

P.E Akhimien

Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria

Perlocution: Healing the “Achilles’ Heel” of Speech Act Theory

Abstract. Seemingly infinite cause and effects controversy has held Perlocution Theory in gridlock, while other elements of John Austin’s Speech Act Theory have enjoyed wide acceptance and been the subject of much further study. This paper identifies the source of a problem in perlocution and proposes *context* as a replacement for the indeterminate *speaker’s intention* as a resolution of the impasse.

Key words: perlocution; context; speech act; pragmatics

1. Introduction

The term ‘perlocution’ traces its provenance to Austin’s (1962) desire to prove the limitations in the perception of language by the dominant logical positivists. Perlocution constitutes the third part of Austin’s trichotomic constituent of a speech act, others being locution and illocution. A speech act, simply put, is the act performed in an utterance (Akmajian, 2001:376).

Whereas locutionary and illocutionary acts have enjoyed wide scholarly attention right from the inception of the Speech Act Theory, (Searle 1969, 1976, and 1979; Vendler, 1972, Katz, 1977; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Ballmer and Brennestuhl, 1981; Edmondson 1981; Adegbija, 1982; Allan, 1986, 1994, 1998; Wierzbicka, 1987 and Ude, 1996) perlocution has been given very little attention. Apart from Cohen, (1973), Davis, (1979), Gu, (1993) and Marcu, (2000) Speech Act theorists hardly devote more than a paragraph or two to perlocution (Searle, 1969; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Adegbija, 1982 and Ude, 1996). The reasons for this disinterest vary. While some linguists argue that perlocutionary acts are

outside linguistics (Allan 1998, Akmajian et al, 2001) or more precisely, that perlocutionary acts are not as intimately related to linguistic structure as locution and illocution and so has little or nothing to contribute to the understanding of language (Akmajian et al, 2001:379) others argue that perlocution is far too complex for linguists advising that perlocution be left for philosophers interested in the effects of language (Adegbija, 1982, Allan 1998). Adegbija (1982:88) for example, opines that:

Perlocutionary effect is so difficult to recognise sometimes (in whatever way defined) and so complex and intriguing a phenomenon to characterise that it will most likely remain enigmatic for a very long time to come.

Adegbija therefore, calls for an interdisciplinary approach to tackling this ‘enigmatic monster’. Surprisingly, eleven years after the assertion above was published, Gu (1993) echoes Adegbija’s statement, lamenting that up till his time of writing, Speech Act literature contained just four articles on perlocution compared to the thousands on locution and illocution. He therefore reiterates the call for scholarly attention to perlocution, a call to be repeated yet again, twenty-two years later, in Marcu (2000). Gu (1993:406) believes the literature on perlocution is scarce because ‘the conception of perlocution is fundamentally misguided’.

Linguists have yet to agree on what constitutes perlocution and perlocutionary acts; in addition; scholars’ are divided on what constitutes a perlocutionary trigger. So controversial has perlocution become that two articles published almost ten years apart on the subject are entitled: ‘The perlocution Impasse’ and ‘Perlocution: The Achille’s Heel of the Speech Act Theory’ respectively. It is from the latter that this paper derives its title. As the title suggests, the objective of this paper is to heal this seemingly incurable heel and provide a clear framework for the characterisation of perlocution and the delimitation of perlocutionary acts/effect.

Although apparently problematic, perlocution remains an important, perhaps the most

important component of the Speech Act Theory and of course, the things we do with words because the whole essence of speaking or producing a meaningful utterance is to produce some form of effect on our hearer. In other words, perlocution underlies the act of communication. As Allan (1998) rightly notes, it is pointless informing a consumer that that product A is ‘tropicalised’, ‘durable’ and ‘made to international standard’ or that ‘there is a spider on H’s back’ or ‘asking for a glass of water’ if the addressees fail to respond appropriately.

2. Theoretical Foundation

A locutionary act is the act of ‘saying something’ meaningful in a language understood by both the speaker (S) and the hearer (H) (Austin, 1999:73). It comprises, according to Austin, of a rhetic, phonetic and phatic acts. An illocutionary act is the act performed in the utterance such as asking or answering (a question), ordering, advising and so on. (See Austin 1999:69). While defining and explicating locutionary and illocutionary acts remain relatively easy, the same cannot be said of perlocution or perlocutionary acts.

