The same can be achieved with the grammatical devices of modality or with words such as 'perhaps'.

We are dealing with one factor which in Chapter 3 was hypothesized to be constituent (and distinguishing) of dissertation acts: force of assertion. It should be noted at this point that this force is intentional. In fact, we have talked of commitment to the truth of the proposition. This is important, because it is one of the justifications for saying that a definition, an observation and a generalization are acts. The other justification is that they, just as illocutionary acts, are interpreted and judged in conditions which they, in turn, modify. It is just that the conditions for the interpretation and judgement of dissertation are conceptual frameworks, whereas the conditions of illocution are basically social relations and social values.

We can now consider the exception to the generalization that with action we do not perform anything equivalent to dissertation acts: gestures of approval (or disapproval). In a dialogue a person can indicate with such gestures that she gives the same assertive force (or a different one) to a proposition formulated by her interlocutor than he does. Thus, we can say that in such context the person providing the said indications is in fact performing a dissertation act, whose propositional content is elided; it is for this reason that I said earlier that gestures of the sort in question do not carry on dissertation: they simply re-state.

Conclusions

Words are realized by actions that have little physical effect on other actions. But they are interpreted as illocutionary acts that modify deontic conditions and, therefore, inaugurate further acts which are realized as actions. This is one meaning 'do' has when we say "words do".

Words have another sort of consequences on action, because they make knowledge about action. This knowledge tells us whether certain actions are feasible, what they imply, and what they will bring about. So, it conditions our decisions to act. Acting upon knowledge is a second meaning of 'do'.

The two meanings are duly separated by the distinction between illocution and dissertation.

Implications and applications

One implication of the above discussions for the classroom analyst is that teacher and student actions have to be regarded as potentially meaningful. Failure to do this is behind Ellis's (1984: 107-109) misjudgement of a lesson discussed in Chapter 2. He did not realize that Anan's miming counted as a response to the teacher's invitation and, therefore, was evidence of the child's competence to interact illocutionarily. He did not see either that Anan's performance was based on the teacher's previous exposition of the Green Cross Code and, so, was proof of the child's capacity to comprehend oral dissertation.

The need to record action and the meaning of action is perhaps most evident in transcriptions like the following:

> Let's have a look at these things let's have a look at these.
> (PAUSE 6 SECONDS)
> Now ^ Let's just have a look at these things here.
>
> (Taken from Sinclair and Coulthard 1975: 96)

The word "now" and the silent stress "^" would seem to indicate, not only that something happened during the pause, but also that that something and the previous utterance form a unit. This impression is corroborated by the analysis by the transcribers. Sinclair and Coulthard consider the word and the stress as a marker act which defines a boundary exchange. That is, the previous utterance and the pause form a complete transaction. However, that which completed the utterance, presumably the action of looking, was left off the record.

The deficiency is reflected in the analysis. This shows no 'answering' or 'follow-up' to the utterance and, because in Sinclair and Coulthard's scheme an act is defined in terms of its position in a sequence of acts, the utterance is identified as a 'metastatement'. The analysis, thus, fails to capture a recurrence of a pattern present in other parts of the lesson, consisting of a directive act and a non-verbal response. Clearly, a description of the action, perhaps something like "looking at the objects referred to", is needed within such a transcription, instead of PAUSE. Furthermore, an identification of it as an act of obeying or fulfilling is

necessary in the analysis. This would allow for the utterance to be recorded as some sort of directive.

Let us add that the coding of action should in principle follow similar, if not the same, criteria used in the coding of words. Sinclair and Coulthard sometimes record action, although only as non-verbal behaviour (NV). But, by definition (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975: 42), they can only identify it as a reaction act[3]. A system like theirs would miss greetings, thanks, offers and other acts we have mentioned in this chapter.

Another implication, which answers the main question in Chapter 2, is that a coding system requires two dimensions. The importance of this can be shown by reference to another two (non-consecutive) fragments in Sinclair and Coulthard's corpus:

> (1) And then they realized that what was on the second row was really repetition of what was on the-
> (2) And so they were able to translate and this is what they this is the result of the work that they did.
> They found that these were the symbols which meant these sounds.
>
> (Taken from Sinclair and Coulthard 1975: 75)

(1) is coded by the authors as an act of elicitation, whereas (2) is coded as an informative act. The system is unable to show that (1) is both an elicitation and an informative act, and that, so, in the dimension of dissertation, (1) and (2) form part of a larger unit. This points us to an issue that will be addressed in the following chapter: is larger unity a criterion to separate basic types of acts, *ie* to distinguish dimensions?

Let us now consider another implication. If it is important to register action in research, it is also important to take it into account in teaching. It will be easier for students to grasp the illocutionary forces of utterances in the foreign language if they actually see what these do. And there is a better guarantee that they will see what utterances do if they actually take part in the deontic game of utterances, if they come to be committed, or manage to avoid commitments, or commit others to action.

