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Illocutions in Context

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1 Introduction

It is commonplace for many scholars, when discussing the notion of "what is said", to claim that we may legitimately ascribe truth-conditions to sentences only in the context of a speech act.¹ In this line of thought, then, speech acts are the primary object of analysis in semantics and pragmatics. Oddly enough, little attention has been paid to the question of which context determines (i.e. fixes) the illocutionary force of a speech act. A noteworthy exception is constituted by the literature on free speech and silencing: a stimulating debate is devoted to the context determining the illocutionary force of written or recorded utterances – the ones involved in written texts, films and images, conceived as *recordings* that can be seen or heard in many different contexts.²

The question has been discussed along the lines of the interpretation of the indexical expressions in recorded messages and written texts. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the relevant context for the determination of the illocutionary force of recorded or written utterances is neither the *encoding* nor the *decoding*, but the context *intended* by the speaker, and made available to the addressee: this is the proper context of interpretation.³ What matters are the intentions the speaker *makes available to the addressee*: if they are

¹ Especially for contextualists: cf. for example Recanati 2004, p. 3: "Only in the context of a speech act does a sentence express a determinate content".

² See MacKinnon 1987, Langton 1993, Hornsby 1993 and 2000, Hornsby and Langton 1998, West 2003, Saul 2006, Wieland 2007, McGowan 2004 and 2009, Maitra 2009, De Gaynesford 2009, Maitra and McGowan 2010, Grünberg 2011.

³ See Bianchi 2008.

transparent and publicly accessible, these intentions fix which particular speech act has been performed. In this paper I will spell out and clarify this idea, defending it from criticisms raised by Mari Mikkola, and distinguishing my (weak) intentionalist proposal from other (strong) intentionalist perspectives.

2 Recorded speech acts

In speech act theory, the illocutionary act "can be thought of as a use of the locution to perform an action"⁴; in different contexts the same locution may be put to different uses, as when someone utters

(1) Don't leave

to issue, in different contexts, an order, an invitation, or a challenge. In order to determine which particular speech act has been performed, we have to resort to the context, and it is naturally assumed that the force-determining context is the context of production of the utterance.

In cases of delayed communication, such a simple picture must be enriched, for very often the illocutionary force of a written text or a recorded utterance isn't determined by the context of production or creation of the utterance. Suppose that for some reason (e.g. laryngitis, or a particular environment such as a library) Ethel uses for communication various written signs with multi-purpose sentences on them. One of her signs reads

(2) I do,

and Ethel uses it in different contexts to perform many different illocutionary acts (such as getting married, agreeing to return her books on time or confessing to murder).⁵ Ethel's sign can be conceived as a *recording* that may be used again and again in different contexts. In this example, it is quite straightforward to rule out the context in which the sign was produced or encoded as the force-fixing context: Ethel created her sign as a multi-purpose item, to be used in a variety of future communications, to perform a variety of different speech acts.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate which context determines the different speech acts performed by Ethel with her sign, and, more generally, which context determines the different speech acts performed with a recording. More precisely, my paper deals with the "metaphysical" or constitutive role of the context – as opposed to its epistemic or evidential role: my aim is to determine which context is semantically relevant in order to fix the illocu-

⁴ Langton 1993, p. 300; cf. Austin 1962, Bach and Harnish 1979, Hornsby 1994.

⁵ I borrow this example from Saul 2006: 235-236.

tionary force of a speech act, as distinct from the information the addressee uses to ascertain the semantically relevant context.⁶

3 Written notes and answering machines

In order to shed light on the role of context for recorded speech acts, it may be useful to refer to the large literature on written texts and recorded messages, and in particular to the problem of the determination of the reference of the indexical expressions in notes and answering machine messages.

Many scholars underline that, in some cases, the referents of utterances of "here" and "now" are not obtained by applying their characters to the context of utterance: examples involving the message of an answering machine or a written note cannot be evaluated with respect to the context of utterance or inscription. Consider the message of an answering machine like

(3) I'm not here now.

The message seems to have a paradoxical content: the speaker of the utterance is not at the place of the utterance at the time of the utterance. Yet, intuitively, an utterance of (3) may well be true. Or imagine that Jack, while in his office, writes a note reading:

(4) I am here,

and then, arrived home, leaves it in the kitchen, to let his wife Jill know that he is back from work: the note is not informing Jill that Jack is in his office (the place of inscription), but rather that he is at home.

In Bianchi 2008, I discussed an example adapted from Predelli.⁷ Suppose that, before leaving home at 8am, Mr Jones writes a note to his wife, who will be back from work at 5pm:

(5) As you can see, I'm not here now. Meet me in two hours at *Cipriani's*.

The reference of the indexicals in (5) isn't fixed by the context in which the utterance is recorded, or *encoded*: intuitively, the note does not convey the (false) content that Mr Jones is not at home at the time of utterance (the coding time) of the note, nor does it ask Mrs Jones to be at the restaurant at 10am – namely two hours after Mr Jones wrote the note.

⁶ Cf. Stokke 2010, p. 386: "when it comes to intention-sensitive expressions, the metaphysical work is done by the speaker's intention. The speaker's intention determines reference. On the other hand the epistemic work is done by a host of factors, some linguistic and some not". Cf. Predelli 2002, p. 315 and Bianchi 2006, p. 391.

⁷ Cf. Predelli 1998a and 1998b.

The intriguing point is that a parallel may be drawn between the interpretation of the indexical expressions in answering machine messages or written texts like (5), and the determination of the illocutionary force of recorded utterances.⁸ As for (5), in Ethel's example, too, it is intuitive to rule out the context in which the sign was produced. Ethel created her sign as a multi-purpose item, to be used in a variety of future communications: focusing on the recording context will not identify a particular speech act.

According to the perspective Saul 2006 and Mikkola 2008 seem to endorse, in cases (3) – (5) the relevant context is the one in which the recorded message or the written note is heard or read, i.e. *decoded*.⁹ Likewise, Saul and Mikkola claim that the relevant force-determining contexts are the occasions at which Ethel *used* her sign in performing speech acts. Ethel may use (2) in a church to get married, in a library to agree to return her books on time or in a police station to confess to a murder: it is the context in which the sentence is decoded that determines the illocutionary force of the speech act performed by the agent. In each of the different contexts, Ethel used her sign to perform a different speech act. Which speech act was performed "hinges on some combination of Ethel's intentions in using her sign, the audiences' interpretations of her utterances, and the fulfilment of necessary felicity conditions".¹⁰ Saul and Mikkola argue that these are all features of the contexts in which Ethel's sign was heard or seen – *decoded* – rather than features of the context in which it was made or encoded.¹¹

4 Arguments against Saul

However, there is a powerful argument against the idea that the relevant reference-fixing context for the indexical expressions in (5) is the decoding context.¹² Just imagine that Mrs Jones comes home late, and reads (5) at 10pm. Intuitively, Mr Jones is not inviting her for dinner at midnight: she must interpret the message not in relation to her actual time of arrival but to her expected time of arrival (the expected decoding time). In (5), the context

⁸ The parallel is put forward by Saul 2006, p. 236.

⁹ In this line of thought, notes and messages allow one to utter sentences 'at a distance'; in other terms they allow the utterance of sentences at time *t* and location *l* without being in *l* at *t*: Mr Jones "uttered" (5) at 5pm, when Mrs Jones came home from work.

¹⁰ Saul 2006, p. 237.

¹¹ Cf. Saul 2006, p. 238: "viewings of a work... are the times that matter for determining its illocutionary force. At each of these times, we have different audiences, who may interpret the... work in different ways; and different felicity conditions may be fulfilled or unfulfilled"; Mikkola 2008, p. 319: "the context that fixes [the illocutionary force of recordings] on my example is that of actual decoding".

¹² The argument is put forward by Predelli: see Predelli 1998a and 1998b; cf. Bianchi 2001.

giving the correct interpretation contains, as the temporal co-ordinate, Mrs Jones's expected time of arrival (5pm) and not the moment Mr Jones wrote the note (8am) or the moment Mrs Jones came home (10pm): this intended context of interpretation provides the values for "now" and "in two hours", i.e. 5pm and 7pm, while keeping the usual characters for the two expressions.

Let's now turn to speech acts. According to Saul and Mikkola, in order to determine the illocutionary force of the different speech acts performed by Ethel, we must focus on the different *decodings* of (2). If the parallel between indexical expressions and speech acts holds, however, we have a compelling argument against the choice of the decoding context as the force-fixing context for recorded utterances. Suppose again that Ethel has created (2) as a multi-purpose item, to be used in a variety of future communications. Today she is going to marry Jack: she is standing in the church, holding her sign in front of her fiancé and the priest. A police officer investigating the murder of Jack's former wife, Jill, is present in church. Struck by an intuition, suddenly the officer stands up and asks Ethel "Do you confess that you murdered Jill?". He sees Ethel's sign reading (2), interprets it as a confession and arrests her for murder. Nevertheless, intuitively Ethel is not pleading guilty to Jill's murder: the police officer must interpret the sign not in relation to the actual viewing but to the *expected* viewing – an intuition Saul and Mikkola's view cannot account for. The relevant context is the one envisioned by the speaker, and not the one determined by the unforeseen events involving the sign.