Saying something will often, or even normally *produces* certain consequential *effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons*; and it may be done with the design, intention or purpose of producing them; and we may then say, thinking of this, that the speaker has performed an act in the nomenclature of which reference is made (a) only obliquely or even (b) not at all to the performance of *the locutionary or illocutionary act*. We shall call the performance of this kind, the performance of a perlocutionary act. And the act performed, where suitable-essentially in cases falling under (a) – a perlocution.¹ (emphasis mine)

Taken systematically, the following may be extracted from the above definition:

1. S says something (produces an utterance)
2. S’s utterance (U) produces an effect on H, or other persons or even S himself.
3. S or H’s consequent action could be intentional or unintentional.

Put together, Austin’s definition: a perlocutionary act is the effect of a speaker’s utterance on the hearer or speaker or an over hearer. However, as would soon be made clear, this is not so

¹ All quotations are taken from: Austin, J.L. (1962; 1999) *How to Do Things with Words*.

straight forward as it appears. Although Austin makes a distinction between two types of perlocutionary acts- a perlocutionary object (the intended effect) and perlocutionary sequel (the unintended effect) (1999:71) explaining that an utterance with the perlocutionary object of alerting a hearer of the approach of a car, for example, may achieve a perlocutionary sequel of alarming or even annoying him, it is too apparent that Austin's definition of perlocution is fraught with inconsistencies.

3. Attempts at Characterising Perlocution

Levinson (1983:236), like Cooper (1973:193), observes that perlocution has been problematic from the days of Austin. He points to Austin's fuzzy demarcation of illocution and perlocution, a lack of clarity that has raised several questions:

- a. who performs a perlocutionary act - Speaker, Hearer or both?
- b. what is a perlocutionary cause – a locutionary act, or an illocutionary act, or both?
- c. do acts remotely connected with an utterance qualify as perlocutionary acts of that utterance?

Scholars' concerned with perlocutionary causes (Cooper, 1973; Cohen, 1973 and Davis (1979) argue, that almost anything (ranging from the sound of an utterance, its propositional content, the hearer's state of mind and the physical environment of the utterance) can cause a perlocutionary effect (act). This is referred to as the multiplicity or infinity cause thesis. They refer to Austin's definition stating that:

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience (1999:70)

This definition, they argue, suggests that a perlocutionary cause is the act of saying something, a locutionary act. Cooper (1973:194) argues that even the utterance, *Good evening*, said to oneself in a horrible voice on a lonely forest path (the speaker believing that he is alone) would perform the perlocutionary act of terrifying the wits out of someone listening even though there is no convention in English that makes 'good evening' a tool for terrifying a hearer. The act of terrifying the hearer in the above example qualifies as a

perlocutionary act, though unintended, because Austin's definition accommodates unintended acts as perlocutionary acts. (We have our reservations concerning this conclusion which shall be addressed later) Cooper therefore, concludes that any sentence (utterance) is a perlocutionary cause. What can be inferred from Cooper above is that perlocutionary cause (trigger) is a locutionary act.

In a similar vein, Gu (1993) argues that the utterance, *don't wake up*, said loud enough may be used to rouse a sleeping person. Correct as this may appear, since Austin admits that a perlocutionary act may be intentional or unintentional, one problem with both utterances is that, in both cases, S and H were not engaged in any communication. The obvious cause of the hearers' waking up or being terrified is the noise or vibration resulting from the utterances. Since S and H were not engaged in any communication and therefore, the utterances not directed at any of the hearers, H's being terrified or roused from sleep can not be termed perlocutionary. In the former, H was just an over hearer (Allan, 1998) and could well have been terrified by the noise, considering the physical context of the utterance – a lonely forest path. In the latter, H's waking up was caused by the noise and not the import of the utterance.

