On the Ontology of Communicative Acts

Antonella Carassa[1], Marco Colombetti[12]

[1] Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, CH
[2] Politecnico di Milano, Milano, IT

- **Interpersonal communication**: obviously a social activity—but in what sense, exactly?

- Many substantially different views, but a main distinction can be drawn between:

  - theories that regard communicative acts as actions performed according to **shared social conventions** (e.g., mainstream speech act theory as developed by Austin 1962, Searle 1969, Alston 2000), and

  - theories that regard communicative acts as actions performed by "**subjects in interaction**" (e.g., theories based on Grice 1957)

- Powerful objections against convention-based theories (e.g., Strawson 1964) …

  … but the subjects-in-interaction approach is still in need of firm foundations

- Understanding how communicative acts are grounded in the **human cognitive architecture**:

    - what fundamental cognitive capacities are involved?

    - how are such capacities put to use in actual communicative interactions?

- Tomasello's (2008 2009) **cooperative model of human communication**: understanding human communication in the context of a more general theory of human cooperation

    But in our view:

    - the theory overlooks a crucial dimension of cooperation, i.e., **interpersonal normativity**

    - the "three general types of evolved communicative motives" (Tomasello 2008:87) (i.e., **requesting**, **informing**, and **sharing**) are too generic to ground a full-fledged treatment of communicative acts

- What cognitive capacities are necessary for cooperation?

  - **intersubjectivity**: the capacity to share attitudes and feelings (by now a well developed research topic in cognitive science, e.g., Morganti et al. 2008, Zlatev et al. 2008)

  - **(deontic) normativity**: the capacity to consider oneself as responsible/answerable to others for something (often overlooked in theories of cooperation)

- What we are interested in is

  - not the '**external**', cultural or legal normativity which applies to the execution of communicative acts (e.g., whether it is or it is not socially acceptable to ask certain things to certain people in certain situations)

  - but the '**internal**' normativity that is created by the communicative acts themselves

- Two categories of speech acts (a distinction introduced by Strawson 1964):

  - **institutional speech acts**, performed thanks to some kind of extralinguistic institution (e.g., appointing a professor at a university, giving a penalty in a soccer match, surrender at a battle)

  - **communicative acts** performed by **sharing communicative intentions** (e.g., informing, requesting, promising, expressing attitudes and feelings)

- It is part of our view of communication as cooperation that all speech acts have normative effects:

  - institutional speech acts do so thanks to the underlying nonlinguistic institution

  - what about communicative acts?

    ➡ **interpersonal normativity**

■ The basic normative relationship: an agent (the **debtor**) is **responsible** for something (the **content**) to another agent (the **creditor**)

A is responsible to B for X

A

debtor **X** creditor

content
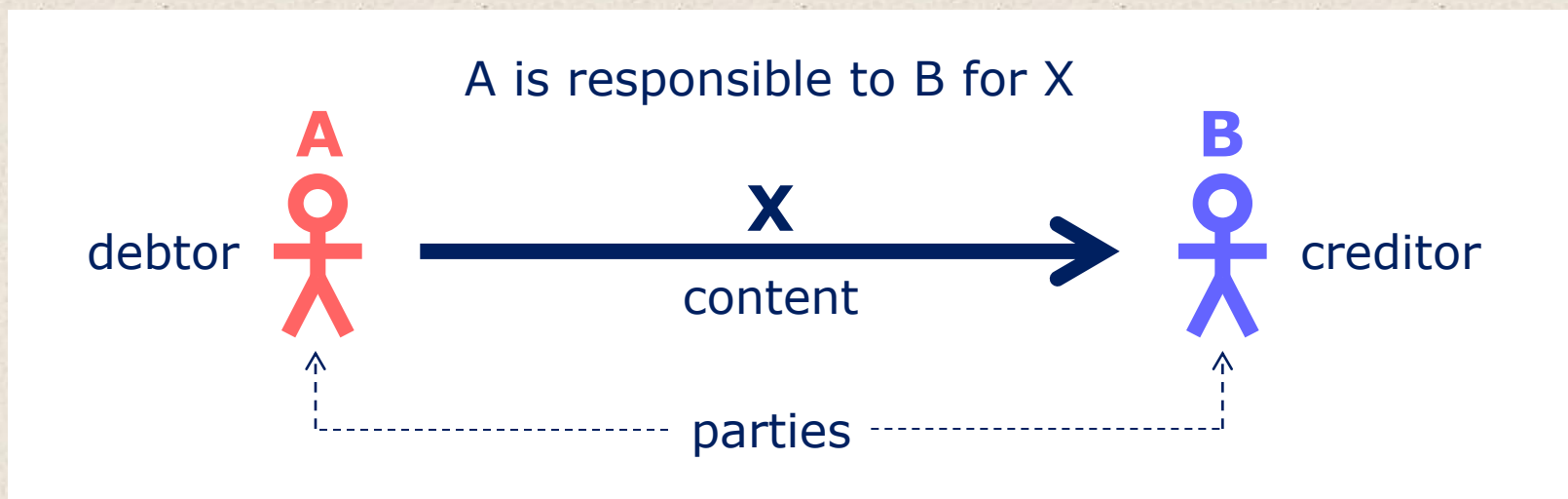
parties

■ The relationship is **interpersonal**: it holds because it is collectively constructed by both parties