Taking seriously Saul's parallel between the reference-fixing context and the force-fixing context, I claim that what settles the illocutionary force of a speech act is neither the context of production of the utterance nor the context of the actual decoding of the utterance. The relevant context is the one *intended* by the speaker: this context will be the proper context of interpretation. Let me now draw attention to a point I will stress in my concluding remarks: what matters are only the intentions the speaker *makes available to the addressee*: if they are transparent and publicly accessible, these intentions fix which particular speech act has been performed (and this is the metaphysical role of the context). The speaker directs the addressee to this intended context – which is identified and sorted out by various pragmatic means (knowledge of the world, of the speaker's desires and beliefs, of social practices, and so on – and this is the epistemic or evidential role of the context).

If a written utterance is intended as an illocutionary act of getting married, and if this intention is made available to the addressee, no accidental viewing may change its illocutionary force. It is not the *actual* viewing that fixes the illocutionary force of the utterance, but the *expected* viewing.

5 Mikkola's objection

Arguing in favour of Saul's position, Mikkola claims that the analogy between Ethel's sign and Mr Jones's note doesn't hold, for Mr Jones wrote the note to a single intended audience (Mrs Jones), to be read at a single intended time (5pm on the day of encoding) at a single intended place (their home). Ethel's sign is used as multi-purpose recording while Mr Jones's note is not. According to Mikkola, making Mr Jones's note analogous to Ethel's sign supports Saul's proposal.

To substantiate her claim, Mikkola examines another example. Imagine that Mr Jones contracts laryngitis, losing his voice. For communication, he writes multi-purpose notes one of which reads

(6) Meet me in two hours at *Cipriani's*;

he does so "without knowing where, when or if at all he will be using the note".¹³ The same goes for Ethel's sign: at the time of encoding, Ethel doesn't know where, when, with whom or if at all she will be using the sign.

Now, suppose that Mr Jones employs the note in different contexts to perform a variety of speech acts. He uses it on Monday at 5pm to invite his wife to the restaurant for 7pm, on Wednesday at 10am to invite Mr Smith to the restaurant for noon and on Friday at 7pm to invite his sister to the restaurant for 9pm. Our problem is to identify, in all these cases, the reference-fixing context for "you" and "in two hours".

On my view the reference-fixing context for (6) is the one intended by the speaker: it is the expected decoding context that fixes the reference of "you" and "in two hours". According to Mikkola, however, this context won't do: "if the note is a multi-purpose one, Mr Jones did not have a particular intended time and place of decoding in mind when he wrote the note. Once Mr Jones's note is analogous to... Ethel's sign (intended to be used in various, at the time of the encoding, unknown future contexts), the context that fixes the reference of 'in two hours' is the *actual decoding* of the note: when Mrs Jones, Mr Smith and Ms Jones *read* it".¹⁴ And if a parallel holds between determining the illocutionary force of recordings and the interpretation of indexical expressions in recorded messages – Mikkola further argues – the context that fixes both on this example is that of actual decoding, the same context Saul took to be relevant for fixing the illocutionary force of Ethel's sign.

I agree that if the note is a multi-purpose one, Mr Jones doesn't have a particular intended time and place of decoding in mind when he writes the

¹³ Mikkola 2008, p. 319.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

note. But I maintain that Mr Jones has a particular intended time and place of decoding in mind every time he *uses* the note. The same goes for illocutionary forces. Imagine that Mr Jones, while in his office, writes a note reading

(1) Don't leave,

with no particular illocutionary force in mind (and no particular addressee). Arriving home, he may leave it in the kitchen to issue an order to his butler; later he may leave the same note on Mrs Jones's desk to beg her not to leave him, or in his mother's bag to challenge her, and so on. Now, it is quite intuitive to say that Mr Jones has a particular illocutionary force in mind every time he *uses* the note; otherwise, in order to beg his wife not to leave him, why should he put the note on Mrs Jones's desk and not, let's say, in his mother's bag?

Examine again Predelli's original scenario: Mr Jones, who expects his wife to come home at 5pm, writes a note reading (6). Suppose that Mrs Jones is late, and that Jill, Mr Jones's former wife, passes by, sees Mr Jones's note and heads for *Cipriani's*. Intuitively, Mr Jones is not inviting *Jill* for dinner: Jill must interpret the message not in relation to the actual addressee but to the intended addressee.

And now suppose that when Mr Jones writes the note in his office, he intends to invite Jill for dinner; he puts the note in Jill's bag, but later changes his mind and decides to invite Mrs Jones, instead. He then takes the note from Jill's bag before she could see it and leaves it on Mrs Jones's desk. In this case Mr Jones does have a particular intended time and addressee in mind when he writes the note. But he has a different intended time and addressee in mind when he uses it – and this sets the relevant context of interpretation, because it is only in this very situation that he makes his intentions *available* to his intended addressee.