Using the utterance, *there is a spider on your lap*, which may be used to perform the act of frightening a hearer, Davis (1979) argues that there are other possible perlocutionary causes and identifies four:

1. The sound of the utterance – a phonetic act (where H is frightened by sounds)
2. The English Language where H is frightened by English language – a phatic act.
3. The word spider where H is frightened by spiders -a locutionary act
4. The import of the utterance, that is, the position of the spider relative to the body of H- an illocutionary act.

In 1, H is frightened by a phonetic act and by a phatic act in 2. In 3, H is frightened by a propositional act and lastly, by the illocutionary act in 4. As Davis rightly acknowledges, there are several other ways that the act of frightening H could have been achieved in the

above utterance. For example, it is possible to add that H may have been frightened by the burst of air stream from S's mouth in the course of producing the utterance (5), and lastly, the vibration caused by S's utterance (6). The last two are, of course, physical and extra-linguistic acts. Although Austin acknowledges that these acts may also qualify as perlocutionary acts, our concern shall be with the linguistic acts.

To determine which of the above should qualify as a perlocutionary trigger, Davis employs the following formula:

S's ϕ -ing H (to ψ) by uttering p is the performance of a perlocutionary act if and only if

- (1) S performs an illocutionary act or propositional act in uttering p
- (2) S means by p what p means ψ in the language of which it is a part
- (3) H understands S to mean to perform some illocutionary act or propositional acts by uttering p
- (4) H understands S to mean something by p
- (5) What H understands S to mean causes H to ψ or to be ϕ -ed.

S is a variable designating speaker; H, a hearer; the hearer can be the person addressed, the speaker or someone else ϕ , a variable for perlocutionary act verb. The brackets indicate the optionality of its content –to. P is any sentence or sentence fragment well formed in the grammar of a language and ψ , any verb phrase that preserves grammaticality.

Ignoring the technicalities, the formula above translates as follows:

H's action is considered perlocutionary if and only if

- 1) S performs an illocutionary act
- 2) S means by the utterance what it means in the language
- 3) H understands S to mean to perform some illocutionary act (inform him of something)
- 4) H understands S to mean something by the utterance and finally
- 5) What H understands S to mean causes H's action

The thrust of Davis' proposal is that for an act to be classified perlocutionary, it must result from both S and H using their language conventionally in addition to an intention by S to cause an effect in H (Davis 1979:230). With this schema, Davis effectively eliminates

phonetic, phatic (locutionary) and extra-linguistic acts as perlocutionary causes. In other words, Davis is of the belief that a perlocutionary trigger must be an illocutionary act, the exact opposite of Cooper's proposal.

Davis' schema suggests that saying alone is sufficient to activate a perlocutionary act. Gu (1993:3) disagrees with this, stating that even where S and H are operating according to the conventions of the language, the determinant of H's perlocutionary act includes other extra linguistic variables. For example, notes Gu, if S informs H that an earthquake is imminent, H's reaction (perlocutionary act) would be determined not only by the utterance but by other information available to H at the time of the utterance. If H sees S as a doomsday prophet and H does not believe in prophets his reaction would be different than it would be if H knows or is informed that S is an expert seismologist. Gu argues that what makes the difference would be the influence S has over H based on his expert knowledge and calls this *verbal-influential causation*.

Verbal-influential causation, according to Gu, includes power relations between S and H, contingencies, and the social relationship between S and H. What this exposes is that, in a perlocutionary act, H is not just a passive or robotic participant but an active one. This we fully subscribe to. From this premise, Gu proposes,

[with the r]estoration of the addressee to the status of an active agent, and recognition of mental acts lead to the conclusion that the so-called perlocutionary effects are not in fact caused by S, but actively produced by H. who has the claim to the agency of the effects. Thus, the perlocutionary act cannot be said to be performed by S alone. It is a joint endeavour between S and H. It involves S's performance of speech acts and H's performance of response-acts. The relation-between S's speech acts and H's response-acts is anything but causal (1993:21).

In other words, since H is an active participant, a perlocutionary act should be seen as a joint act, a status that must be acknowledged. In effect, rather than saying S produces a perlocutionary act in H, it should be said that S causes H to perform a perlocutionary act in order to recognise the individuality and contribution of the two participants. This is also

problematic, as Gu seems to have ignored the fact that even in his example, the utterance remains causative.

