Interpersonal Communication as Social Action

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Abstract

We compare a number of influential approaches to human communication with the aim of understanding what it means for interpersonal communication to be a form of social action. In particular we discuss the large-scale social normativity advocated by speech act theory, the view of communication as small-scale social interaction proper of Gricean approaches, and the intimate connection between communication and cooperation defended by Tomasello. We then argue in favor of a small-scale view of communication capable of accounting for the normative effects of communicative acts; to this purpose we introduce the concept of interpersonal normativity and analyze its relationship with communicative intentions.

Nobody would deny that human communication is a form of social action. But what does this precisely mean? In what sense, exactly, is communication social? In this paper we are concerned with interpersonal communication, and more precisely with what Clark (1996) calls the "basic setting" of human communication—face to face communicative interactions between two or more individuals. Our goal is to clarify in what sense this type of communication is a form of social action. To this purpose we compare different theoretical approaches; in particular we discuss mainstream speech act theory, the approaches based on the Gricean concept of communicative intention, Tomasello's cooperative model of communication, and our own theory.

All these approaches share the view that communication is a form of activity, and thus is to be analyzed as a sequence of *communicative acts* performed by the interlocutors. Important bases for the study of communication as a form of action have been laid by Austin (1962) and Grice (1957), who started two major traditions in the study of communicative acts: speech act theory, based on Austin's concept of a speech act, and Gricean theories of communication, based on Grice's conception of speaker's meaning. As we show in the first two sections of this paper, these two traditions put

forward radically different views of what it means for a communicative act to be a form of social action.

Speech act theory and Gricean theories are both part of the wider field of philosophy of language. Recently a different type of approach, firmly rooted in empirical studies on the phylogeny and ontogeny of human communication, has gained wide popularity. Tomasello's (2008) cooperative model of communication, which we shall discuss in the third section of this paper, deals with communicative acts from the standpoint of comparative and developmental psychology: the communicative capacities of human adults are analyzed on the background of the current understanding of the communicative capacities deployed by nonhuman primates and by children. In our view, however Tomasello's model neglects important aspects of interpersonal communication; in particular it does not account for how humans use communication to create or modify the normative relationships that bind them to their interlocutors, as it happens for example when people make promises or agreements. This aspect, which is essential to understand the social implications of human communication, is a crucial concern of the theory that we have been developing in the last few years, which will be briefly presented in the fourth section.

Language as a Social Institution

Since the publication of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), speech act theory has been a very influential approach to the study of linguistic communication. Speech act theory comes in different versions, all of which share some basic assumptions: that language is used to perform certain specific types of actions, called "speech acts"; that by producing a single linguistic utterance a speaker typically performs several speech acts at different logical levels (in Austin's view a *locutionary*, an *illocutionary*, and a *perlocutionary* act); that the main concern of the theory is the analysis of illocutionary acts (like for example informing, requesting, promising, greeting, and so on); and that the force of an illocutionary act derives from specific conventions shared by the members of a linguistic community.

The last point is the most problematic. Indeed, Austin did not clearly explain what he meant by a convention; most plausibly he wanted to clarify the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts: between informing and convincing, requesting and inducing, threatening and frightening. One possible interpretation of why Austin considered illocutionary acts to be conventional is that to inform, request, or threaten someone it is crucial that the addressee understands the speech act as a case of informing, requesting, or threatening; on the contrary, understanding is not sufficient to convince, induce, or frighten: these are possible further effects on an addressee, which a speaker may fail to achieve even if their illocutionary act has been properly understood. This seems to be what Austin had in mind when saying that to perform an illocutionary act it is essential to "secure uptake" (1962, p. 138).

Today's most popular version of speech act theory is the one offered by Searle (1969). In Searle's view, in performing a speech act a speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in virtue of the fact that "the meaning of the item he utters conventionally associates it with producing that

effect"[1] (p. 61). The conventions regulating meaning are regarded as the constitutive rules of a social institution, the *institution of language*. According to Searle, language is the "basic social institution," because it plays a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of all other human institutions (Searle 1995, Ch. 3).