(Carassa & Colombetti in press; our treatment is partially inspired by the works of Darwall 2006 and Gilbert 1989 1996)

- We have argued elsewhere (Carassa & Colombetti in press) that the relationships of interpersonal responsibility can be created by intersubjective transactions in which communicative intentions are shared

  This allows us to explain the normative effects of communicative acts (i.e., noninstitutional speech acts) without recourse to conventional procedures or analogous concepts (as characteristic of mainstream speech act theory)

- Different types of communicative acts (like asserting, informing, requesting, promising, etc.) can now be modelled in terms of their different normative effects

  This allows us to reconsider certain key issues of speech act theory, like direction of fit, felicity conditions, and the taxonomy of communicative acts

  In what follows we consider direction of fit (Searle 1975) and the distinction between misfires and abuses (Austin 1962)

- Direction of fit is a key concept of mainstream speech act theory, first systematically discussed by Searle (1975):

  - **words-to-world** direction of fit (↓): the speech act has to fit the world, e.g.: asserting, informing

  - **world-to-words** direction of fit (↑): the world has to fit the speech act, e.g.: promising, requesting

- Sometimes direction of fit is described in terms of "responsibilities for fitting" (e.g., Searle 2001:37):

  - ↓: the responsibility for fitting is on the words

  - ↑: the responsibility for fitting is on the world

- This specification is metaphoric:

  - only agents can literally be responsible of anything

- In the literature on responsibility it is traditional to distinguish between:

  - **prospective responsibility**: being responsible for achieving some state of affairs in the future, e.g.:
    - Angelina is responsible for bringing a bottle of wine to the party

  - **historic responsibility**: being 'culpable' for some state of affairs after the fact, e.g.:
    - Brad is responsible for breaking a bottle of wine at the party

- To understand direction of fit in terms of agent responsibilities we distinguish between two types of situations:

  - as an effect of performing a communicative act, an agent is prospectively responsible for achieving a state of affairs

  - as an effect of some state of affairs, an agent is historically responsible for a communicative act of hers/his being a violation

- Two examples of communicative acts with the same content and different directions of fit:

  - **case 1**: Angelina promises to Brad to do X

  - **case 2**: Angelina informs Brad that she will do X:

- Suppose that Angelina **does not do X**:

  - **case 1**:

    - Angelina's not doing X violates a prospective responsibility of hers

    - i.e.: her act of promising is all right, but her not doing X is a fault which calls for a correction or an excuse

  - **case 2**:

    - in view of Angelina not doing X, her act of informing is a violation

    - i.e., her not doing X is all right, but her act of informing is now a fault which calls for a correction of an excuse

- According to Austin, a speech act is performed by carrying out a socially shared **conventional procedure**, which in particular specifies certain **felicity conditions**

- An attempt to perform a speech act may be unfelicitous in two distinct ways:

  - a **misfire**: the attempt fails because the conventional procedure is not correctly carried out and the act is therefore void

    - e.g.: a meeting is adjourned by someone who does not have the power to do so

  - an **abuse**: the attempt succeeds because the conventional procedure is correctly carried out; the act is therefore performed, but is somehow defective because certain felicity conditions do not hold

    - e.g.: the meeting is adjourned by someone who has the power to do so, although s/he believes that the conditions for doing so do not obtain

- In our view, in the original form proposed by Austin the distinction applies only to institutional speech acts

  What about communicative acts, as these are performed not by carrying out conventional procedures, but by sharing communicative intentions and thus creating interpersonal responsibilities?

  An insincere promise, for example, may be regarded as an abuse— but what would count as a misfire in a promise? In other words, when is a promise void?

- A communicative act is void when at least one of the parties does not have sufficient **interpersonal power** (Carassa & Colombetti in press) to enter the relevant relationships of interpersonal responsibility:

  - small children

  - severe cases of dementia

  These are the only possible **misfires** in the execution of communicative acts (as contrasted to institutional speech acts)

- When a speaker promises to do X, besides becoming responsible for doing X, he or she takes responsibility for certain states of affairs (roughly corresponding to Austin's felicity conditions): e.g., the speaker takes responsibility for believing that he or she can do X

  If this is not the case (i.e., if the speaker does not believe that he or she can do X), the communicative act violates such responsibility as soon as the act is performed, and therefore it is an **abuse**

- In general, a speaker commits a communicative abuse if in performing a communicative act s/he intentionally takes responsibility for a state of affairs that the speaker does not believe to hold

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