Scholars have wondered how to delimit perlocutionary act where several acts result from a locutionary or illocutionary act. In fact apostles of the *multiple/infinity-effects thesis* (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Adebija, 1982 and Marcu, 2000:2) opine that there is no limit to what can result from a speech act. Adebija, (1982:188/189) illustrates the infinity problem with the following anecdote:

If I read a Dettol ad and I'm infuriated by it, slam the paper down so it breaks my favourite glass and then cut myself while cleaning up the mess and possibly wreck my car on the way to buy a bandage

He rightly wonders where to draw the perlocutionary act line, since the acts of infuriation, glass breakage and car wreckage result from the act of reading the Dettol ad. Adebija is at a loss whether they should be categorised as perlocutionary acts of the advertisement. Although the advertiser could not have imagined, through any stretch of the imagination, that his advertisement would produce such extensive effects, Adebija's poser is relevant because Austin (above) states that a perlocutionary act may be intentional or unintentional. As a way out, Bach and Harnish (1979:17) propose a restriction of perlocutionary acts to the act(s) S intended to produce in H with the utterance and all other (unintended) acts referred to as perlocutionary effects.

The problem with Bach and Harnish's proposal is that a speaker's intention is often indeterminate. This is obvious in the following conundrum from Gu (1993). If S sees H's house on fire, rushes to H and informs him that his house is on fire. S would have performed an illocutionary act of informing and simultaneously, the perlocutionary act of alerting H. Suppose H is alerted, becomes alarmed, and dies as a result of a heart condition. How do we determine S's intention, whether S is aware of H's heart's condition and therefore intends to alert or alarm and kill him, or simply intends to alert H to the fire accident? Alternatively,

suppose H is secretly joyful because H had set the house on fire in the first place, in order to claim insurance money. Clearly, while an intention criterion is attractive, because of its indeterminacy, intention alone cannot be a determinant of perlocutionary act. There is, therefore, a need to find a more suitable criterion to determine perlocution and delimit perlocutionary acts.

4. Toward an Adequate Characterisation of Perlocution

Clearly, there is a need to effectively characterise perlocution and delimit perlocutionary acts or effects, but first, it is important to address its definitional weakness, inherited from Austin, as already noted by Gu (1993). Part of Austin's definition of perlocution reads:

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of *the audience*, or of *the speaker*, or of other Persons (emphasis mine)

This, as already pointed out elsewhere in this paper, is fraught with inconsistencies if not outright contradictions. It is apparent that the inclusion of S and H as possible subjects on whom the effects of an utterance is produced (let's call it *perlocutionary effect* for now) is problematic. Beyond the inclusion of S and H in Austin's definition (above) no other available literature on Speech Act (to the knowledge of this author) supports it. For example, Allan (1998:10) is of the view,

Speaker's perlocutionary act is the act of achieving a perlocutionary effect as a result of hearer recognising the locution and illocutionary forces in [utterance] (U). So, a perlocution is hearer's behavioural response to the meaning of an utterance.

Levinson (1983:236) defines a perlocutionary act as,

the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstance of the utterance

Not inconsistent with these, Ogunsiiji (2002:211) paraphrasing Austin, puts it thus:

saying something will often produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, actions of the hearer. It is such an act of producing some effects on the hearer that Austin calls the perlocutionary act

None of the above definitions assigns perlocutionary effects to the speaker. Rather, a speaker performs a perlocutionary act, that is, the act of producing some effect on the hearer. A perlocutionary act is, therefore, seen as a process, while perlocutionary effect is the act of H consequent on S's utterance. Put differently, perlocution is referred to as the effect of S's utterance on H. Even Gu, above, does not object to this. Thus Bach and Harnish's distinction is consequently erroneous. So, we are left with a delimitation of perlocutionary effects attributable to illocutionary acts.