What we can call *institutional theories of communication*,[2] like Austin's and Searle's, have two notable advantages. The first is that they provide a unified treatment for all types of speech acts, whether they presuppose complex nonlinguistic institutions (like the speech acts involved in baptizing someone or firing someone from a job) or are simple, purely linguistic communicative acts (like informing or requesting). Moreover, institutional theories simply accommodate speech acts that have normative effects (like promises, invitations, agreements, etc.) because such effects are typical of institutional actions.

To summarize, the illocutionary acts of speech act theory are social in at least two distinct ways: first, they are social in that they are institutional actions, and as such presuppose shared acceptance of the constitutive rules of the institution of language; second, they are social because their performance can produce social consequences, like for example normative effects (which are regarded as institutional facts created by a speaker within the institution of language). Interpersonal communication, therefore, can be viewed as a *large-scale social phenomenon*, in that it essentially involves forms of group-level normativity.

This view of communication is not without problems. Possibly the main difficulty is that the actual reconstruction of illocutionary acts as conventional actions has proved impossible. Consider for example the utterance, "I'll be at office tomorrow." Depending on the circumstances, in producing this utterance the speaker may be trying to make an assertion, or to inform the addressee, to make a promise or a threat, to issue an invitation, and so on; however, it is clearly impossible to formulate a set of conventions able to account for the illocutionary act that is actually performed. In speech act theory this problem is typically faced by assuming that in uttering a sentence a speaker can perform indirect illocutionary acts (e.g., a promise) different from the literal speech act (e.g., an assertion); but even Searle (1975) explains the meaning of indirect illocutionary acts in terms of nonconventional inferential processes.

Of course, that the illocutionary force of an utterance is (at least partially) nonconventional does not rule out the fact that the sentence uttered is itself conventional, in the sense that it follows the conventions of the lexicon and grammar of English. But in certain cases even the "utterance" may be nonconventional: a fictional example is offered by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), who describe a situation in which two prisoners succeed in escaping by coordinating their actions thanks to the production by one of them of a spontaneous, nonconventional signal. Speech act theory cannot explain similar cases, nor the communicative activities of preverbal children. Bruner (1983), however, has convincingly argued that children learn to deal with illocutionary forces before they acquire the conventional rules of their native tongue, and recent research by Tomasello and collaborators shows

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[1] This is actually part of a more complex formulation, which is not relevant to the current argument (but see Note 5).

[2] This term is Searle's (1969, p. 71).

that preverbal children are capable of communicative interactions that could not be explained if one assumes that communication always presupposes the acquisition of social conventions.

In addition to these difficulties, a more general objection can be made to Searle's idea that illocutionary acts are institutional actions defined by constitutive rules. In Searle's words, "constitutive rules, such as those for games, provide the basis for specifications of behavior which could not be given in the absence of the rule" (Searle 1969, p. 36). Now consider, for example, a promise. It is fair to define an act of promising as a speaker's attempt to create an obligation to an addressee to perform an action that is in the addressee's interest. However, creating such an obligation has to be part of the capacities of human beings before promise can be defined: promising does not create the concept of an obligation in the same way as, for example, the game of chess creates the concept of a checkmate; and even when language is needed to specify the action that an agent promises to perform, it is not the use of language by itself that creates the obligation, nor is the fact that specific obligation-making conventions are followed.

Minds in Interaction

A sharply different approach to communication is based on Grice's pioneering article on nonnatural meaning. As is well known, Grice (1957, p. 385) defined nonnatural meaning, or meaning$_{NN}$, as follows:

> "*A* meant$_{NN}$ something by *x*" is (roughly) equivalent to "*A* intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention."