Perhaps what we have here is a simple test of communicative teaching. Previous methods and approaches, such as situational teaching (Corder 1966: 59), were centred on the use of sentences obtained by lexical substitution to talk about things or events in the classroom or presented in various sorts of images. This was supposed to provide meaningful repetition of grammatical patterns. Using discourse analysis terminology (which was not available to language teachers at the time), we can say that referring to things or events, 'situations', allowed for the expression of propositions. Some simple dissertation acts were also performed, but, as we shall see in Chapter 9, they represented a small set. The number of illocutionary act types realized was even more reduced; these were almost exclusively request and provision of information.

As said in Chapter 1, communicative teaching called the teacher's attention to speech acts. It introduced or gave prominence to activities like role-play, which should encourage students to do things with the sentences they are practising. However, nowadays, often classes which pretend to be communicative do not involve the students negotiating deontic outcomes, although they purport to bargain meanings. In other words, students still talk about situations, rather than being in them, and still practise limited classes of speech acts.

In Chapter 10, I shall argue that discussions of communicative situations are not undesirable, so long as they help the student to see the various elements of discourse. However, even if this is accepted, one has to grant that the student has to experience those elements in actual effect, at least at some points. Maybe a question like "Who has carried, or who has to carry out, which actions?", after linguistic exchanges in the classroom, can help us note the extent to which illocution is really at play. If the answer is always nobody, then very probably our classes are not communicative; they are, at best, situational.

This view suggests an extension of Thomas's concept of cross-cultural pragmatic failure. According to her, communication fails, even if what is said is comprehended, when what is meant by what is said is not understood. In our terms, this would be when the correct sentence but a wrong proposition or a wrong illocutionary act are interpreted. One example she gives is taking (3) as a "genuine request for information, rather than ... a complaint" (Thomas 1983: 93).

(3) Is this coffee sugared?

She is particularly concerned with systematic misunderstanding resulting from "the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another" or the application of "different beliefs about rights, 'mentionables', etc." (Thomas 1983: 101)

Thomas makes the point that the language teacher's task is not only to teach the grammar of the target language, but also to sensitize learners "to expect cross-cultural differences in the linguistic realizations of politeness, truthfulness, etc." and give them the tools to overcome pragmatic failure (Thomas 1983: 110). Adopting this perspective, the view of illocution that has evolved from the discussion in this chapter means that the student has to become aware of the commitments acts carry.

Promises do not bind speakers equally in all cultures. For some peoples, a marriage oath is for ever, while for others it can easily be broken. Likewise, in some countries appointments are kept religiously, but in others they are often regarded as flexible plans.

The consequences of not complying with obligations are variable, too. A study by Rall (1993) shows that Mexicans who say they are going to phone you tomorrow and do not are not necessarily regarded as insincere. The promise is simply not a strong obligation. According to the author, this is related, on the one hand, to given notions of time and certainty and, on the other, to promises being used to perform phatic[4] functions which are more important than the possible commitments involved. These might be characteristic, though not necessarily unique, features of Mexican culture.

We knew it was necessary for the language student, not only to learn how to speak words, but also how to do with them. Thomas has told us this means learning possibly different realizations of speech acts. We now see that it also means learning possibly different deontic implications of those acts.

A final implication is that a course designer has to bear in mind both illocution and dissertation. Even if she is going to deal with one in a more detailed fashion than the other, this has to be a conscious and principled decision. It might be justified that a textbook index contains only greetings, orders, promises, offers and the likes – to the exclusion of descriptions, observations, charac-

terizations and the likes –, if it is intended for, say, students who will have to participate in social encounters and that have little time to study the foreign language. But the omission will not be justified at all if it is the result of not knowing that no illocutionary acts could represent the whole domain of speech acts, however carefully they be chosen, because they are of a fundamentally different nature from dissertation acts.

Summary

Words commit action and, therefore, the language teacher and the classroom analyst ought to pay attention to the meaning of action. And they must also pay attention to the making of knowledge, which can accompany the commitment, but is not the same.

Chapter 6 notes

1. The title of Austin's (1962) famous collection of lectures is *How to do things with words*.

2. 'Deontic' is used in expressions like "deontic logic" and "deontic modality", which refer to systems that deal with obligation, prohibition and permission. It is often opposed to 'epistemic', which is used in connection with truth and falsity. The founding paper of deontic logic is von Wright 1951 and the most important contemporary discussion of deontic logic is von Wright 1991. Probably the clearest and most insightful discussion of deontic modality is found in Lyons 1977 (823-849).

3. In Sinclair and Coulthard's system, there is also the possibility of identifying some non-verbal responses, such as nods, as replies. In my terms, these are actions which indicate force of assertion. That is, the notion that actions interplay deontically with words is not present in the system, which is the point made in the body of the chapter. This is manifest in the term used by these authors to identify most non-verbal acts: 'reaction'.

4. The phatic function of language is to make contact between speakers (see *eg* Jakobson 1960), and a typical example of it is greeting. The word 'phatic' was first used by Malinowski (1935) to refer to ritualistic formulae which people in Papua used to identify themselves as participants in a community event and, thus, as members of the community. The point Rall makes in the article referred to in the chapter's body (Rall 1993) is that in Mexico promises to call serve to express an open disposition to be interlocutors again, in the future, though they do not necessarily require that action be taken to that effect at the specific moment referred to.