5. Redefining Perlocution

With the restriction of perlocutionary effect to H, it becomes necessary to redefine the two terms. This would also facilitate a determination of a perlocutionary cause. The utterance *fire!* may be used by an army commander to order a soldier to perform the perlocutionary act of shooting a criminal. However, if in the process of shooting, the soldier loses balance, slips and falls, it would be ludicrous to treat the action of falling as a perlocutionary act of the illocutionary act of ordering since it did not result from an understanding of the S's utterance or is the utterance used to make a hearer fall in any context. The soldier's act of shooting, which results from a conventional understanding of the speaker's illocutionary act (an order), is the only one that qualifies to be considered as the perlocutionary effect of the utterance. The act of falling may, at best, be seen as perlocutionary sequel. In this way, the actions of *slamming the paper*, *breaking the glass* and *wrecking the car* will be effectively eliminated by contexts as perlocutionary effects of the advertisement. A perlocutionary effect should result directly from H's understanding of S's illocutionary act, taking the context of the utterance into consideration. Thus this eliminates all remote acts or effects of the utterance. In this way, the cut, the breaking of the glass and the wrecking of the car in the above anecdote are again, eliminated. What is therefore left is the act of infuriation. It also eliminates the reliance on the indeterminate S's intention.

A perlocutionary act may therefore be defined, using Davis' schema, as the process or act of bringing some form of effect on H by S through language. The act or effect brought about by S's utterance is the perlocutionary effect or simply put, perlocution (cf Levinson, 1983). Perlocution may therefore, be defined as an act of H directly resulting from H's understanding of S's illocutionary point as determined by the context of the utterance. Therefore, a perlocutionary cause, from a narrow perspective, is an illocutionary act. That notwithstanding, since an illocutionary act cannot exist without a locutionary act, it is safe to treat them as single events that trigger a perlocutionary effects.

It is equally important to stress that a perlocutionary effect could be, using Gu's (1993) classificatory system, **Motor reflexive response**: as in, *H jumped as a result the utterance Snake!* **Emotive response**, such as an emotion caused by an emotive message after H's processing the message as in, *H was frightened by being told that there was a spider on the lap.* Perlocutionary effects may also be a **Cognitive response** (to become aware of something after processing -and evaluating the message); **Negative response** as in H stopped the present behaviour or refrained from indulging in certain behaviour; **Verbal response** such as performing a speech act as in, *H answered S's question.* etc. or **Physical response** such as performing a physical act as in, *H pulled a gun and shot the criminal at S's ordering 'Shoot him!'* (cf. Gaines, 1979: 1; Allan, 1998:7).

These responses or effects can only occur after H has processed S's information vis-à-vis other information at H's disposal at the time of the utterance. This leads us to the active nature of H in the interaction, and of course, in the performance of a perlocutionary act as just being recognised by Speech Act scholars (Gu, 1993 and Marcu, 2000). Contrary to the impression created by previous Speech Act scholars, perlocutionary acts do not result as a simple consequence of H's understanding S's illocutionary act. The utterance must pass through intervening cognitive processing (cf. Ogden and Richards, 1923). Even the simple

utterance, *there is a spider on your lap* undergoes this process in order to produce some result. The process may be illustrated with the following diagram.