Even if Grice does not explicitly mention communication, Strawson (1964) remarks that Grice's definition can be interpreted as an analysis of interpersonal communication. In the same paper, Strawson criticizes Austin's idea that the force of all illocutionary acts is conventional. He distinguishes between two categories of illocutionary acts: the first category includes those speech acts that do appear to derive their illocutionary force from a convention, like bringing in a guilty verdict in court, pronouncing a batsman out in a cricket match, introducing someone by saying "This is Mr. Smith," or surrendering by throwing up one's arms; the second category includes those speech acts, which we call *communicative acts*, whose illocutionary force does not appear to be fully determined by any convention. The example we gave in the previous section (saying "I'll be at office tomorrow") is an instance of this category.

To explain how a communicative act acquires its illocutionary force, Strawson interprets Austin's concept of uptake in terms of (a revised version of) Gricean meaning. In the appropriate circumstances, for example, the utterance "The ice over there is very thin" will have the force of a warning (rather than, e.g., the force of an assertion) not because it conforms to a specific convention regulating warnings, but because the addressee, considering the total situation in which the utterance is produced, recognizes the speaker's intention to issue a warning, at least in part by having this very intention recognized.

Since Strawson's article, several theories of communication based on the Gricean definition of meaning have been put forward. Most often Grice's original definition is somewhat modified. A first frequent amendment concerns the reference of the expression "this intention" in the original definition. As Grice clarified in later writings (see for example Grice 1969), he meant it to refer to the

speaker's intention "to produce some effect in an audience" through the utterance. The definition therefore involves two stratified intentions: a first-level intention to produce an effect in an audience, and a second-level intention that the first-level intention be recognized by the audience.[3] However, there are good reasons to prefer a version of the definition involving a single reflexive intention, where the expression "this intention" is taken to refer to the whole intention "to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention" (see Carassa and Colombetti 2009 for a justification of this interpretation); following common practice, an intention of this kind we shall call a *communicative intention*. A second modification of the original definition concerns the concept of recognition by an audience. As argued by Schiffer (1972), the one-sided recognition of the speaker's intention by the audience does not suffice: for genuine communication, the speaker's intention must be shared (i.e., mutually recognized[4]) by the speaker and the audience. As a third amendment we propose to drop the qualification "in an audience" from the expression "to produce some effect in an audience." The reason is that, as we shall argue later, the effect of a communicative act is not necessarily limited to the audience, as it generally involves also the speaker. Considering these amendments, our preferred version of Grice's definition becomes:

> A communicative act is an action performed by an agent (called "the speaker") with the intention to achieve some effect, at least in part by means of sharing this very intention with some other agent (called "the addressee").

Let us now compare mainstream speech act theory with Gricean theories of communication. As far as communicative acts are concerned, the main difference is that Gricean theories do not rely on a concept of convention or constitutive rule.[5] But this involves a very different idea of what it means for a communicative act to be a form of social action: rather than stressing the role of language as a large-scale social institution, Gricean theories stress the importance of the small-scale interaction between individuals. What is at stake, in Gricean approaches, is human intersubjectivity, understood as the capacity to share with others certain types of mental states, inclusive of communicative intentions.

It should be remarked that a certain level of intersubjectivity is presupposed also by the institutional theories of communication. Such theories usually insist that the conventional rules of language apply to utterances that are used literally and seriously, and this rules out those uses that are either metaphoric or ironic. But how is an addressee supposed to understand, for example, that an utterance is used ironically and standard conventions are therefore suspended? Should we assume some form of metaconvention to signal metaphors and ironies? But then, we should be able to signal that the metaconventions too are used literally and seriously, which would lead to infinite regress. It seems that the only viable solution is to assume that speakers are able to share with their addressees

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[3] In the already cited article Strawson argues that a third-level intention should be considered.

[4] By this we mean that the speaker's intention must be common belief of the speaker and the audience; in Clark's (1996) terminology, it must become part of their common ground.

[5] Also Searle adopts a version of Grice's definition; he insists, however, that speakers try to achieve the recognition of their communicative intentions in virtue of the addressees' knowledge of the constitutive rules of language (see Searle 1969, Ch. 2 Sect. 6).

their intention to use an utterance literally and seriously: but this inevitably brings intersubjectivity into institutional theories of communication.

Gricean theories view interlocutors as "minds in interaction," and treat communication as a *small-scale social phenomenon*, with a number of advantages. Nonconventional forms of communication, like the ones discussed in the previous section, are no longer problematic. Moreover these theories can be extended, with due care, to the communicative processes of preverbal children. It will therefore come as no surprise that the Gricean structure of communication plays a prominent role in Tomasello's cooperative model (Tomasello 2008), to which we devote the next section.

However, also Gricean theories of communication face some difficulties. First, if minds in interaction take center stage it is not possible to marginalize the psychological dimension of communication; rather, it is necessary to investigate what mental capacities are put to use in communicative interactions, how it is concretely possible to share mental states with others, and so on. We shall come back to this important point in the next section. Second, if communication is no longer assumed to take place in the context of the institution of language, it is not easy to explain how communicative acts can have normative consequences, as it is obviously the case with such acts as promises, proposals, and agreements. Proposing a solution to this problem is a major concern of our own research, which will be sketched in the fourth section.

Communication for Cooperation

The last few decades have witnessed remarkable progress in the developmental and comparative psychology of communication. Michael Tomasello and colleagues, in particular, have carried out a vast amount of experimental research on the communication processes in nonhuman primates and children. On the basis of the results of this research activity, Tomasello has recently formulated a comprehensive theory, the *cooperative model of communication*, in which human communication is viewed in the wider context of cooperation (Tomasello 2008).

In Tomasello's view, human communication is radically different from the communication processes of other animal species. This is due to the fact that the communicative capacities of humans are part and parcel of their wider ability to cooperate, which is a distinctive feature of the species. A deep comprehension of the psychological infrastructure involved in cooperation is therefore necessary to understand human communication, and this infrastructure can be investigated by carrying out systematic empirical research in developmental and comparative psychology.

According to the cooperative model, the main elements of the psychological infrastructure of human communication include the capacities for shared intentionality, certain prosocial motivations, and an understanding of social norms. As far as shared intentionality is concerned, Tomasello places center stage Clark's concept of common ground (Clark 1996), together with the capacity to form joint intentions and goals: for these concepts Tomasello mainly refers to the works of Searle (1990, 1995), Bratman (1992) and Gilbert (1989). In particular, Tomasello draws on Searle (1990) to remark that cooperation is mutualistic, in the sense that to cooperate one has to regard others as possible candidates of cooperative action.

The infrastructure for shared intentionality, however, would make no sense if humans did not have a repertoire of motivations that drive them to engage in cooperative behavior. In Tomasello's view such prosocial motivations concern helping others and sharing feelings and attitudes.

Coherently with the idea that we see each other as possible candidates for cooperation, these motivations are both active in each subject, and assumed to be active in the others. For this reason the motivation to help underlies both the acts of informing others in their interest, and requesting from others something that is in our interest. Requesting, informing, and sharing are therefore assumed to be the three fundamental types of motivations underlying communication.

The cooperative model posits different kinds of intentions that are relevant to communication. *Social intentions* concern the actual social interactions that speakers try to achieve by performing communicative acts (helping, getting help, and sharing feelings or attitudes). Relying on the mutual assumptions of cooperativeness, speakers try to achieve the intended effects by intentionally sharing their social intention with their interlocutors, and therefore perform communicative acts with a Gricean *communicative intention*, whose main (but not only) function is to create expectations of cooperation.

Interestingly, there is much empirical evidence that while cooperative communication of this kind is precluded to nonhuman primates, it is already within the capacities of preverbal children of about 1 year of age. Later on (from 3 to 4 years of age), children start to appreciate that communicative acts also have normative effects. In Tomasello's approach, the social normativity of communication is strictly related to the fact that communication is functional to cooperation, and is related to the logical structure of communicative intentions: as already noticed by Strawson (1964), communicative intentions make what we say overt and avowable, and "the fact that I have communicated to you overtly, publicly, actually creates not just expectations of cooperation but actual social norms, whose violation is unacceptable" (Tomasello 2008, p. 91-92). Such normativity arises at two distinct levels. The first level concerns the performance of the communicative act itself: "if I attempt to communicate with you ..., you cannot just ignore me as though I did not attempt to communicate" (p. 92). The second level of normativity concerns the addressee's compliance to the speaker's social intention: "if I make a small request..., you cannot really reply with 'No'—unless you make some excuse for why you cannot comply in this circumstance" (p. 92).

In the cooperative model, the idea of sociality that underlies human communication is coherent with the role of communicative interactions for cooperation, and presents both small-scale and large-scale aspects. As far as small-scale sociality is concerned, young children of about 1 year already demonstrate pro-social motivations and basic capacities of shared intentionality, including the ability to take into account common ground and to form and pursue common goals. Later on, between 3 and 4 years of age, children become sensitive to the social norms regulating communicative acts. Importantly, the normative effects of communication crucially depend on the logical structure of communicative intentions The role attributed to such intentions is to make the communicative act "public"; as a consequence, speakers fall under relevant social norms. Tomasello clarifies this with an example concerning a guest who would like to have more wine at a dinner (2008, p. 214-215):

> If I place my empty wine glass in a conspicuous position, hoping my host will see it and fill it, but (for reasons of politeness) making sure he does not see me do it and so does not view it as an overt request, no norms apply. ... But if I signal him overtly by brandishing the empty glass in his direction, in most cases this would trigger a norm— we know together that he has seen the empty glass and presumably has inferred from the

brandishing act toward him that I want a full glass, and so he must deal with it in some way, or pretend that he did not in fact see my act.

The global picture, therefore, is that communicative interactions do not create normative relationships from scratch, but rather instantiate preexisting social norms, recognized at group level.

At present, Tomasello's cooperative model is the most remarkable attempt to embed a theory of interpersonal communication in a larger theory of human cooperation. What makes it especially valuable is the vast empirical evidence on which it is based, gathered in observational and experimental settings and concerning both the phylogeny and the ontogeny of communication. However, the cooperative model leaves a number of crucial aspects unclarified. For example, when shared intentionality is at stake Tomasello usually refers to the works of Searle, Bratman, and Gilbert: but in fact these philosophers propound theories of shared intentionality that are incompatible with each other. Another important point concerns social normativity. What kind of psychological infrastructure can account for the human capacity to consider oneself and the others as subject to norms? And is all social normativity a large-scale phenomenon, so that specific normative relationships are always produced by instantiating preexisting group-level norms? Or can such relationships directly arise from small-scale intersubjective interactions?

In the next section we shall briefly present our approach, which specifically aims to clarify the normative effects of interpersonal communication.

Normativity from Interaction

Let us go back to our previous example utterance, "I'll be at office tomorrow." Let us also suppose that in producing this utterance the speaker intends to make a promise, and that the addressee correctly understands this. How can we account for such a communicative interaction? As a promise is an attempt to create an obligation of the speaker to the addressee to perform an action in the addressee's interest, we have to explain how such an obligation can be brought about through a communicative interaction. The answer given by speech act theory is that promises are part of the institution of language and are performed by carrying out a conventional procedure, whose institutional effect is to create a certain type of obligation. But in our example (as in most everyday cases of promises) it appears that no specific conventional procedure for promising is followed. Therefore a different explanation is needed.

