

ON THE LOGIC OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTS

CHRISTIAN PLUNZE

Cognitive Linguistics
University of Frankfurt
Plunze@lingua.uni-frankfurt.de

In this paper I answer the question how it could be that someone already communicates if his or her communicative intention is recognized by an addressee — without relying on the somewhat mysterious assumption that the *recognition* of a communicative intention implies somehow the *fulfillment* of this intention.

1. Communicative Intentions

Someone who utters a sentence usually communicates something (in particular, if he or she performs an illocutionary act like an assertion, a warning or a promise), but not every utterance act is communicative, and, of course, it is possible to communicate something without using language. Hence, the act type to-communicate-something-to-someone cannot be defined by reference to a particular type of *doing* like the utterance of a sentence. If one restricts oneself, as I will do, to intentional communicative acts, it is more promising to rely on the notion of a communicative intention. After all, it holds that S, by doing something, communicates intentionally to an addressee H that A only if S, by her doing, intends to bring it about that it is communicated to H that A

Given this connection between communicative acts and communicative intentions the former notion can be defined with reference to the notion of a communicative intention if one explicates the *goal* of this intention (i.e., the fact that S intends to bring about, namely that it is communicated to H that A) without reference to the notion of communication. If one, as I do, thinks that a communicative intention is an intention to bring it about that the addressee believes something, it holds:

- (N) By doing α , S communicates (intentionally) to H that A only if S intends to bring it about that H believes that A

Now, a striking feature of communicative acts is that H's recognition of S's communicative intention implies that S communicated to H something, i.e., it holds:

- (C) If H recognizes that S, by doing α , intends to bring it about that it is

communicated to H that A, then S, by doing α , communicates to H that A

Consider, for example, the following case: S, waiting at the airport in Lisbon for the departure of her flight to Paris, wants to inform her husband H about the time of her arrival. In order to do so, she sends him the following text message on his handy: *I will arrive at midnight*. Now, suppose that S's husband has been told that (due to bad weather) the airport in Paris will be closed soon. Hence, he does not acquire the belief that S will arrive at midnight. Nevertheless, it seems hard to deny that S communicated to H that she will arrive at midnight. It would be absurd to say something like 'S didn't communicate to H that she will arrive at midnight because he didn't believe her'. The opposite is correct: Although he didn't believe her, she has communicated to him the (alleged) time of her arrival.

Assumption (C) does not claim that the recognition of a communicative intention implies that S communicates *successfully*. However, many authors (Searle 1969, Bach and Harnish 1979, Sperber and Wilson 1986, Recanati 1987) endorse exactly this. According to these authors it holds:

- (C*) If H recognizes that S, by doing α , intends to bring it about that it is communicated to H that A, then S, by doing α , communicates *successfully* to H that A

Assumption (C*) is puzzling. It seems natural to explain the distinction between successful and unsuccessful communicative acts by reference to the distinction between a fulfilled and an unfulfilled communicative intention. Roughly, S communicates *successfully* to H that A if and only if the following two conditions are fulfilled:

- (i) By doing α , S intends to bring it about that it is communicated to H that A
- (ii) S's doing α brings it about (in the manner expected by S) that it is communicated to H that A

Accordingly, S communicates *unsuccessfully* if and only if (i) is fulfilled, but (ii) is not.

Given this explication of the distinction between successful and unsuccessful communication, the assumption (C*) is tantamount to the assumption that the recognition of a communicative intention implies the *fulfillment* of this intention. But how should it be possible that a communicative intention is fulfilled if it is recognized by the addressee?

If (C*) is true, a communicative intention cannot be a perlocutionary one. In particular, if (C*) is true, (N) must be false because it is clearly possible both that H recognizes that S intends to make him believe that A and that H does not acquire the belief that A (because, for instance, H thinks that S is a liar). Hence, advocates of (C*)

usually claim that a communicative intention is an 'illocutionary intention' with an 'illocutionary goal' that is of such an extraordinary kind that (C*) comes out as true.¹

On my view it is unclear whether (C*) is really fulfilled within illocutionary frameworks that have been put forward so far. Moreover, since I think that (N) is more plausible than (C*) (after all, in the example given above something has gone wrong because H does not believe that she will arrive at midnight), hence, I think that (C*) is false. However, the weaker assumption (C) seems true. Let me therefore sketch an perlocutionary account of communicative acts that can explain why (C) is true.

2. Communicative Acts: Presence, Success, and Failure

Everybody agrees that S communicates successfully only if her communicative intention is fulfilled. However, usually it is also assumed that S does not communicate at all if her communication intention is not fulfilled. If this assumption is true, it is impossible to reconcile (N) with (C) since (C) is true even if the intention to bring it about that someone believes something is not fulfilled.

However, the assumption that the non-fulfillment of a communicative intention implies that S does not communicate by no means follows from the explication of the distinction between successful and unsuccessful communicative acts (obviously, this explication implies only that S does not communicate successfully if her communicative intention is not fulfilled). Moreover, I think this assumption is false. In the following I will argue, first, that the mere presence of a certain intention (or intentions) can be a conceptual sufficient condition for the presence of an act of a certain type, and, second, that this holds for the act type to communicate-something-to-someone.

The class of act types can be divided into, as I will say, result-defined act types and (pure) goal-defined act types.² Here are some examples:

RESULT-DEFINED ACT TYPES: S opened a window; S deceived H; S boiled water ;
S killed H; ...
GOAL-DEFINED ACT TYPES: S asked H whether A is the case; S lied to H,
S searched for her sunglasses; ...