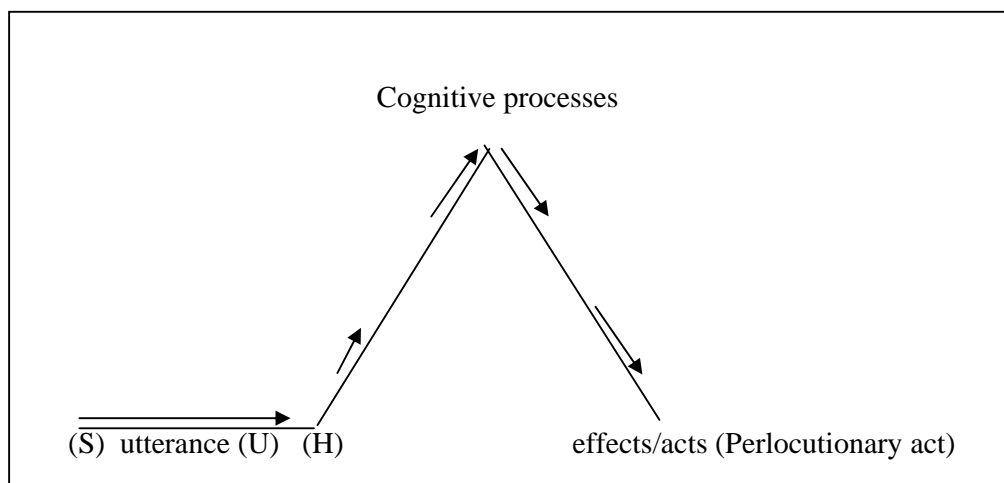


Figure 1. Diagram showing utterance / perlocutionary act relationship

As the broken triangle above shows, on the reception of S's locutionary act, the message goes to a cognitive processing centre where H analyses the linguistic as well as other contextual variables within his scope to produce an act termed perlocutionary act/effect. What this shows (and rightly pointed out by Gu, 1993) is that in the performance of a perlocutionary act, H is not robotic. For example if A and B are friends and A says to B, *Can I have your car for an hour?* B's response would depend on not only A's utterance but also, other information available to B. Such extra information may include whether A can drive and is licensed to drive. B might also consider A's driving habits, among other things. If B is aware that A has wrecked five cars through careless driving, his response may be different than it would if B knew A to be a careful driver. This is also true for kinds of messages we receive, whether they are pure statements of fact, such as *John is a boy* or the predictive *the sun will rise tomorrow*, or a directive from the boss, *Please file those papers*, or expressives as in the apology, *I'm sorry I stepped on your toes*, or an advertising message inviting us to buy a brand of television or tooth paste. H processes the message, taking into cognisance the linguistic (message) and extra-linguistic variables available to produce a response act:

perlocution. Despite the processing of the message by H, S's illocutionary act remains causal; thus we disagree with Gu's position as stated.

6. Role of Context in Perlocution

Related to the above is the need to accord context a greater priority in the discussion of perlocution. It is noted that much of the previous discussions on perlocution are based on contrived and decontextualised utterances that offer little or no practical use. Linguists acknowledge the crucial role of context in our understanding of the language (Levinson, 1983; Verschueren, 1999 and Grundy, 2000). Searle (1976) has rightly acknowledged that the context of an utterance determines its illocutionary force. This is also true, as shown in the preceding instances, in all areas of language use. For example, the utterance, *the ice over there is thin*, may be used to warn a skater even though there is no convention in English whereby such an utterance is so used conventionally, as a warning (Fakoya, 1998). As a warning, the utterance derives its illocutionary force from the context. Its force in another context such as a Geography class would certainly be different, possibly informative. In the same vein the perlocutionary effects of being terrified with a *good evening*, as above, is dependent on the context. The same applies to Davis' *there is a spider on your lap*. For example, if S utters the same utterance, *there is a spider on your lap* and it turns out that H had deliberately kept the spider there, the perlocutionary effect would be perhaps, a smile not a fright. There is therefore a need to give an adequate consideration to context in an adequate description of perlocution. Previous Speech Act analysts, especially those interested in perlocution, have so far ignored this crucial factor. This is partly responsible for the present problem and militates against effectively defining perlocution and delimiting perlocutionary acts/effects. With a framework as the above definition, the question of infinity causes and effects is hopefully, laid to rest, but there is still need to give perlocution more attention than it presently receives.

7. Conclusion

This paper sets out to ‘heal’ the Achilles’ heel of Speech Act Theory – perlocution. The paper addresses the infinity cause thesis and agrees with Davis (1979) that a perlocutionary cause is the illocutionary act together with the context of the utterance. It observes that while Gu’s is a brilliant submission, his failure to admit the causality of S’s utterance is erroneous. The paper proposes the restriction of perlocutionary acts to those acts of H resulting from a H’s understanding of the import of S’s utterance. A major finding of this paper is that previous Speech Act analysts did not give context a serious consideration in their study of perlocution leading them into philosophical blind alleys. The paper therefore argues for a serious consideration to be given to context for an accurate description of perlocution. This paper does not and cannot pretend to have provided all the answers on the topic but it, certainly, hopes to ignite scholarly interest in this very exciting aspect of human communication — the perlocution phenomenon.

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