

## DIMENSIONS OF POWER: A LINGUISTICAL ANALYSIS

The concept of “power” is one of the most investigated by social scientists. The purpose of this work is to clarify its dimensions and its problems from a sociological way, and then to examine some of its aspects under the schemes and the features of pragmatics and speech acts theory. What really interests us is to understand if and how conceptual categories related to illocutionary acts may be applied or not, in a positive way, to typical acts of power, such as force, manipulation, persuasion and threat. John R. Searle has given a relevant theoretical contribution to this debate on power and speech acts, and our choice of bringing together these two spheres reflects our interest in the Searlian approach.

### Power and Threat

Among the definitions of “power”, we found most useful starting from Max Weber’s three types of legitimate rules, moving through Dennis Wrong’s and Searle’s analyses and then focusing on the notion of threat.

In his famous book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*<sup>1</sup>, Weber defines power as a social actor’s ability to exercise his will in a social action, even if there is resistance from the other people who participate to the action. He distinguishes “Macht”, which happens when the dominant subject knows how to manage in order to make his will followed in every situation, from “Herrschaft”, which happens instead when the weaker subject conforms himself to the dominant’s

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<sup>1</sup>Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1922.

decisions because he judges them legitimate. Starting from the idea of "Herrschaft" Weber introduces three types of legitimate rules: legal authority, based on people's trust in legal orders and submission to those which have been appointed by the law; traditional authority, based on the belief of the sanctity of traditions and constituted authorities; charismatic authority, based on an extraordinary devotion to a particularly charismatic leader. The most interesting part of Weber's definition of power refers to the fact that the exercise of power is multiple-based: it is determined by personal prestige, persuasive or manipulative capacities, sense of duty, personal charisma, fear of economic or physical sanctions.

Wrong agrees with Weber, and claims that "power is the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others"<sup>2</sup>; moreover, he believes that a definition of power must include a solution to five major problems: the issue of the intentionality of power, its effectiveness, the latency, the asymmetry and balance in power relations, the nature of the effects produced by power. Let's see them in detail.

The intentionality of power. It is essential to distinguish between the exercise of power and social control in general, because there is a difference in diffuse controls exercised by the group over socialized individuals from direct, intentional efforts by a specific person or group to affect another's conduct: an adequate definition of power cannot ignore the difference between intended and unintended but foreseen effects.

The effectiveness of power. When attempts to exercise power over others are unsuccessful, when the intended effects of the aspiring power-wielder are not

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis H. Wrong, *Power - Its Forms, Bases and Uses*, New York, Harper&Row, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1980, p. 2.

in fact produced, we are confronted with an absence or failure of power. If this happens, we witness the breakdown of the power relation.

The latency of power. The capacity to perform acts of control and their actual performance are clearly not the same things; this distinction reflects the difference between viewing power as a dispositional (so latent) and as an episodic concept.

Asymmetry and balance in power relations. Power relations are asymmetrical in that the power holder exercises on the subjects' behavior a greater control than the control which subjects can exercise on his behaviours, even if a reciprocal influence is never completely absent. Wrong calls "intercursive power"<sup>3</sup> relations in which balance in power relation is determined by a division of competence spheres between the parts, and "integral power" the ones in which the decisional process and the initiative of action are centralized and monopolized by a single part.

The nature of the effects produced by power. If A's intention is to modify B's attitudes and perceptions more than his behaviours and succeeded in obtaining what he wants, A has obviously power on B in that sphere, even if B's behaviours have not changed, and vice versa.

The last aspect in Wrong's analysis is topic related to the three forms of power which he identifies as force, manipulation and persuasion.

Force. The use of force implicates that the subject who suffers it has not to be seen as a human being anymore. A close relation runs between use of force and threat of force, but these two features must not be confused each other. In fact, force as form of power exists only when it is manifested; who acts in a certain way because of fearing the idea of force used against him has not to suffer force but, at least, threat of force.

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<sup>3</sup> op. cit. p. 11.

Manipulation. When B does not know that A is going to influence him, but A actually behaves in such a way which determines B's conformation to his wishes, than we are in front of a case of manipulation. It can take place both within or in absence of a social relation; sometimes the power subject may not even be aware of the power holder existence.

Persuasion. When A presents B his arguments or exhortations and B, after having independently checked out their content comparing them to his values and goals, accepts A's recommendations as a guideline for his behaviour, A has persuaded B.

Let's come now to Searle. In our opinion, Searle's idea of power is more fine-grained. Searle distinguishes power from his exercise, and defines it as "the ability of an agent of power to get subjects to do what the agent wants them to do whether the subjects want to do so or not"<sup>4</sup>: power is the ability to do something even more than make that thing actually being done. Moreover, he strongly ties the concept of power with the "intentionality constraint": the idea that power, in order to being power, is always exercised intentionally; and with the "exactness constraint": the idea that in order to talk of power in a kind of circumstances, it is necessary to recognize exactly who has power above someone else in doing what. Then, Searle defines the social control "background power", and considers it a kind of power relation.

After the analysis of the concept of power, the next step of our work was to examine, according to Popitz, one of its instruments, which is threat.

The elements of a threat can be thousands, but in every kind of threat it is possible to highlight a common scheme; the one who threatens let the threatened

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<sup>4</sup> John R. Searle, *Making the Social World - The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p.147.

subject know this situation: if you don't do (dissimilar behaviour) what I want (requested behaviour), I'll get you troubles (threaten sanction); instead, if you do what I want (conformable behaviour), you'll avoid troubles<sup>5</sup>.