To see this, imagine that – *after* putting the note on Mrs Jones's desk – Mr Jones changes his mind back and decides to invite Jill for dinner – by means of that very note on Mrs Jones's desk. This would be an *unreasonable* communicative intention – because Mr Jones hasn't done anything to put Jill in a position to recognise his intention.

6 Concluding remarks

In this paper I have claimed that the illocutionary force of a speech act is fixed by the intended context. Bringing intentions into the picture, however, requires qualification; in particular, it is useful to distinguish my (weak)

intentionalist proposal from other (strong) intentionalist perspectives, such as that endorsed by Predelli.¹⁵

From a strong intentionalist perspective, in order for a speaker to refer by using an indexical, all that is required is that the speaker have a certain intention: "In [the intentionalist stance] the indexicals in [an utterance of a sentence containing 'I' and 'now'] *refer* to the individual or time in the intended context, in the sense that they are semantically associated with it by virtue of the mechanisms governing expressions of this kind. This is of course compatible with the fact that, in most cases, those expressions cannot be *used to refer* to that individual or time, in the sense that the sentences in question cannot be employed as a means of conveying the desired information".¹⁶ In a similar vein, from a strong intentionalist perspective, in order for a speaker to perform a speech act all that is required is that the speaker has a certain intention – even if it is agreed that in most cases the audience cannot recognize the illocutionary force of the speech act in question. In that view, Ethel could agree to return her books on time – standing in the church, holding the sign saying "I do" in front of her fiancé and the priest – and simply failing to *communicate* her intention to her audience. The intention determines the speech act performed, even if no evidence of the speaker's intention is made available to the audience, leading to a communicative failure.

From a weak intentionalist perspective, on the other hand, in order for a speaker to refer by using an indexical, the speaker must put her addressee in a position to recognize her intention. In this view, intentions are constrained by expectations and beliefs: one cannot intend to refer to something if one doesn't believe her addressee will be able to identify her intention. The speaker's intention must then satisfy an *Availability Constraint*, that is it must be reasonable and not arbitrary: reference is determined by public behaviour, by intentional acts and not by intentions as mental objects.¹⁷ In a similar vein, from a weak intentionalist perspective, in order for a speaker to perform a speech act, she must put her addressee in a position to recognize her intention. In my view, then, an intention, to be *semantically* relevant (and not only successfully *communicated*, as for strong intentionalists *à la* Predelli), must be made available to the addressee (for that purpose the speaker can exploit any feature of the context, words, gestures, relevance in the context of utterance).¹⁸ Jack isn't in a position to recognise every bizarre

¹⁵ I borrow the distinction between weak and strong intentionalism from Stokke 2010; cf. Corazza et al. 2002, p. 9, and Predelli 2002, p. 314.

¹⁶ Predelli 2002, p. 315.

¹⁷ On reasonable intentions see Donnellan 1968; cf. Bianchi 2006, p. 389.

¹⁸ It must be made available to the *addressee*, and not to *any* competent speaker, contrary to what Garcia Carpintero proposes; cf. Garcia-Carpintero 1998, p. 537: "I will take demon-

intention Ethel might have, such as, for example, the intention – in church, holding the sign saying "I do" – of agreeing to return her books in time, if no evidence of her intention was made available to him. In a similar vein, Jill isn't in a position to recognise every bizarre intention Mr Jones could have, such as the intention of inviting her for dinner by putting a note reading (6) on Mrs Jones's desk.

An intention – to be semantically relevant – must be something that an addressee in normal circumstances is able to work out using external facts (where, when and by whom the utterance is produced), linguistic co-text (what has been said so far), and background knowledge (knowledge about weddings, libraries or murder investigations). And the addressee can reasonably be expected to recognise a communicative intention just because the speaker has done what is necessary in order to make it public, open and manifest.¹⁹ No arbitrary or unreasonable intention the author of a speech act could have plays a role in *fixing* (and not only communicating) the illocutionary force of her speech act – for the author hasn't done enough to make her intention available to the addressee.²⁰

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strations to be sets of *deictical intentions* manifested in features of the context of utterance available as such to any competent user".

¹⁹ Cf. Bach 1994, p. 314; Romdenh-Romluc 2006 and Stokke 2010.

²⁰ I am grateful to the organisers of the *Workshop on Context 2010* (Genoa, June 11 2010), Filippo Domaneschi and Carlo Penco, and to Emma Borg, Kepa Korta and Stefano Predelli for their questions and comments.

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