We believe that the main fault of the institutionalist explanation of a promise is that the addressee is supposed, first, to recognize that the speaker is carrying out a conventional procedure for promising; and second, to derive from this (by instantiating a general constitutive rule of promising) that the speaker is thereby trying to create a certain type of obligation. If no convention is involved, the explanation must necessarily go the other way around: first, the addressee understands that in performing her utterance the speaker is attempting to create a certain type of obligation; and it is only as a consequence of this that the addressee is entitled to describe the speaker's communicative act as a promise. But then we are left with the problem of explaining how people can directly create obligations, and similar normative relationships, without relying on specific conventions.

Very few scholars have devoted their attention to what we call *interpersonal normativity* (Carassa and Colombetti 2014), that is, the normative relationships that two or more agents can create intersubjectively, without relying on pre-existing group-level norms. Interpersonal normativity has

the distinctive feature that it binds precisely those agents who jointly create it. To our knowledge, the only extensive attempt to account for this phenomenon is Gilbert's *plural subject theory* (Gilbert 1989). A number of agents constitute a plural subject when they create a joint commitment of doing something "as a body," which in turn entails directed obligations (and the correlative rights) between the agents (Gilbert 2013). It is remarkable that creating a joint commitment does not presuppose pre-existing institutions: according to Gilbert, it is only required that the relevant agents express, in conditions of common knowledge, their readiness to do so.

Gilbert (2009) submits that joint commitments are the essence of shared intentionality. Her position, however, is highly controversial. According to Bratman, for example, shared intentions are "primarily a psychological—rather than primarily a normative—phenomenon" (Bratman 1993, p. 112). A similar position is put forward by Tomasello (2014), who argues that the ability to collaborate appeared in an evolutionary stage in which humans still lacked the psychological infrastructure necessary for normativity. Tomasello's conception of normativity, however, encompasses large-scale, group-level norms, and does not seem to take into account interpersonal normativity.

We agree with Tomasello that simple forms of collaboration, like group hunting, do not necessarily involve normative relationships: such collaborative efforts may be driven by the fact that every member of the group appreciates that their contribution is critical for the success of the current endeavor, and therefore for the achievement of their personal goal. However, it seems plausible to assume that human normativity did not appear at once in the fully-fledged form of group-level norms. At an intermediate stage, humans may exploit interpersonal normativity to support more complex forms of collaboration; for example, some kind of interpersonal normativity seems necessary to support delayed exchanges (I do this for you now, you will do that for me tomorrow).

We believe that interpersonal normativity is basically a matter of being *responsible* (or answerable) to someone else for doing something. Responsibility is a deontic relationship (Carassa and Colombetti 2014) that assigns definite normative positions to two specific agents (which we respectively call the *debtor* and the *creditor* of the responsibility); these positions are correlative in the sense that the debtor is responsible to the creditor to do *X* if, and only if, the creditor has a legitimate claim against the debtor that the debtor does *X*.

Being responsible to someone is a piece of social reality: as such, a relationship of responsibility holds when it is recognized to hold by a suitable social collective, which we call the *source* of the responsibility. Most often the parties of a responsibility (i.e., the debtor and the creditor) belong to the source, but this is not strictly necessary; Ann's responsibility to take care of his old father Bruce, for instance, is recognized at society level independently of whether Ann and Bruce do or do not recognize it. There are important cases, however, in which the crucial point is that the responsibility is recognized by the parties themselves; for example, if Ann promises Bruce to bring him a bottle of wine, and Bruce accepts the promise, then Ann accrues a responsibility to Bruce because the two of them mutually recognize that this is the case. This type of normative relationship we call an *interpersonal responsibility*.

In general, responsibilities that are not interpersonal (like Ann's responsibility to take care of her old father Bruce) hold because they instantiate general norms supported at group level. The idea is that a group can only support norms that are general and justified by attributes of the relevant agents

or relationships between them. For example, a group may support the general norm that everybody ought to take care of their old parents; when such a norm is instantiated for Ann and Bruce, a specific relationship of responsibility is created. On the contrary, interpersonal responsibilities are agent-specific from the very start, in that they hold between two parties exactly when they are recognized to hold by the parties themselves—and this feature of interpersonal responsibilities is crucial when one comes to the process of creating them.

