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Speech Acts, Deixis and Advertising Language

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The kind of linguistic "performance" that I will concentrate on in this paper is related to the seminal work of Austin and Searle in speech act theory. In other words, I will take a pragmatic stance on this issue. The corpus for this study is composed of a series of magazine advertisements that were published in several English periodicals such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Time*, *The Economist*, etc. In this study, I will focus on the way advertising language makes use of a certain range of speech act categories, namely commissives and directives, in order to perform some communicative action. Some of the issues that I will raise in the course of this paper will deal with the most striking features of those speech acts we find in ads. Thus, I will discuss pervasive devices like implicitness and indirectness, as well as their related effects. In the last part of this article, I will address a slightly different problem. On the basis of the various conclusions that I will draw from the first section, I will widen the scope of this survey and investigate the area of potential overlap between speech act theory and another pragmatic concept, i.e. deixis. I will claim that there is evidence to argue that commissive and directive speech acts involve a deictic marker. Thus, I will suggest that commissives and directives pertain to a form of person deixis.

As a general remark on the rather intricate labelling used in speech act theory, I will first pin down some of the notions that we will look at in the following paragraphs. In particular, given the general title of this volume – "Performance" – , it seems appropriate to draw a clear distinction between the *true* performatives and the other types of speech acts. Following Searle (*Speech Acts*), Levinson and Leech, I should say that, strictly speaking, the topic of this paper is the use of illocutionary force in advertising communication. Thus, I restrict the category of "performatives" to highly institutionalised utterances such as

I declare the meeting open.

I hereby christen this ship the HMS Belfast.

These two utterances, and similar ones, are described as declarations in Leech. On the other hand, if true performatives belong to a limited set of social or institutional acts (see Leech), namely declarations, it is still the case that other utterances have an illocutionary force too, and consequently that they do *perform* acts. Moreover, my data does not provide me with a single occurrence of a true performative. And, although this should not lead us to conclude that they cannot appear in such a context, one can safely infer from this observation that declarations are not found very often in advertising communication. A likely explanation is that the strong social and/or institutional requirements attached to the successful performance of declarations prevent them from being used in an advertising context. The action performed by the utterance in such a case would be doomed to fail, as it will not meet the necessary requirements.[1] The purpose of my account, then, is to pay closer attention to the other types of illocutionary acts performed in contemporary magazine advertisements.

Without going into detail, one of the reasons why advertisements constitute an excellent corpus for these issues has to do with the extremely convoluted nature of this form of communication. Ads play hide-and-seek with consumers, pretending not to be what they are, using complex linguistic devices to conceal plain facts. Ads constitute the epitome of indirectness and implicitness. This is the reason why ads make up a first class real-life corpus for speech act analysis. In this context, I wish to concentrate on two particular categories of illocutionary acts where the inherent indirectness of this mass medium comes out very clearly, viz. commissives and directives.[2] This choice is not arbitrary, as I will work on advertisements along the lines defined by Bach and Harnish in their book on *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. That is to say, I have deliberately chosen to stress the importance of the larger interactional framework within which the speech act is uttered. An advertising speech act will be regarded as an act of communication between participants involved in a process of linguistic interaction. In that sense, I have decided to focus on those two categories of speech act for which the interactional component constitutes the prominent feature. And indeed, an advertising page in a magazine can appropriately be described as a piece of linguistic interaction between an advertiser and a (potential) con-

[1] On the other hand, one could think of a fictional world, as is very often displayed in ads, that would set up the appropriate social/institutional context to allow a successful performative utterance. I have not come across any such example yet.

[2] For a detailed account of the taxonomy of speech acts, see Leech, who comments on and follows up the discussion presented in J.R. Searle, "The classification of illocutionary acts," *Language in Society* 5 (1979): 1-24.

sumer. Ultimately, because of their strong interactional property, commissives and directives seem to be the best candidates to support a parallel with person deixis.

Commissives

The first category of illocutionary acts performed in advertising that I wish to look at is that of the so-called commissives. At this stage in my research, I am unable to provide precise statistics for this, but it appears very clear that communicators often perform commissive illocutionary acts. What do they look like? With commissives, the speaker commits herself to making the world fit her words via the speaker/herself (adapted from Yule 54). The literature usually presents the act of promising as the prototypical commissive act. Indeed, given the particular type of interaction involved, it is quite obvious that commissive illocutionary forces should be part of advertising messages: standard ads work more or less like a contract between the advertiser and the addressee, where the advertiser promises the addressee – who is also a consumer – a better life if he buys the product. As a consequence, though, advertisers and the company for whom they are designing the campaign have to face the legal consequences of public, commissive illocutionary acts, such as those performed in ads. Because the utterance of these illocutionary acts commits the speaker to the truth of her proposition, she can be held responsible if the propositional content of her commissive act turns out to be false. We can draw an interesting parallel here between the pragmatic failure of a promise contained in an advertisement and the legal concept of deceitful advertising. This is a case where our society has officially legislated against the infelicitous performance of speech acts. As a result, communicators stay away from straightforward commissives.

This is not to say that they avoid them completely. Rather, they choose an indirect or implicit formulation. Thus, they will avoid the legal consequences that might ensue after they have performed an explicit commissive act. Pragmatics has shown that implicit meaning can be used in order not to take any responsibility for what one says. In other words, implicitness functions as a face-saving device that can protect both the addressee and the speaker.[3] In

[3] For a discussion of the notion of face-preserving acts, the reader should consult P. Brown and S.C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). The chapter on negative politeness deals more specifically with issues such as implicitness and indirectness in relation with speech acts.

this case, very clearly, to choose an implicit illocutionary force protects the speaker.

In speech act theory, implicitness has a very restricted sense. It refers to an illocutionary utterance that does not have a corresponding illocutionary verb as one of its constituents. For example, if, when making a promise, you do not use the verb "promise," then you are said to have performed an implicit illocutionary act of promising. According, to this definition, it seems very difficult to find commissives in ads that could be described as explicit. And when one does, they look like the following example: [4]

> Lands' End (published in *The Economist*, October 19th-25th 1996)
> A clothing company sells its products through a catalogue. The ad consists of a long description that tells us how to buy something from that catalogue and why their prices are so low. In the lower right corner of that full-page ad, we find a coupon for ordering a free catalogue, as well as the logo and slogan of the company: "Lands' End / Direct Merchants [displayed as embroidered on a garment's label] / Guaranteed. Period."

Here you find an explicit commissive verb – *guarantee* – in the slogan, but it is not obvious what is being guaranteed, moreover, this explicit illocutionary verb is in the passive voice and there is no overt agent. In this example, we find a greatly weakened version of what Austin described as the prototypical explicit illocutionary performance, viz. a combination of active voice and first person pronoun. It becomes obvious from the previous ad that the contrast between implicit and explicit should be regarded as a matter of degree. The Lands' End advertisement demonstrates that it is a long way from true, straightforward explicitness.

But as I said, this is an exception, and it is much more likely that you will find implicit commissives, as in the Pantene ad below:

> Pantene (published in *Cosmopolitan*, UK edition, November 1996)
> The headline running across the top of this full page ad reads: "IT WON'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT BUT IT WILL HAPPEN." The text then goes on describing the positive effect that their shampoo will have on your hair in 14 days. The punch line claims "For hair that looks so healthy it shines."

In this example, you get a typical occurrence of implicit illocutionary force. The explicit illocutionary verb is left out and the reader has to retrieve it by

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[4] For technical as well as financial reasons, the editor and I have decided to give a short description of the relevant aspects of each ad rather than provide the reader with a facsimile. I will try and make these descriptions as readable as possible.

means of a short inferential process involving Gricean implicatures. It is very clear here why it would be extremely dangerous to perform an explicit promise.

Indirectness is another way for advertisers to perform commissive acts and yet keep themselves covered. Indirectness has been analysed in detail in Searle ("Indirect Speech Acts"), where indirect speech acts are defined as utterances whose surface structures perform an illocutionary act that differs from the actual, deep, illocutionary force of that utterance. So, for instance, an assertive surface structure would really count as a directive act, as in *I want you to stay* where the actual meaning is *Stay!* In fact, Searle found that indirectness follows its own rules. According to him, if you want to perform an indirect commissive act, you will either state or question one of the felicity conditions related to this particular speech act.[5] Without going into a complete explanation, let me just remind you of one of the so-called felicity conditions for promises, which can be paraphrased like this: In order to perform a felicitous promise, the speaker must be capable of doing the action A as stated in the propositional content of that promise.

Following Searle, then, the speaker can perform an indirect promise by stating that she is capable of doing the action described in the propositional content of the utterance. Two examples will help us understand this whole idea of indirect illocutionary acts. In the following advertisement the speakers perform an indirect promise, while on the surface level they merely state their ability to do something:

> Novell (published in *The Economist*, October 19th-25th 1996)
> The headline is centred at the top of a full page and claims: "NOVELL SOLUTIONS CAN GET YOU A FULLY FUNCTIONAL INTRANET TODAY," where the important piece of information is contained in the adverb *fully*.

Informally, according to Searle's definition of indirect speech acts, the inferential pattern takes the reader to reinterpret *can get* as "will get." The latter form immediately reminds us of another case we studied earlier, namely the Pantene ad. As you recall, this was a case of an implicit illocutionary act. If this interpretative procedure is correct, then Austin was indeed right to assume that any utterance can be – and in fact is – interpreted as an explicit performative utterance. For, as we saw with the Pantene case, a second inferential stage is triggered by the implicit illocutionary act, in order for the

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[5] Yule (50) defines felicity conditions as a set of "expected or appropriate circumstances [...] for the performance of a speech act to be recognized as intended."

reader to retrieve the corresponding explicit formulation. So, in the Novell ad, the full pattern of implicatures starts with *can get*, which is reinterpreted as "will get," which, in turn, is understood as meaning "we promise to get." The Dollond ad below works on a similar schema:

> Dollond & Aitchison (published in *Cosmopolitan*, UK edition, November 1996) The headline, above the picture of a woman whose eyes have different colours (i.e. brown and blue), says: "We can make your brown eyes blue." They advertise coloured contact lenses.

And in fact, if you look around, you will see that this surface structure: *first person pronoun + modal "can" + main verb* is very frequent in ads. Yet another example of this same technique can be found if you think of an everyday situation where one would perform an indirect commissive act by saying *I can do that*, meaning "I promise I will do it." Over the years, I have learned that it is better to avoid such statements.

What these examples show is that advertisers often make use of implicit or indirect illocutionary acts in order to hide and/or weaken the actual illocutionary force of advertising utterances. Implicitness as well as indirectness appear to function as protective or defensive devices. With the second type of illocutionary force, we will deal with very different phenomena, analysing illocutionary devices that could be seen as offensive or aggressive.

Directives

The second category of illocutionary acts is that of directive acts. With directives, the speaker wants to make the world fit her words via the addressee (adapted from Yule 54). Requests are often presented as the prototypical directive act. Thinking of the true nature of advertising discourse, directives seem to be a more appropriate type of illocutionary act to appear in advertisements. Indeed, what 90% of ads try to do is to urge the addressee to buy a product. In terms of speech act theory, one would say that ads aim at a common perlocutionary effect. This also happens to fit very appropriately into the definition I gave before. Therefore, one could argue that in 90% of ads you have an underlying directive act that would read something like: *I request that you buy this product* or *Buy this product!* Still, only a few ads will use that kind of direct formulation on the surface level. In my entire corpus, the Ammo ad is the only occurrence I came across:

Ammo (published in *The 73rd Art Directors Annual and the 8th International Exhibition*. New York: ADClub Publications, 1994)
The small script at the bottom of this two-page ad reads: "Buying a more expensive cotton pyrethroid won't buy you better worm control. So why pay more for the same control? Buy Ammo. Guaranteed worm control. Cheap."

But if the propositional content is almost never as straightforward and transparent as this, the use of a directive force is still extremely frequent in advertising language. Sometimes, the changes made to the propositional content are only superficial, as in the next example:

Wonderbra (published in *Glamour*, November 1996)
The headline is positioned under four pictures of women wearing underwear. It reads: "LADIES, CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON."

In the Wonderbra ad, the directive force is preserved even though the propositional content differs from the explicit meaning we discussed above. Still, it is obvious that in this particular case, *choose your weapon* counts as a slightly more subtle way of saying *buy this product.* Sometimes, the path that leads to the underlying meaning is more winding, as in the Cartier ad below:

Cartier (published in *Cosmopolitan*, UK edition, November 1996)
The product advertised is an *eau de toilette* called *Must.* The headline says: "Turn a few heads."

In this case we have a greater semantic distance between the two directive utterances, *turn a few heads* and *buy this product.* Clearly, the effort needed to infer the implicit utterance from the surface utterance is quantitatively greater than in the previous ad, but the process is essentially similar in both cases.

In all the examples of directive speech act that we have looked at so far, the directive force at work is displayed in the imperative structure of the utterance. But according to Searle, directives also include interrogative constructions, in which case the act performed is a request for information. The Dep ad below shows this:

Dep (published in *Glamour*, November 1996)
At the top of a full page ad showing a woman's face and long hair, one reads: "Can you see the dep in this picture?" They advertise a kind of hair gel.

Although this utterance is also aptly described as an instance of directive force, the interpretative procedure triggered in this second case greatly contrasts with what we had with the first type.
I do not have time to discuss here the conversational function of such a usage, but what I would like to do in the last part of this paper is to bring both types of directives – viz. those with an imperative construction and those with an interrogative construction – together and point out the pragmatic feature they have in common.

Deixis

In my view, interrogative and imperative directives have in common the fact that they are addressee-oriented acts. What I mean by this is that directives – be they of the imperative type or the interrogative type – essentially and implicitly point at an addressee. As Yule points out, a directive can be regarded as an attempt by the speaker to make the world fit her words *via the hearer*. A request or a request for information is always addressed to someone. They are not – and cannot be – successful or felicitous if there is no addressee. But there is even more to it, as the category of directives seems to be the only illocutionary category to display such a feature. As a consequence, directives turn a passive viewer into an active addressee who is expected to do something about the request or the request for information that has just selected him as its favoured, individual addressee. He is expected to make the world fit the utterance. Obviously, in our general framework, the only way to meet this expectation is to buy the product.

I would call this power to turn someone into an identified addressee a deictic feature of directive illocutionary acts. There is a deictic marker embedded in directives. This appears to be a consequence of the interactional function of directives. By definition, a communicative interaction involves an addressee. Thus, as he reads a directive utterance, such as in the Ammo advertisement below, the reader identifies himself with an implicit *you*. This process goes quite unnoticed and relies on the default interactional reading of directives. In a sense, one could maintain that directive speech acts in advertising language work like communicative traps to catch a potential consumer.

This deictic marker resembles very much the spatial deictic marker which is part of the semantic description of verbs like *come* and *go*. But with directives, we have a person deictic marker. Directives point to an addressee, a *you*, just like the verb *come* points to the addressee's spatial location. Notice though, that whereas the spatial deictic marker is *lexically* embedded in the

verb *come*, the person deixis marker is *syntactically*, as well as *pragmatically*, embedded in directive speech acts. In the Ammo ad that we looked at previously, we find a very good example of deictic marking of the second person pronoun by means of a directive speech act, in this case a request for information:

> Ammo (published in The 73rd Art Directors Annual and the 8th International Exhibition. New York: ADClub Publications, 1994)
> The left-hand page shows a picture of two identical dead worms, while on the right-hand page, the headline asks: "So. Which worm is more dead?"

Even though an explicit second person pronoun is not used here, it is implied by the directive speech act performed in the utterance. In other words, I argue that, because of their pragmatic nature (as described in Searle [*Speech Acts*] and Bach and Harnish), directives contain an implicit person deixis. The interrogative construction of our example deictically points to an addressee and selects any reader as the implicit *you*.

To come back to our corpus of ads, it makes a lot of sense that advertisers are very fond of directive illocutionary acts. In fact, they can use directives to change an anonymous passer-by or reader into a *you*.

The reading of commissives works in a very similar way. In fact, the two categories only differ, as far as the implied deictic marking is concerned, in that directives point to an addressee, whereas commissives point to the "doer" of the speech act. In other words, commissives pragmatically imply a performer, an *I*. Behind commissive utterances such as those we analysed in the first section of this paper, there must be someone who commits herself to the felicitous performance of that speech act. We do not need to replicate the discussion here in order to see the clear parallel between these two forms of implicit deixis.

In brief, we saw that advertising communication crucially relies on two types of speech acts. Our set of examples shows that both types involve a strong interactional framework between the various participants. Furthermore, in the last section we argued that there is an obvious correspondence between deictic phenomena and the pragmatic features of directive and commissive speech acts. This last statement has a number of consequences: one is that the parallel between deixis and speech act theory suggests that the next step in the pragmatic analysis of advertising language should probably consist of looking at deictic devices; another important consequence is that, if our hypothesis about the existence of an implicit deixis is true, then considerable reworking of the whole concept of deixis is urgently required.

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