

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Doing More Than One Thing in Saying: A Pluralist Approach to Illocutionary Force**1. Introduction**

Originally developed by J.L. Austin, speech act theory emphasizes that we use language not merely to make statements or convey information, but also to perform various actions—such as promising, apologizing, criticizing, and requesting. According to Austin (1962), a speech act consists of three *simultaneous* acts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. While the “three-dimensional” nature of speech acts could be interpreted as already embodying a certain kind of pluralism (Sbisà, 2013), classical speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975a) relies on a model that assumes a one-to-one relation between a single utterance and a single illocutionary act (also referred to as *illocutionary “monism”* or *“intuition of illocutionary uniqueness”*: see Johnson (2019)). In this view, each utterance performs one primary illocutionary act, even if it can generate multiple perlocutionary effects or be accompanied by implicit social meanings¹.

In recent years, however, a growing body of work has begun to challenge this assumption². Different frameworks—variously labeled *illocutionary pluralism* (Sbisà, 2013; Lewiński, 2021; Johnson, 2023), *illocutionary relativism* (Johnson, 2023), *molteplicità illocutoria* [“illocutionary multiplicity”] (Labinaz, 2024), *multi-act semantics* (Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016; Frigerio & Tenchini, 2025), or *cooperative illocutionary acts* (Hancher, 1979)—share the core intuition that a

¹ Austin (1962, p. 102) offers, among others, the following example (*verbatim*):

Act (A) or Locution

He said to me, ‘you can’t do that’.

Act (B) or Illocution

He protested against my doing it.

Act (Ca) or Perlocution

He pulled me up, checked me.

Act (Cb)

He stopped me, he brought me to my senses, &c. He annoyed me.

² In retrospect, hints of illocutionary plurality can already be found in earlier frameworks—for example, in Wegener’s (1885) account of directive functions, Bühler’s (1934) model of sign functions, and Reinach’s (1913) analysis of social acts. The historical perspective is only briefly mentioned here and not explored in detail. It was the focus of my presentation (*Speech Act Theory and Multi-Act Semantics*) at the 16th International Conference on the History of Language Sciences (ICHoLS XVI), held in Tbilisi, Georgia, from August 26 to 30, 2023, which also serves as the starting point for the present paper.

single utterance token, intentionally produced via conventional procedures, may realize multiple distinct illocutionary acts simultaneously.

This may occur in a variety of contexts. One possibility is semantic (or pragmatic?) ambiguity, where an utterance is open to more than one illocutionary interpretation; another involves utterances whose conventional effects are compatible with multiple illocutionary patterns; a third example is that of indirect speech acts, already well-known within the classical framework (Sbisà, 2013). A distinct case arises in polyadic (rather than dyadic) conversations, where a speaker, through a single utterance, might intentionally direct distinct illocutionary intentions to different hearers. In such cases, the felicity of the speech act depends on distinct recognition by each addressee (cf. Lewiński, 2021).

An additional strand of this pluralistic turn considers the possibility of illocutionary pluralism at the lexical level independently from the contextual features. For instance, some expressive or evaluative terms—such as slurs or pejoratives—may inherently trigger multiple illocutionary effects. When embedded in a sentence, these terms are tools for performing multiple speech acts, one of which is always an expressive (Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016; Frigerio & Tenchini, 2025).

Another approach identifies certain pre-cooperative or cooperative acts as intrinsically involving more than one illocutionary force. An invitation or an offer, for example, may simultaneously enact a directive and a commissive force (Hancher, 1979). Such acts rely on a shared social background and mutual recognition, which reinforces the idea that illocutionary force is often distributed across multiple dimensions.

Taken together, these considerations challenge the original 1:1 paradigm—i.e., the assumption that each utterance corresponds to a single illocutionary act—central to classical speech act theory. Contemporary pragmatic and semantic accounts, as well as cross-disciplinary findings—such as the Gestalt-inspired focus on part-whole relationship—offer strong grounds for reconsidering that model.

This paper surveys a range of approaches to illocutionary pluralism highlighting their core insights and showing how they relate to current discussions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines the classical theory of speech acts and introduces the notion of illocutionary monism. Sections 3 and 4 examine a range of pluralist frameworks that converge on the idea that a single utterance may perform multiple illocutionary acts, dividing them into context-dependent and context-independent approaches. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. The Classical Framework and Its Monist Assumptions

In 1955, John L. Austin delivered the William James Lectures at Harvard, later published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962, 1975). In these lectures, he put forward a new perspective on meaning, language, and conversational interaction (communication). Rather than focusing solely on the semantic content of utterances, and after overcoming the dichotomy between constative and performative utterances, Austin emphasized the performative dimension of language: he argued that we use language not only to make statements and convey information but also to perform various kinds of actions—such as promising, apologizing, criticizing, requesting, and more. On his view, all sentences are tools that speakers use in order to do “things”; to say something is always to perform a *speech act*.