A common feature of all mentioned act types is that someone performs such an act by

¹ For example, it has been claimed that (C*) is true for an intention to bring it about that H has a reason to believe that A (cf. Bach and Harnish 1979, Recanati 1987) .

² The following distinction was made (somewhat differently) also by Ryle 1949 and Kenny 1963.

doing something more basic: One kills someone by poisoning a Martini or by shooting a gun; and one asks someone something by uttering a sentence or making a gesture. Henceforth, I will express this as follows: By doing (something of type) α , S does something of type β . As before, I will assume both that S does α intentionally and that the fact that S has done α does not imply that S's doing α is also a doing of type β .

If β is a result-defined act type, it holds that S's doing α must bring about a certain effect (or effects) in order to perform an act of this type β at all. For example, if a poisoning of a Martini does not bring it about that someone dies, the poisoning of the Martini is not a killing. In contrast, if β is a goal-defined act type, the mere presence of a certain intention (or intentions) is conceptually sufficient for the performance of an act of this type β . For example, X's looking into a drawer is a search for her sunglasses even if she does not find them given that S intends to bring it about that S finds her sunglasses. The presence of this intention is sufficient for its being the case that S's looking into a drawer is a search.

In the light of the distinction between result-defined and goal-defined act types one may ask whether the act type to-communicate-to-someone-something is a result- or a goal-defined. Here are three arguments for the view that the mere presence of a communicative intention is (conceptual) sufficient for the presence of a communicative act.

First, if an act type β is a result-defined act type, there is no reasonable distinction between a successful and an unsuccessful *performance* of an act of this type. Consider, for instance, the following two sentences:

- (1) S killed H successfully by poisoning a Martini.
- (2) S killed H unsuccessfully by poisoning a Martini.

Obviously, both sentences are hard to understand due to the fact that the act type to-kill-someone is result-defined. In particular, the second sentence is extremely bizarre because the speaker presupposes (due to the use of 'killed') that a killing has occurred. But then it is unclear what could be meant by the qualification 'unsuccessfully'. Probably not 'unintentionally' — an utterance of 'S killed H unintentionally by poisoning a Martini' give no reason to cast doubt on the conceptual competence of the speaker. The interpretation that remains is that by using 'unsuccessfully' the speaker claims that the defining result of the killing has not been realized. But this contradicts the presupposition that a killing has occurred which explains the oddity of (2).

In contrast, no oddities arise, if an act type β is goal-defined:

- (3) S searched successfully for her sunglasses by looking into a drawer.
- (4) S searched unsuccessfully for her sunglasses by looking into a drawer.

Now, if communicative acts are result-defined, one should expect that (5) and (6) are odd:

- (5) S communicated successfully to H that it is raining by uttering 'It is raining'.
- (6) S communicated unsuccessfully to H that it is raining by uttering 'It is raining'.

But (5) and (6) are faultless. So we have a first reason to suppose that communicative acts are tokens of a corresponding goal-defined act type.

A *second* reason for this view relies on the fact that only verbs that characterize goal-defined act types can be used in a so-called explicit performative sentence. It is not possible (for obvious reasons) to use a verb that characterizes a result-defined act type in an explicit performative even if the act type under consideration can be performed by uttering a sentence. Consider the contrast between (7) and (8):

- (7) I hereby assert that it is raining.
- (8) I hereby convince you that it is raining.

Significantly, 'to communicate' is on par with 'to assert':

- (9) I hereby communicate to you that it is raining.

Third, and most importantly, the view favored here delivers a straightforward explanation for the above mentioned feature (C) of communicative behavior. Let me illustrate this by assuming that communicative acts are defined as follows:

- (D) By doing α , S communicates to H that A:=
By doing α , S intends to bring it about that H believes that A

According to (D), the mere presence of an intention to bring it about that someone believes that A is (conceptually) sufficient for the presence of a communicative act. Now, someone who recognizes that Q arguably also recognizes that P if the sentence that expresses Q entails analytically the sentence that expresses P. Given this principle, it follows from (D) that H recognizes that S communicates to him that A just if H recognizes that S intends to make him believe that A. Hence, the recognition of a communicative intention is tantamount to the recognition that S communicates something because *to recognize a communicative intention is just to recognize that someone already communicates* — as H recognizes that S searches for her sunglasses if H recognizes that S does what she does with the intention to find her sunglasses.

Obviously, according to (D) (or according to any other definition that characterizes communicative acts as goal-defined), it is false to say that S

communicated to H successfully that A if H has recognized merely her communicative intention because this intention is not fulfilled. However, according to (D) (or according to any other definition that characterizes communicative acts as goal-defined) its *also* false to say that S's doing α is merely an *attempt* to communicate if it holds both that S does α with a communicative intention and that this intention is not fulfilled — as it is false to say that S's looking into a drawer was merely an attempt to *search* for her sunglasses if she did not find them. From the perspective of (D) the opposite view rests either on a confusion between an attempt to perform an communicative act and an attempt to bring about the defining goal of a communicative act or on a confusion between an unsuccessful performance of a goal-defined act type and the non-performance of a result-defined act type. — I don't communicate because you don't believe me? No. You don't believe me although I communicate.

Bibliography

- Bach, K. & R. M. Harnish: 1979, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass
- Grice, H. P.: 1957, Meaning , in: *The Philosophical Review* 66, 377-388.
- Kenny, A.: 1963, *Action, Emotion and Will*, Routledge, London
- Recanati, F.: 1987, *Meaning and Force. The Pragmatics of Performative Utterances*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Ryle, G.: 1949, *The Concept of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Searle, J. R.: 1969, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass
- Sperber, D. and D. Wilson: 1986, *Relevance: communication and cognition*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford