

The Linguistic Capacity of Performative Speech

TILO WESCHE *Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg*

ABSTRACT: In my paper, I shall briefly explore a philosophy of performative speech acts, which is in line with Charles Taylor's investigation into the human linguistic capacity. It complements the full shape of the linguistic capacity and gives an account of how reason enters thinking due to language. Language creates openness to reasons by, as I emphasize, means of a critique of self-deception, which could be accomplished by linguistic capacity.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans ce commentaire, je me pencherai brièvement sur une philosophie du discours performatif qui s'inscrit dans la foulée de l'exploration par Taylor des capacités linguistiques humaines. Cette philosophie vient compléter la pleine étendue de la capacité linguistique, et montrer comment la raison pénètre la pensée grâce au langage. Le langage crée en effet une ouverture à la raison grâce — et c'est ce sur quoi je me concentrerai — à une critique de l'auto-tromperie, qui peut être réalisée grâce à la capacité linguistique.

Keywords: performative speech act, linguistic capacities, self-deception, critique, Jürgen Habermas

In his book, *The Language Animal*, Charles Taylor explores the human linguistic capacity that creates, as he calls it, a responsiveness, sensitivity, or openness to issues of “intrinsic rightness.”¹ Language makes us aware of, or sensitive to, societal and ethical issues that matter for human life. This linguistic capacity

¹ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 7.

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that creates openness falls outside the scope of the tradition of the philosophy of language that runs from Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Étienne Bonnet de Condillac to Ferdinand de Saussure and Gottlob Frege.

[U]nderstanding the language, even of ordinary prose speech, involves seeing it in the context of meaningful enactment, and the whole range of symbolic forms. Specialized pared-down languages, stripped of human meaning, may be ideal for certain important purposes, but these austere modes cannot provide the model for human speech in general. That is one the main messages of this book.²

In contrast to this tradition, Taylor attempts to present the ‘full shape’ of the linguistic capacity by investigating its force *to create openness*. But one can push the issue even further than Taylor does. I will leave aside many of the insights of Taylor’s admirable endeavour to present the ‘full shape’ of this linguistic capacity but I shall attempt to outline one feature that, at least in my eyes, is missing.

In order to supplement the full shape of the linguistic capacity, I will focus on the question of how communication creates openness to critique. This question arises in regard to a certain malfunction of linguistic capacity that relates to prejudices, untruthfulness, or, to use the term I adhere to, ‘self-deception.’ Self-deception is the ability to close one’s mind to arguments, reason or truth that are self-evidently issues of intrinsic rightness. An openness or responsiveness to arguments, reason or truth can, by contrast, be accomplished by the linguistic capacity. Due to this truth-tracking function, the linguistic capacity itself becomes an issue of intrinsic rightness. This sheds some light on the ambivalence of the linguistic capacity. On the one hand, the linguistic capacity creates a responsiveness to issues of intrinsic rightness. On the other hand, the linguistic capacity belongs to the facts to which persons can blind themselves. This prompts the question of how the linguistic capacity creates a responsiveness to itself. How can language open one’s mind up in cases in which one closes one’s mind to meaning?

In the case of self-deception, openness to meaning can only be created by means of *critique*. I will, thus, focus on the critique of self-deception, which can be accomplished by linguistic capacity. This critique features a reflective faculty. The linguistic capacity itself comprises a capacity of critique and remediates by its own the failure of linguistic capacity. What connects a critique of self-deception with language is the question of how language creates openness to reasons in cases in which someone remains immune to reasons. If someone acts deaf what—and this turns the issue to language—could we *say* to him?

² Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 288.

1. Critique of Self-Deception

Our starting point is a specific case of failure of communication. Communication fails when the participants believe in trivial, prejudiced, and biased convictions that disrupt a truth-tracking communication. Trivial, prejudiced, and biased convictions cannot be accounted for as mere errors of rationality. In fact, they can be conceptualized as of form of self-deception.³ Self-deceptions are defined by three features. First, the most salient point of self-deception is cognitive disengagement. Not driven by any constraint or coercive force, an individual indulges in illusion and contents himself with simplistic answers. Deceiving oneself, one considers convenient truths to be more justified than they actually are, while disengaging from further inquiry. Second, self-deception implies ignorance about arguments, experience and critique; it is a kind of immunity to reasons. Holding on to simplistic answers, one closes one's mind to arguments, critique, and experience. Last but not least, freedom constitutes the third characteristic of self-deception. Here, being content with simplistic answers is not caused by any constraint or coercion. There is neither deprivation nor any other circumstance involved here that would prevent someone from facing the world openly and freely and from seeing things as they really are. Self-deceptions are caused by free will. In this regard, they differ from error or other delusions that are inescapably caused by biographical, cultural, or historical circumstances. This does not imply that self-deception is the only delusion that matters. Besides error, ideology, and compulsive obsession, they form a different, free-will-based type of delusion that completes the *full* shape of the human delusion.

Coping with self-deceptions requires a specific type of critique, since self-deceptions are caused not by adverse circumstances but free will. They cannot be understood as a defect of rational capacities that are impeded by adverse circumstances. They do not result from internal or external impediments that hinder rational capacities in their actualization. Thus, self-deceptions are separated from some defects of rational capacities and form an independent force. They exist independently from rational capacities. Rational capacities and self-deception form an antagonism or, as Hegel would say, a contradiction between forces that exist independently from another. They stand side-by-side as independent forces that pull in opposite directions. This antagonism necessitates a certain concept of critique. Since self-deceptions do not arise from the fact of an inappropriate design of institutions and rights, openness cannot be enabled by an institutional improvement. In the case of self-deceptions, the rectification of certain impediments that hinder rational capacities in their actualization does not suffice. Openness is enabled more directly by opposing

³ On the distinction between self-deception and error, see: McLaughlin and Oksenberg Rorty, *Perspectives on Self-Deception*; Barnes, *Seeing through Self-Deception*; Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*.

and destroying self-deception. In other words, openness is created due to a form of critique that takes into account the antagonistic structure of self-deception. Openness must achieve its breakthrough against antagonistic forces of cognitive disengagement. It is by a certain power of critique that self-deceptions are levered out and, in turn, are replaced by an unabbreviated view of things.

This power to lever out self-deceptions is triggered by the performative speech act. A critique of self-deception is accomplished by a specific performative act of language. This turns the matter to conception of the linguistic capacity that is based more on the act of speech. The linguistic capacity investigated by Charles Taylor and a concept of language that takes the performative act of communication into account are complementary. Only when combined do they give a full picture of the human linguistic capacity.

2. The Performative Act of Language

Taylor explores the ‘creative’ power of discourse as the force for establishing societal ties between the members of a community. “In the way we exchange, talk to one another, treat one another, we establish and then continue or alter the terms of our relationship, what we might call the ‘footing’ on which we stand to each other.”⁴ And: “the discourse of social exchange ... could itself forge new relations and norms, and/or alter old ones.”⁵ The creative power is exerted due to a performative speech act. Although Taylor goes far beyond the *loci classici* in performativity of John Austin and John Searle,⁶ he does not take account of a kind of performative speech act that seems to me to be crucial for the explanation of the linguistic capacity and its function as critique. In the following, I will draw attention to the kind of performative speech act that has the form ‘It has to be acknowledged that p.’ The speech act ‘It has to be acknowledged that p’ performs a critique that, at best, causes the addressee to begin to acknowledge that x. The assertion ‘It has to be acknowledged that p’ exerts a performative act because it causes that p is going to be acknowledged. It is more than a mere clarification of illocutionary effects. For example, the assertion ‘I’m warning you, the bull is loose!’ just makes the act of warning explicit that is exerted implicitly by the assertion ‘The bull is loose!’ In contrast, the assertion ‘that p’ has not been acknowledged by the addressee before the speech act has been performed. Nor is the assertion ‘It has to be acknowledged that p’ a prescriptive demand. The speech act is not at all an imperative of the sort ‘You ought to accept that p!’ because the performative act is exercised intrinsically and does not confront the addressee with any demand (see below).

⁴ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 265-266.

⁵ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 280.

⁶ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; Searle, *Speech Acts*.

The performative speech act fosters a critique of self-deception due to three features. These features of communication are its a) self-corrective character, b) pre-predicative meaning, and c) intrinsic performance.

(a) *The self-corrective character of communication:* Persons can close their minds to the linguistic capacity and the meaning constituted by it. Thus, the openness the linguistic capacity creates must supersede this narrow-mindedness. The openness to the linguistic capacity must be created by the linguistic capacity: the linguistic capacity must create an openness to herself. For investigating the linguistic critique of self-deception, the first step must be to elucidate this self-corrective character of the linguistic capacity.

For this purpose, I will draw on Jürgen Habermas' concept of discourse. One does not have to be a proponent of Habermas' theory of discourse to accept his deep insight into the self-corrective character of language. Although I will not argue for his concept of discourse, I credit Habermas with putting us on the right track to deal with a linguistic concept of critique of self-deception. Habermas distinguishes four rational standards that are inescapably inherent in communication practice. The standards are as follows: 1) publicity and inclusiveness; 2) equal rights to engage in communication; 3) the absence of coercion; 4) the exclusion of deception and illusion. The latter is exercised as sincerity or openness (*Aufrichtigkeit*) and requires "the *strength to critique one's self-delusion*."⁷

Habermas characterizes communication as a "self-correcting" process.⁸ It is *within* discourse that the pragmatic presuppositions unfold their revisionary power to correct irregularities. Endowed with the "critical potential of *self-transcendence*," discourse, by its own means, tends to ascertain validity claims when they are neglected.⁹ The revisionary power of criticism is considered as a form of progressive de-centring that takes place in discourse when participants adopt and mutually exchange perspectives on the issue in question. The need for justification exerts pressure in such a way that ever new forums and ever more competent and larger audiences are in a position to raise new objections. The entire process is fostered by the presuppositions effectively inherent in the argumentation practice.¹⁰

Now, the self-correcting process accomplishes the critique of one's self-delusion. Communication itself is the source of this strength to criticize self-deceptions. The concept of critique, thus, must sort out the problem of how critique itself creates openness that makes it accessible for its addressee. On the one hand, someone who indulges in self-deception lacks openness

⁷ Habermas, *Rightness versus Truth*, p. 269 (my emphasis).

⁸ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 51.

⁹ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 52 (my emphasis).

¹⁰ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 52.

to critique. On the other hand, critique presupposes openness for being effective. Thus, critique itself must generate an openness of its addressee.

Habermas, however, does not do justice to the fact that the openness to reason presupposes more than just an exchange of arguments. Whoever adheres to simplistic worldviews or remains unimpressed by arguments will not shift to a different mindset by receiving more arguments. Nonetheless, there is a force inherent in communication to create openness to critique. If people are content with simplistic answers and close their minds to arguments, what could we actually *say* to them? In a sense, it is in a self-corrective way that communication provides the requirements for critique of self-deception, an attitude that is characterized by the refusal to engage in the truth-tracking communication. Self-deceptions are dismantled through communication, although, initially, they evade and counteract the rationality of communication. Communication touches even those who would normally have a tendency to remain unmoved by arguments. We need not break off the dialogue with a person who encapsulates herself against reasons. The narrow-mindedness that remains immune to reasons may—at best—be levered out and transformed into openness through communication.