Within the same total speech act, Austin distinguishes three different acts: *locutionary*, *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts.

The locutionary act is the act *of saying* something, and it involves three acts (or actions): a phonetic act (producing certain noises), a phatic act (uttering certain words or vocables in accordance with a particular grammar and with a certain intonation), and a rhetic act (using those words with a specific meaning—sense and reference) (Austin, 1962, pp. 92–98).

To perform a locutionary act is also, and *eo ipso*, to perform an illocutionary act (*ibid.*, p. 98). The illocutionary act is thus the action the speaker performs *in saying* something, which depends on how the speaker is using a given locution. The concept of *illocutionary force* is central to Austin’s theory, to the point that he defines the framework he is developing as “the doctrine of ‘illocutionary forces’” (*ibid.*, p. 99). Illocutionary acts correspond to the force that an utterance carries in a particular context—such as an order, request, verdict, question, statement, or challenge. This “use of language”, claims Austin, may be said to be conventional, insofar as it could be made explicit by a performative verb or formula³.

The perlocutionary act represents “another sense in which to perform a locutionary act and therein an illocutionary act” may have further consequences: it corresponds to what speakers “bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring...” (*ibid.*, p. 108). Perlocutionary effects are non-conventional, but rather context-dependent. Austin himself acknowledged that a single locutionary act may correspond to different illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, depending on the circumstances of the utterance.

The distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts is, as Austin himself emphasizes, a theoretical abstraction. Within his framework, every

³ Austin classifies illocutionary acts into five types: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives.

“total speech act in the total speech situation” simultaneously involves all three dimensions. These are not to be understood as separate or hierarchically ordered components, nor does one act embed or include the others. The model is neither additive nor based on a structure of embedding—particularly with regard to the distinction between locution and illocution (cf. Sbisà, 2013, pp. 230–231). Yet, even if Austin introduces this threefold structure, he maintains a fundamentally monistic view of illocutionary force: each utterance is still seen as performing *one* illocutionary act, and the internal articulation of the speech act is not intended to support illocutionary plurality.

Another major classical reference for speech act theory, John R. Searle (1969), also adopts a fundamentally monistic approach, despite his later theorization of so-called indirect speech acts (Searle, 1975a). In *Speech Acts* (1969), Searle systematizes and partly modifies Austin’s framework—arguably in a more consistent and analytically refined way. Like Austin, he maintains that “all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts” (*ibid.*, p. 16), and that “[t]he unit of linguistic communication is not...the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol, or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act” (*ibidem*).

Searle eliminates Austin’s notion of the locutionary act, replacing it with two distinct categories: the *utterance act* (the act performed by producing certain morphemes and sentences, encompassing Austin’s phonetic and phatic acts) and the *propositional act* (which corresponds to Austin’s rhetic act, and consists in *referring* and *predicating*). Utterance acts, propositional acts, and illocutionary acts are the three kinds of acts involved in the utterance of any sentence.

Like Austin, Searle distinguishes illocutionary acts, which he considers the full-fledged or complete speech acts, from perlocutionary acts, which concern the consequences or effects of illocutionary acts on hearers. However, in his theoretical framework, perlocutionary effects receive limited attention. As in Austin’s model, the different kinds of acts that make up the total speech act are not to be thought of as additive layers: they are distinguished only by theoretical abstraction, since “the identity criteria are different in each case” (*ibid.*, p. 24).

Moreover, by stating that “the illocutionary force indicator shows how the proposition is to be taken ...what illocutionary force the utterance is to have” (*ibid.*, p. 30), Searle appears to endorse the view that each speech act is associated with a single illocutionary force.

A more nuanced case arises in Searle’s later account of indirect speech acts, where the monistic model seems to show signs of strain. In his 1975a article, Searle appears to take a step toward an illocutionary pluralism—though not a semantic pluralism, but rather a pragmatic one. Nonetheless, this shift offers a perspective on the relationship between parts and wholes in speech act structure and meaning. Indeed, as Searle notes:

“The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says. In such cases the speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in the hearer, and he intends to produce this effect by getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce it ... in virtue of the hearer’s knowledge of the rules that govern the utterance of the sentence” (Searle, 1975a, p. 59).

However, in ordinary conversation, it often happens that a speaker utters a sentence and means more than what is said literally, and in such cases “a sentence that contains the illocutionary force indicators for one kind of illocutionary act can be uttered to perform, IN ADDITION, another type of illocutionary act” (*ibidem*, emphasis in original). The classic example Searle offers (and which has been frequently cited since) is:

(1) Can you reach the salt?

Here, the propositional content suggests that the utterance is a question, but the act itself is understood as a request. At first glance, this seems to involve two illocutionary forces operating at the same level—a phenomenon that would support a multi-act reading. However, Searle insists that “one illocutionary act is performed *indirectly* by way of performing another” (*ibid.*, p. 60, emphasis added), thereby introducing a hierarchical structure: the primary illocutionary act (a request) is performed by means of a secondary act (a question), which is performed by uttering a sentence whose literal meaning “is such that its literal utterance constitutes a performance of that illocutionary act” (*ibid.*, p. 62). The hearer can grasp the primary illocutionary force only by engaging in a set of inferential strategies that allow them to go beyond the surface structure of the utterance.

The hierarchical relationship between the primary and secondary acts in Searle’s account of indirect speech acts has been described by Lewiński as operating along a vertical axis, giving rise to what he terms “vertical speech act pluralism” (Lewiński, 2021, p. 6696). Conversely, Johnson reaffirms the monistic assumption underlying Searle’s theory, arguing that even in the case of indirect speech acts, the two illocutionary forces are not on the same level: the secondary force is determined by the grammatical form of the utterance (Johnson, 2019, p. 1154)⁴.

Regarding indirect speech acts⁵, Sbisà observes that utterances of this kind “can be taken to display illocutionary plurality at least every time they receive

⁴ In Johnson (2019) possible varieties of illocutionary monism (on the speaker’s side, on the audience’s side and from a hybrid perspective) are investigated and discussed. This scholar concludes that although the intuition of the uniqueness of force is plausible, it is nevertheless difficult to sustain.

⁵ Sbisà also considers cases of utterance that are ambiguous between two illocutionary patterns (such as a *proposal* and an *offer*) and cases in which the intended effect conflates two (or more) patterns (such as *promising* and *apologizing*). She concludes that these do not constitute instances of illocutionary pluralism—at least not in the strict sense, and not invariably (cf. Sbisà, 2013, pp. 236-238).

responses recognizing both the so-called ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ illocutionary acts” (Sbisà, 2013, p. 238)⁶. One of these responses may be non-verbal, as in the following example:

(2) A: Can you reach the salt?

B: Yes (and then B passes the salt to A).

As I see it, for an accurate presentation of the terms of the issue it is worth distinguishing between a context-dependent pluralism and a context-independent pluralism. Both approaches challenge the classical assumption that each utterance corresponds to a single illocutionary act, yet they conceptualize plurality in different ways and adopt distinct criteria for explaining its compositional structure.

The issue of illocutionary pluralism is intertwined with another important question: what determines the illocutionary force of an utterance? This question concerns the actual role played by interlocutors in communication. Sbisà’s answer is that the speaker is ascribed responsibility for the change brought about, but that the speaker’s intention alone is not sufficient. As she clarifies:

What is ascribed to the speaker/agent is responsibility for the change brought about: the new situation is recognized to hold and to be caused at least in part by her behavior. In the case of illocutionary acts, this ascription involves distinguishing, on the basis of multiple verbal and non-verbal cues, the change or pattern of changes that an utterance token is designed to bring about, but at the same time, manifesting the audience’s uptake (the “securing” of which is essential to the illocutionary act) actively contributes to the success of the illocutionary act and, therefore, to the real occurrence of that change. (Sbisà, 2013, p. 243)

This convergence suggests that speech act pluralism (of any kind) makes sense only in the framework of an ascription-centered conception of action (*ibidem*).

If we ask what determines the illocutionary force of an act, three main positions have been defended within mainstream versions of speech act theory: illocutionary force is said to depend either on the speaker’s intention, or on the hearer’s uptake, or on a form of negotiation between speaker and hearer, in which the hearer’s ascription must be validated by the speaker. These models tend to reflect an idealized, monistic conception of the speech act.

By contrast, in an effort to account for the complexity of communication—which often exceeds the one-to-one correspondence between utterance and illocutionary force—alternative models have been proposed. This does not mean that

⁶ Elsewhere, Sbisà (2007) claims that all illocutionary acts are conventional primarily because they all have conventional effects.

there are no clear-cut, linear cases in which a single utterance straightforwardly performs a single, easily identifiable illocutionary act. But such cases represent only one end of a broader spectrum.

Building on these preliminary distinctions, Section 3 will focus on context-dependent accounts of illocutionary pluralism, and Section 4 will turn to the context-independent ones.

3. Context-dependent Pluralism

The context-dependent approach acknowledges the possibility that a single utterance may simultaneously perform two (or more) illocutionary acts relating to some specific features of the context of utterance. This illocutionary plurality can be defined in terms of the speaker's communicative intentions, the audience's uptake—which may include one or more addressees or other participants—and the effects brought about. Following Sbisà (2013), we do not consider here cases of so-called (semantic) ambiguity, i.e. utterances that contain certain words or structures compatible with two illocutionary patterns, and whose ambiguity is contextually resolved by the hearer through their selection of a single act in response⁷.

We begin by presenting Lewiński's proposal, which defines *illocutionary pluralism* as “intentional performance of a plurality of conventionally recognizable illocutionary acts via the same utterance token in one unique speech situation” (Lewiński, 2021, p. 6692). His conception of pluralism, which he terms *horizontal*, places intentionality and conventionality at its core: a speaker can intentionally perform more than one conventionally acknowledged illocutionary act at once through a single utterance token. In this perspective, the act performed by the speaker is full-fledged plural, both in dyadic conversations (one speaker – one addressee) and in polyadic ones (one speaker – multiple addressees). However, the different normative effects produced on various interlocutors depend on whether the multiple communicative intentions conveyed by the act are actually recognized.

With regard to illocutionary pluralism in a dyadic exchange, Lewiński identifies two cases: *dilemmatic deliberations* and *strategic ambiguity*.

In situations of dilemmatic deliberation, participants face multiple possible solutions to a practical problem. The speaker deliberately uses a single utterance token to perform several acts, all plausible within the given context. The example he provides (cf. *ibid.*, p. 6699) is as follows: two biologists are collecting samples under the frozen surface of a lake. If the ice is thin and transparent, more accurate

⁷ Sbisà specifies that in cases of ambiguity of this kind “[t]he “plural” element in them only concerns the speaker's openness to accept either understanding of her utterance” (Sbisà, 2013, p. 238).

samples can be gathered. However, thin ice poses a danger. This is a typical dilemmatic case (“real good data are hard to come by”). Moreover, the project leader had advised them to consult him if they encountered any dilemma. The exchange between the two biologists goes as follows:

(3) *Biologist 1*: Shall we go out to collect samples?

Biologist 2: The ice is thin.

According to Lewiński, Biologist 2 might be performing three indirect but primary acts: *encouraging* data collection, *warning* of the danger, and *deferring* the decision to the boss. We agree with Johnson’s observation that Biologist 2 is “deliberately taking advantage of the fact that distinct illocutionary forces can share a conventional profile,” and that the illocutionary forces at play here are “far apart in their normative effects,” thus distinguishing this case from examples where the speech acts are *compatible*, such as *proposing* and *offering* (Johnson, 2023, p. 137). Lewiński concludes:

In this way, by simultaneously putting three incompatible illocutionary acts in view (encourage, warn, defer), a speaker might overtly signal an action trilemma, thus opening the space for joint deliberation over the issue. Given that an identical assertion (“The ice is thin”) is performed as a direct but secondary act, this possibility relies entirely on illocutionary pluralism at the indirect but primary level of speech. (Lewiński, 2021, p. 6700)⁸

In cases of strategic ambiguity, Lewiński notes that the speaker intends to maintain the ambiguity through their utterance, “thus keeping the space of illocutionary potential... wide open” (*ibid.*, p. 6701). This may occur in diplomatic negotiations, where “[t]he strategic illocutionary ambiguity [for example ‘neither confirming nor denying’] is not merely a trick of a sly manipulator—it is a conventionally recognizable way of mutually handling trick situations where the stakes are high” (*ibid.*, p. 6702).

Let us now consider the case of polyadic conversations. Lewiński claims that here “illocutionary pluralism becomes a natural fact of communication” (*ibidem*). Consider, for instance, the utterance:

(4) Can you do it by tomorrow?

If this is a case of “illocutionary pluralism proper” (*ibid.*, p. 6703), different intended illocutionary forces are directed at different participants in order to produce distinct conventional effects for each of them (the pronoun “you” is to be interpreted as plural). This may depend, for example, on the personal relationships

⁸ The dilemmatic nature of the situation is, in a sense, already thematized in the very form of the question “Shall we...?”, which presupposes joint deliberation and shared responsibility for action.

between interlocutors. Lewiński imagines a scenario in which two co-principal investigators of a project meet with a postdoc involved in the same project. If one of the PIs utters (4), the illocutionary forces involved are a *request* directed at the co-PI and an *instruction* (even an *order*?) directed at the young postdoc. The speaker intends, with one and the same locution, to produce two different conventional effects and, consequently, expects two different responses. Once differentiated uptake has been acknowledged by each addressee, distinct effects will ensue.

Naturally, the situations can be more complex than the one just outlined. Lewiński observes that one must always consider the *multiple-recipient design* in relation to a “public score common to all participants, and shared scores limited to subsets of participants,” with the latter being either inclusive or exclusive. He concludes:

It is this multiplicity of simultaneously evolving scores that allows for illocutionary pluralism proper in a polylogue: with one and the same locution we can advance different illocutionary moves in different illocutionary games played with different subsets of participants [...]

Given this complexity, each conversational move, while being a single locutionary act, can alter various parallel sub-games, and to do so via simultaneously performed, fully fledged *illocutionary* acts, with all the overt, reflexive communicative intention in play. Moreover, these parallel illocutionary acts are conventional moves, collectively and by default recognized as such. (*ibid.*, pp. 6705–6706, emphasis in original)⁹

An alternative proposal to Lewiński’s is put forward by Johnson (2023a). Taking a different perspective, Johnson labels her view illocutionary *relativism*, whose core claim is that an utterance has the force(s) it is taken to have.

Whereas Lewiński focuses on the speaker’s intention and acknowledges that, when addressing multiple addressees, a single utterance may perform different acts depending on the hearer it is directed to, Johnson instead places the perspectives of the participants—their *uptakes*—at the center. She develops the idea that different viewpoints can assign multiple, and at times incompatible, forces to a single utterance:

If Lauren makes an utterance *u*, and Marcus and Niko have reactions to *u* that are conventional for illocutionary forces *a* and *b*, respectively, then *u* has force *a* relative to Marcus’ perspective and has force *b* relative to Niko’s. Further, if Lauren has a reaction that is conventional for illocutionary forces *c*, then the utterance has three forces—one from each of their *perspectives*. (Johnson, 2023a, p. 10, emphasis added)

⁹ Lewiński closes his paper by discussing two further instances of illocutionary pluralism in polylogue, developed by analytic philosophers: Langton’s *back-door speech acts*—low-profile acts enabled by presuppositions and similar mechanisms—and Saul’s *dog-whistles*—utterances designed to carry a covert, coded message for a subset of the audience while remaining innocuous to others. For a fuller account, see Lewiński (2021, pp. 6707–6711).

In Johnson's example, if Lauren says:

(5) I get so annoyed when the bus is delayed

Marcus may respond in a way that is conventional for complaints; Niko (who had borrowed Lauren's bike a few months earlier) may interpret it as a request; and Lauren, on her part, may intend to explain her quiet behavior over the past few minutes. As Johnson notes: "Each of these is a conventional response for a different illocutionary force. And so, the illocutionary relativist claims, they all indicate different illocutionary forces of Lauren's utterance" (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Thus, according to Johnson's relativism, "[a]s long as someone responds to the utterance in a way that is conventional for some illocutionary force, the utterance has that force (relative to the uptake)" (*ibid.*, p. 13). This shifts some of the weight away from the speaker's authority in determining the force of their utterance—although the speaker still plays a crucial role in establishing whether or not the illocution is felicitous (or infelicitous). In the example above, all participants contribute to defining the force of Lauren's utterance, yet only Lauren—if her actual intention was to explain rather than to perform another act—produces a fully felicitous speech act. Nevertheless, even if it remains an *explanation*, if Marcus takes it up as a *complaint*, then Lauren's illocutionary act is also a complaint, and if Niko interprets Lauren's utterance as a request, then Lauren's illocutionary act is also a request.

Based on the relativist hypothesis she defends, Johnson summarizes her view as follows:

[...] an utterance has the force it has in virtue of the similarity between its normative profile and the normative profiles of the classical cases of their forces. This profile includes the reaction of the participants in the conversation in which the utterance occurs. Since utterances regularly approximate the conventional procedures for several different forces, and since uptake can vary from participant to participant, the normative profile for an utterance can approximate the classic case of more than one force. So, the view holds that force facts for each utterance are determined relative to the uptake of the participants. (*ibid.*, p. 14)

Thus, speaker intentions and listener responses may diverge, and even the speaker's subsequent reactions may not align with their original aims¹⁰. Such divergences are shaped by shared conventions that define standard normative profiles for illocutionary acts within a linguistic community. Yet, precise agreement on these profiles is not always necessary for the conversation to move forward.

¹⁰ Cf. Johnson (2023b) where she outlines and highlights the social consequences and costs associated with a perspective-dependent view such as the one she proposes (see Johnson, 2023b, pp. 132–136).

The third proposal discussed in this section is that of Labinaz (2024), who examines the views of Lewiński and Johnson and highlights what he sees as their respective limitations. In particular, he argues that the excessive emphasis placed either on the speaker's intention (as in Lewiński) or on the perspectives of the addressees (as in Johnson) fails to adequately account for certain levels of indeterminacy. This indeterminacy may arise either from incomplete control over the illocutionary force or from a divergence in the normative profiles invoked. Drawing on Sbisà, Labinaz points out that both theories overlook the intersubjective nature of the normative effects produced by illocutionary acts (Labinaz, 2024, pp. 394–397). In his view, it is precisely the negotiability of these effects—and their impact on the unfolding of interaction—that constitutes the key to understanding the illocutionary dimension.