It is very useful, in order to understand properly the structure of a threat, to underline the three most important links between the basic elements: the link between requested behaviour and dissimilar behaviour; the double role which the person who is threatening embodies, as sender of a threat and at the same time executor of a sanction; finally, the link established between the announced sanction, which is a possible action, and the conformable behaviour, an actual action.

Threats are instruments of power because of their profitability and capability in being extensible<sup>6</sup>.

## Pragmatics

Pragmatics studies relations that occur between the meanings of linguistic expressions and their use. Our work is focused on the Far-side pragmatics branch, which analyses what language does except for what it says.

The main philosopher devoted to speech acts theory, John L. Austin, made an initial distinction between constative and performative acts, which he later refined as a three-level distinction: locutionary acts, related to the form and the structure of the expressions; illocutionary acts, related to the intention the speaker intends to communicate; perlocutionary acts, concerning the effect the

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<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 2<sup>a</sup> ed., 1992.

<sup>6</sup> According to Popitz, who threatens successfully does not need to apply sanctions, so can save the costs of realizing what he had threatened; because of that, he can invest the saved costs in other threats: in this way, threat is considered "extensible".

speech act has on the listener. Making an illocutionary act requires an illocutionary force (e.g. to promise, to assure), which leads to the perlocutionary act.

Searle improves Austin's theory and lists four conditions which an illocutionary act has to satisfy in order to be felicitous: the propositional contents rules; the preparatory rules; the sincerity rules and the essential rules.

Based on these conditions, he develops also a division in five classes. So, according with Searle, illocutionary acts could be representative or assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, declaratives.

Partly against this view of speech acts, Paul Grice defined the notion of implicature, which consists in the meaning or intention to act that goes along a speech act, rather than with the content of what is said. There are two kind of implicatures: conversational implicatures, which depend on the context of the conversation, and conventional implicatures, which are part of the linguistic meaning of the phrase.

Grice elaborates a theory of ideal conversation ,which postulates a Cooperative Principle, specified by four maxims: maxim of Quality, that means to "make your contribution true; so do not convey what you believe false or unjustified"<sup>7</sup>; maxim of Quantity, that states to "be as informative as required"<sup>8</sup>; maxim of Relation, that requires to "be relevant"<sup>9</sup>; maxim of Manner, that asks to "be perspicuous; so avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and strive for brevity and order"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge - London, Harvard University Press, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> op. cit.

## **Power and Pragmatics**

After having examined the notion of “power” and its structural dimensions in the first part, and pragmatics and speech acts in the second part, our work attempted a synthesis of these two spheres by framing the four elements of power (force, manipulation, persuasion and threat) into pragmatic definitions.

Starting with force, it is easy to recognize that it belongs to the field of corporal acts more than verbal acts; in fact, force finds its existing condition in practically doing something. For that reason, it can be excluded from a comparison with speech acts.

Manipulation can be classified as an indirect illocutionary act; whether which determines a perlocutionary object. Its illocutionary force can vary into all various kinds of influence, depending from which kind of manipulative act is performed. Manipulation is a directive act, according with Searle’s classification, because the manipulator tries to make the manipulated do things conformed to what he says to him through the illocutionary act. Moreover, manipulation finds very useful the Quantity maxim in the way of limiting information given to the manipulated, while it doesn’t respect Quality, Relation and Manner maxims.

Persuasion, a direct illocutionary act, is the most reliable form of power standing from the point of view of who persuades. As well as for manipulation, if persuasion takes place its existing condition determines a perlocutionary object. Its illocutionary force never reaches commands but varies into a spectre of different kind of assertions. Referring to Searle’s classification, persuasion belongs both to representative or assertive acts and to directive acts, depending

on which kind of persuasive technique it is adopted; considering the persuader's dedication in persuading it could also be seen as a commissive one. Grice's maxims are all respected: more the persuader will appear clear and pertinent, more he will succeed in persuading.

Finally, threat has a potentially infinitive range of applications. It can be both a direct or an indirect illocutionary act, and in order to be felicitous it needs a perlocutionary sequel if it is direct and a perlocutionary object if it is indirect. Its illocutionary force is generally very strong, even if effective threats can be accomplished also through suggestions, by alluding and so on; talking of similarities among all different kinds of threat, it is not so much a matter of illocutionary force as of their perlocutionary object (or sequel). Searle's sincerity rule deserves an important role in this context: on a first sight, it does not seem to obtain, but the threatener must be sincere in his communicative intentions, for the threat to reach its goal. In general, according to Searle's classification, threat belongs to commissive acts.

Generally speaking, the comparison between manipulation, persuasion and threat within the speech acts theory shows that the crucial difference among these forms concerns the speaker's intentions in performing the illocutionary act. It is important to underline that the peculiar aspect of threat consists in its effectiveness as a perlocutory act which turns upside down felicity conditions, so to speak.



## Conclusion

Our interest in this work focused on the dimensions of power; our aim was to analyse them by employing some of the tools of pragmatics and speech acts theory.

After the theoretical discussion about power in the first part of the text, we have continued examining in the second the principal issues of pragmatics. In the third chapter, the application of pragmatics' categories to the dimensions of power showed that differences in manipulation, persuasion and threat as speech acts belong to the speaker's intentionality. We have also shown the role that the perlocutionary effectiveness of threats depend in an interesting way on the apparent failure of its felicity conditions.