(b) The pre-predicative meaning: This brings us to a second feature of communication. Communication creates openness to reasons on a pre-predicative level that must be distinguished from the predicative level of propositional content (content of a belief as such). Besides transmitting propositional content, the communication manifests itself in a surplus of meaning—that is, understanding a certain utterance as an invitation to perform an unbiased act of judgement. Being addressed by a speech act involves more than just the content of a speech act. In the first line, it means that a person is becoming aware of being addressed, even then, when she acts indifferently to the addressed content. This creating of an awareness is the profound act of forming an openness to a content. On the pre-predicative level, it is not the content but the effect of opening up to a content that is achieved by the speech act. The addressee of a speech act opens up her mind when she takes notice of the demand for awareness. It is, therefore, not a propositional content that is aimed at the addressee, but, rather, a responsive reaction of opening up when being addressed.

Thus, communication constitutes a three-dimensional space of reason. First, within this space, an understanding of a content takes place; on this apophantic level of disclosure, a content is ‘made known’ or ‘made shown’ when it is understood by the addressee of a speech.¹¹ Second, with regard to these contents, the ‘yes/no’ stances that are invited are founded on arguments; by giving and asking for reasons, agents must judge whether a content is true or false. Third, it is openness to these concerns that is created. By creating this openness,

¹¹ Cf. Taylor, “Theories of Meaning,” p. 84.

it is ensured that the claims to understanding and judging reach the addressee and are taken seriously by her; it ensures that these claims become accessible to her. It is this openness that is enabled by the pre-predicative feature of communication.

(c) *The intrinsic performance of the speech act:* Third, communication is characterized by its intrinsic performance. Self-deceptions are levered out by a surplus of meaning that springs from the intrinsic performance of a speech act. According to the intrinsic performance, things are said simply because they deserve to be said. In this case, critique does not pursue the purpose of convincing or persuading someone; it does not impose itself on the addressee. It is precisely this self-sufficient modesty that allows for the subversion of narrow-mindedness while opening the addressee to what often would remain beyond the threshold of her convictions. Openness to critique is achieved through abandoning all intention of persuasion, which may seem paradoxical at first glance. If narrow-minded convictions can be opened up at all, then this happens through discourse that postpones “a ritualized competition for the better argument,”¹² or the competitive “game of giving and asking for reasons.”¹³ Reason-giving and reason-asking practices are a necessary but not sufficient condition; they must be supplemented by the intrinsic form of how they are performed. Openness cannot be achieved because of some special pressure of justification or because a certain argument seems to be convincing. This strategy underestimates the resistant force of self-deceptions as well as the possibility of compensating the pressure to justify oneself through even more simplification. In fact, the addressee opens up to arguments because the arguments are worth stating. Due to the intrinsic performance of discourse, something is brought to the addressee's attention without expecting her to do a service in return. Things are voiced simply because they deserve to be noted of their own accord. Within such discourse, nothing is stated that could be said independently from the way in which it is stated. The practice of giving and asking for reasons is performed not in order to ascertain an insight or to persuade the other. To state things as they are does not serve the acquisition of knowledge or any other aim that the speaker or the addressee might have; it is a form of discourse in its own right. The perlocutionary act is to state a matter for its own sake and, thus, to open up one's mind to it. The speech act neither is directed towards reaching an understanding (an announcement or request) or an agreement (a normatively authorized expression of the will such as a promise, declaration or command), nor is it a speech act which only expresses feelings or emotions. The intrinsic performance of speaking enables the addressee to become open to criticism and makes the attitude of self-deception permeable to reasons.

¹² Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 26.

¹³ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 189.

3. A Case Example for the Intrinsic Performance of a Speech Act

Finally, an example will help to clarify the issue of intrinsic performance. The film *Sophie Scholl—The Final Days*, directed by Marc Rothemund, revolves around the encounter between Sophie Scholl, a student accused of circulating dissident leaflets, and her Gestapo interrogator, a man called Robert Mohr. The cinematic reconstruction is based on the historical record of the interrogation. What we see and hear in the film might quite faithfully represent the events that took place in the Munich Stadelheim Prison back in February 1943. Initially, we witness Scholl in a defensive position, admitting just as much as can be proved by Mohr. When the evidence becomes overwhelming, she confesses, hesitantly at first, but then increasingly directly. She then makes a speech in which the crimes of the Nazi regime are named for what they are. The unforeseeable element of the scene is how this speech eventually leads to a dialogue with Mohr. An interrogation, in which communication is prevented at first, suddenly changes into a dialogue. This dialogue is performed without a competition in which the participants mutually try to persuade one another. Scholl's speech does not aim to justify her motives in confrontation with Mohr, nor does she try to win him over. Fighting, as it were, a lost battle, she has all the freedom in the world to affirm things as she sees them, regardless of whether Mohr will consent. What is remarkable about the scene is precisely the fact that it is Scholl's refusal to resort to persuasion that causes Mohr's own attitude to crumble. The dialogue takes its unexpected twist at the very moment that Scholl abandons all attempts to either prove her innocence or seek the sympathy of her interrogator. She does not deny her attitudes anymore, nor does she try to change Mohr's mind in order to escape. None of what is said in her speech can be detached from the precise way in which it is intrinsically said. The content would not be the same if it were instrumentally stated with the aim of convincing Mohr. This is emphasized in the scene by contrasting her words with the leaflet. The same arguments are already known to Mohr from the incriminating document but now these arguments exert a pull on him as he is exposed to the performative moment when they are spoken plainly and for their own sake. It is not Scholl's attitude towards the dialogue that changes; the actual change takes place on Mohr's part. The encounter, up to this point more of a duel than a dialogue, is then continued at eye level. Mohr proceeds to the level of argumentation, leaving the previous platitudes behind. He opens up to arguments, responds to them, becomes accessible and is even prepared to offer Scholl a way out, a 'golden bridge.' She rejects the offer, though, once again expressing that, in exposing her worldview, her aim was neither to persuade Mohr nor to convince him of the truth.

The example elucidates both the limits and the force of the linguistic capacity. Evidently, Scholl's speech did not have any impact on the Nazi regime. But what I want to bring out with this example is that an intrinsically performed speech act *does* have an effective influence on the narrow-minded

attitudes of a person. The example shows that conducting a discourse for its own sake does not necessarily mean that one is not dedicated to it. To tell things as they are simply because they deserve to be noticed is anything but a spiritless vindication of one's view. What becomes evident is the power of communication to unsettle a stubborn worldview and transform it into openness instead. Openness to critique, experiences, and arguments are *set free by the performative force of communication*. The strength of argument and the performative force of communication are mutually dependent and require each other. An argument can exert a pull if the intrinsic practice of communication undermines disruptive biases, thus opening up the adversary to the arguments. Since this communicative force unfolds itself in argumentative interaction, it averts the suspicion of being an example of mere actionist rhetoric.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Philosophy of Performative Speech Act

On the account I have offered, the task of a philosophy of the linguistic capacity is to reflect the force of disclosure that is triggered by a performative speech act. This philosophy of performative speech act is in line with Taylor's thought. It complements the full shape of the linguistic capacity and gives an account of how reason enters thinking due to language. "Reason enters into our thinking in this situation, and not just to determine causal relations ..., but also hermeneutically, to explicate the original insight."¹⁴ Opening up one's mind to reason is not a mere causal reaction, but rather a result of a performative act. An essential part of our motivation when we act is an insight neither produced by oneself nor just caused by words. In fact, it is created by language. The scope of a philosophy of language remains wide. Only by appreciating that reasoning is a performance of speech act are we able to render Aristotle's definition "*Zoon echon logon*" as "animal possessing language."¹⁵ The title of Taylor's book, *The Language Animal*, conflates both reason and language. The missing link in his book, which combines both, is the performative speech act that I have examined.

¹⁴ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 205.

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 338.

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