According to Labinaz, fully grasping the scope of illocutionary pluralism and its effects on conversational dynamics requires expanding the corpus of analysis to encompass broader conversational sequences. This would make it possible, first, to assess how the information shared among speakers and hearers in previous turns shapes the various illocutionary forces ascribable to a given utterance. Indeed, “i molteplici legami della parlante con i suoi interlocutori si tramutano in altrettante sequenze conversazionali, in cui può corrispondere l’assegnazione di forze illocutorie anche incompatibili tra loro” (*ibid.*, p. 398) [“the speaker’s multiple connections with her interlocutors turn into corresponding conversational sequences, each of which may involve the attribution of even incompatible illocutionary forces”]. Second, such an approach would bring into focus “le modalità con cui gli effetti normativi si instaurano in una data sequenza conversazionale e il modo in cui tali effetti ne influenzano il prosieguo” (*ibid.*, p. 399) [“the ways in which normative effects are established within a given conversational sequence, and how those effects influence its further development”].

In this sense, Labinaz sees sequentiality as a fundamental feature of the illocutionary dimension: illocutionary acts are both determined by and determinative of the conversational sequences in which they occur. Their normative effects set constraints on, or open new possibilities for, the continuation of the exchange. Illocutionary plurality thus emerges within what Labinaz calls “un complesso reticolo conversazionale” [“a complex conversational network”]. A single utterance may belong to multiple sequences, taking on different, even incompatible, forces depending on how it is received and on the responses it elicits from various interlocutors.

Labinaz revisits Johnson’s example (quoted above as (4)):

(6) Can you do it by tomorrow?

and notes that it may activate distinct conversational sequences that unfold in parallel (even at different times) or overlap in the turns following the initial utterance. These may lead to retractions, modifications, or even the merging of sequences. Therefore, “nonostante a un proferimento possano essere ascritte molteplici forze illocutorie, tali assegnazioni andranno sempre ponderate tenendo conto delle mosse successive susseguenti” (*ibid.*, pp. 400–401) [“although multiple illocutionary forces may be ascribed to an utterance, such ascriptions must always be assessed in light of the subsequent conversational moves”].

In conclusion, Labinaz claims that only by placing illocutionary force within its intersubjective context can we understand how normative effects are negotiated, confirmed, or retracted through interaction (*ibid.*, p. 402). For rights and duties to be effectively established, agreement between the parties is required—an agreement that emerges (or fails to) across extended conversational sequences.

The discussion so far has focused on contextual models of illocutionary pluralism, showing how illocutionary acts can multiply through interactional mechanisms. In what follows, I turn to another perspective that investigates whether and how the semantic properties of linguistic expressions may themselves encode multiple illocutionary acts independently of the peculiar features of the context.

4. Context-independent Pluralism

One strand of this inquiry considers lexical items that inherently activate more than one illocutionary force. Certain expressive or evaluative terms have been shown to trigger at least one expressive act in addition to whatever other function the sentence performs. When such terms appear within a larger utterance, they act as built-in vehicles for illocutionary pluralism.

Tenchini and Frigerio have mostly focused their research on slurs¹¹ contributing to the wide debate regarding the semantic status of the derogatory content of these terms (cf. Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016; Frigerio & Tenchini, 2025), but the theory also applies to other classes of connoted terms such as amelioratives, as shown in Tenchini & Frigerio (2025).

Slurs are expressions that derogate individuals or groups on the basis of certain characteristics (e.g., race, gender, nationality) and are typically used to express contempt or reinforce social hierarchies. The account defended by Tenchini and Frigerio provides an expressivist theory of the meaning of these terms within the

¹¹ For the last forty years slurs have been widely discussed in linguistics and philosophy of language. Several competing theories have been proposed, which cannot be mentioned or presented here for reasons of space. For a short comprehensive overview, see for instance Tenchini & Frigerio (2016, pp. 168–172).

speech act framework. Their approach treats slurs as a specific type of linguistic expression. Consider the following example:

(7) John is a faggot.¹²

This multi-act approach seeks to analyze what a speaker does when using a slurring expression. The central claim is that, in uttering (7), which contains a slur, the speaker performs two distinct speech acts simultaneously. Adopting Searle's taxonomy (1975b), these are:

a) a representative act, by which the speaker commits themselves to the truth of the neutral content of (7)—i.e. John being homosexual, and

b) an expressive act, by which the speaker expresses their contempt (or any other negative feelings or attitudes)¹³ for the individuals who belong to the extension of the predicate "homosexual".

In this sense, slurs are linguistic devices suited for performing expressive speech acts, and the act performed exhibits the usual features of expressives. This multi-act view extends to other sentence modalities: it explains, for example, why a slur derogates the target class even when embedded in negative, modal, or conditional contexts. If the speaker says:

(8) Is John a faggot?

they perform two acts: a directive (the addressee is asked to tell the speaker whether John belongs to the class of homosexuals), and again an expressive (communicating contempt for the class).

Since the two acts are, at least to some degree, independent of each other, the expressive component can be rejected without denying the propositional neutral content (representative act). For instance, (8) may receive a response such as:

(8b) No, John is not a faggot, he is a homosexual,

where only the expressive act is rejected.

This approach can also explain the infelicity of utterances such as:

(9) *Donald is a nigger, but I have nothing against Afro-Americans.

Any utterance where a speaker uses an expressive term while simultaneously denying the attitude it conveys tends to be pragmatically infelicitous.

An advantage of this analysis is that its semantic pluralism may be extended to other kinds of evaluative or affective expressions—both negative and positive—toward a person or a fact, such as in (10) and (11):

¹² The slurs discussed here are to be understood as desensitized examples, employed solely for theoretical analysis. They do not reflect the attitudes of the author.

¹³ Cases of appropriative use of slurs are excluded here.

(10) Yesterday I sold my jalopy.

Here, the speaker performs an assertive act (“I sold my (old) car”) and an expressive act that conveys slight irony. In

(11) Sarah is an angel,

alongside the assertive content (“Sarah is a good fellow”), the utterance conveys admiration or affection—expressing a positive evaluative stance that is not tied to literal truth conditions.

Still within the domain of theories that—though not explicitly expressivist—draw on the speech act framework to explain the derogatory content of slurs from a multi-act perspective, two further contributions are worth briefly mentioning.

Maitra, in her analysis of *subordinating* speech, supports, in a short passage, a version of speech act pluralism whereby a single utterance may carry out multiple distinct acts at once—for example, *asserting* a claim while also establishing a hierarchical judgment (*ranking*) (cf. Maitra, 2012, p. 112).

Also Liu (2021) suggests that a single statement can convey multiple illocutionary acts. He argues that slurs make the same contribution to the truth conditions as the neutral counterpart while also being, additionally, illocutionary force indicators: “[a] slur (e.g., “chink”) is both 1) an illocutionary force indicator of acts of derogation against its target (e.g., the Chinese), as well as 2) a propositional indicator that makes the same truth-conditional contribution as its neutral counterpart (e.g., “Chinese”)” (Liu, 2021, p. 1053). Thus, slurs are understood as illocutionary force indicators of derogation and, at the same time, propositional indicators. Accordingly, slurs are understood as linguistic tools carrying a dual function: they simultaneously serve as propositional indicators and as illocutionary force markers of derogation.

Liu thus endorses a form of illocutionary pluralism—specifically, a semantic variety—and maintains that it is possible to perform multiple direct illocutionary acts within a single utterance. He specifies that when a racist utters:

(12) Zhang is a chink

he is not indirectly derogating Chinese people by asserting that Zhang is Chinese. Rather, both the assertion and the act of derogation are direct illocutionary acts. Moreover, according to Liu, force indicators help determine illocutionary force by offering a default interpretation of the utterance: “for instance, the force indicator “chink” guides the hearer to form the initial (but defeasible) hypothesis that the utterance is an act of derogating the Chinese, before other factors (e.g., irony, sarcasm) are taken into considerations” (*ibid.*, p. 1054).

Liu specifies that the second performed illocutionary act in question typically belongs to the class of declaratives, that is, “an act to bring about certain states of affairs by saying something (e.g., resigning and approving)” and “to enforce discriminatory norms” against the target group (*ibidem*).

A further approach to illocutionary pluralism is developed by Hancher (1979), who reconsiders certain speech acts—such as *inviting*—traditionally classified by Searle as directives. Unlike Searle, Hancher argues that inviting involves more than a mere attempt to influence the hearer’s behavior: when a speaker issues an invitation, they also commit themselves to a particular course of future action. As he observes: “If I invite you to my party and then refuse to let you in, you will normally have grounds to object. The reason for this is that an *invitation is not only a directive but also a commissive*: it commits the speaker to a certain course of behavior himself” (Hancher, 1979, p. 6, emphasis in original).

Similarly, acts such as *offering*, *tendering*, *bidding*, *inviting*, *volunteering* and formal *challenging* are described as “hybrid speech acts” that exhibit the same dual nature. Hancher refers to them as “commissive directives”: acts in which “neither force dominates” (*ibidem*). He notes:

The equivocal nature of commissive directives makes them natural vehicles for social and psychological equivocation. In particular, the directive aspects of offering and inviting can be hidden, for either speaker or hearer (or both), behind the appearance of a generosity of commitment on the speaker’s part. Offering, like inviting, is a potentially manipulative act... Commissive directives all look towards completion in some response by the hearer. In this respect they may seem like any directive, which seeks a hearer-response as a perlocutionary effect. But commissive declaratives are different from simple declaratives, because the response sought is itself illocutionary in nature, and give rise to a peculiarly complex illocutionary situation – in effect, to a cooperative illocutionary act. (*ibid.*, p. 7)

Later in his analysis, Hancher specifies that what distinguishes acts such as *offering* is their unilateral nature. This is why they may be described as “pre-cooperative” illocutionary acts (*ibid.*, p. 8). By contrast, fully cooperative speech acts involve more than one agent. For instance, “...the declaration *giving* (or *gift*) is compounded of two other illocutionary acts involving two speakers: a commissive directive offer matched by a declarative *acceptance*. Giving is a cooperative illocutionary act” (*ibid.*, p. 7, emphasis in original)¹⁴.

To conclude this section, we consider one final challenge to the assumption that a single utterance performs only one communicative function. This comes from Bach (1999) and Neale (1999), who both reject the assumption that

¹⁴ His analysis is rather elaborate, but a detailed discussion falls outside the scope of the present section.

every sentence expresses just one proposition. Although their analyses are not explicitly framed in terms of illocutionary acts, their work opens onto a pluralist perspective.

Bach, for instance, draws attention to utterances that convey both a main assertion and a secondary, parenthetical comment. Consider the sentence

(13) Beth's husband, a plumber, never washes the dishes. (cf. Bach, 1999, p. 345)

Even if the speaker is mistaken about Beth's husband being a plumber, we still tend to regard the utterance as true—since its primary content concerns his behavior, whereas the secondary content (his profession) is perceived as less central, though still part of what is said. According to Bach, this kind of layered structure undermines the need for positing a separate category of conventional implicatures. Bach argues that the theory of conventional implicatures relies on a mistaken assumption—namely, that every indicative sentence expresses exactly one proposition (Bach, 1999, p. 350). This assumption, Bach contends, fails to account for cases like (13), where more than one proposition is expressed. Crucially, these propositions are not conjoined but function independently of each other. Accordingly, some utterances may convey two distinct propositions.

Neale (1999) offers a compatible view, arguing that such sentences express a “sequence” of propositions, rather than a simple conjunction (cf. Neale, 1999, p. 55), where the second proposition typically offers a comment on the first. This second layer is often treated as secondary, although contextual factors can shift their relative prominence.

In both accounts, the utterance displays a layered semantic structure: two distinct contents, semantically autonomous, are conveyed through a single sentence. This analysis provides an important precedent for thinking about illocutionary plurality, especially in cases—such as expressive or evaluative utterances—where more than one illocutionary act may be realized simultaneously.

5. Conclusion

This paper has surveyed a range of proposals for interpreting illocutionary pluralism, each offering a distinct yet valuable lens through which to understand how multiple speech acts may be performed simultaneously through a single utterance. Though grounded in different assumptions, these approaches collectively demonstrate that the meaning and force of an utterance are often distributed across multiple layers, rather than being reducible to a single, unitary act.

What emerges is a pluralistic picture of speech that resists reduction to a fixed taxonomy of discrete acts. Instead, these contributions suggest that illocutionary meaning should be understood as a structured configuration, where different

forces may intersect, overlap, or diverge within the same utterance. In this regard, the relationship between the individual illocutionary acts and the overall meaning resembles the Gestalt principle: the whole is not merely the sum of its parts, but a structured configuration in which each part gains significance from its position within the whole.

Summary

By challenging the classical assumption of a one-to-one correspondence between an utterance and an illocutionary act, this paper surveys a variety of approaches to illocutionary pluralism, all converging on the idea that a single utterance may perform multiple illocutionary acts at once. These approaches, classified as either context-dependent or context-independent, offer distinct perspectives on how such plurality is structured, conceptualized, and categorized. It is shown that adopting a multi-act perspective yields a more nuanced and explanatory account of linguistic meaning and of the complexity of actual language use, especially in contexts where multiple illocutionary forces interact within a single, unified utterance.

Keywords: illocutionary monism, illocutionary pluralism, context (in)dependency

Zusammenfassung

Indem die klassische Annahme einer eins-zu-eins-Entsprechung zwischen einer Äußerung und einem illokutionären Akt in Frage gestellt wird, bietet dieser Beitrag einen Überblick über verschiedene Ansätze zum illokutionären Pluralismus, die allesamt von der Grundannahme ausgehen, dass eine einzelne Äußerung gleichzeitig mehrere illokutionäre Akte vollziehen kann. Diese Ansätze, die sich in kontextabhängige und kontextunabhängige Positionen einteilen lassen, eröffnen unterschiedliche Perspektiven auf die Struktur, Konzeptualisierung und Interpretation solcher Pluralität. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Übernahme einer Mehr-Akt-Perspektive eine differenziertere und theoretisch tragfähigere Beschreibung sprachlicher Bedeutung sowie der Komplexität realer Sprachverwendung ermöglicht – insbesondere in Kontexten, in denen mehrere illokutionäre Kräfte innerhalb einer einzigen, einheitlichen Äußerung zusammenwirken.

Schlüsselwörter: illokutionärer Monismus, illokutionärer Pluralismus, Kontext(un)abhängigkeit

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