We have argued elsewhere (Carassa and Colombetti 2014) that interpersonal responsibilities are created by performing communicative acts, thanks to the distinctive logical structure of communicative intentions. Here is the basic idea: as interpersonal responsibilities hold just because they are intended to hold by their parties, to create an interpersonal responsibility it is necessary and sufficient that each party intends it to hold, and intentionally shares this intention with the other party. For example, consider again an act of promising; if we apply to promises our definition of a communicative act we obtain:

> A promise of *A* to *B* to do *X* is an action performed by *A* with the intention of becoming responsible to *B* to do *X*, at least in part by means of sharing this very intention with *B*.

With this definition, the act of promising is not sufficient to create *A*'s responsibility to *B* to do *X*. What is needed in addition is that *B* accepts *A*'s promise, where the communicative act of accepting is defined as follows:

> The acceptance of a promise of *A* to *B* to do *X* is an action performed by *B* with the intention of acquiring a legitimate claim against *A* that *A* do *X*, at least in part by means of sharing this very intention with *A*.

If these communicative intentions are shared by *A* and *B*, *A*'s interpersonal responsibility and *B*'s legitimate claim that *A* do *X* are brought about. This is a consequence of the fact that for an interpersonal responsibility (and the correlative claim) to hold it is necessary and sufficient that both parties intend it to hold, and intentionally share their intentions with the other party. We can now justify why we modified Grice's original definition by replacing "an effect in an audience" with "an effect" *tout court*: the intended effect of a promise is the creation of a normative relationship binding the speaker and the addressee, and thus cannot be simply regarded as an effect *in the audience*.

Our analysis shows that, at least in the case of promises, communicative acts and interpersonal responsibilities are strictly related, because it is by performing communicative acts that interpersonal responsibilities are brought about. We believe that this argument can be extended to other types of communicative acts, but with a caveat. Promises (and commissive acts in general) are special, in the sense that not only they bring about interpersonal normativity, but this is the very point of performing them. Other types of communicative acts do bring about normative effects, but this is not necessarily their point. Consider for example an act of informing. We suggest that "*A* informs *B* that *P*" means that *A* makes *P* epistemically available to *B*, taking responsibility to *B* that *P* is actually the case. Most of the times, *B* will accept *A*'s responsibility, and this will give *B* a reason to believe that *P*. In other cases, *B* will accept *A*'s responsibility even if he is not really convinced that *P* is the case. But there are also marginal cases in which *B* will not accept *A*'s responsibility, for example if *A* is dead drunk or otherwise mentally incapacitated.

In our approach, the sociality of communicative acts is essentially the sociality of minds in interaction. We believe to have shown that such small-scale communicative interactions are capable of bringing about normative relationships between the interacting agents; such normative relationships do not derive from the large-scale normativity of the institution of language, but are a direct consequence of the logical structure of communicative intentions. Of course, we do not deny the crucial role of linguistic conventions: no complex propositional content could be communicated without language; moreover, language provides us with a large choice of tools to specify or at least constrain the illocutionary force of an utterance (for example, in normal conditions an utterance like "I might be at office tomorrow" cannot be interpreted as a promise). However, the role that we assign to language is different from the one advocated by institutional theories: in our view language affects interpersonal normativity not because producing an utterance counts as a normative undertaking within the institution of language, but because it allows speakers to share complex communicative intentions with their addressees.

As we have seen, different approaches put forward different views of what it means for interpersonal communication to be a form of social action. Speech act theory regards communicative acts as part of the large-scale social normativity underlying the institution of language; Gricean theories focus on the small-scale sociality of minds in interaction; and Tomasello's model regards communication as functional to human cooperation and concentrates on the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of the relevant psychological infrastructure.

In our view, all these approaches fail to account for the human capacity to create interpersonal normative relationships, which we regard as crucial for cooperation. We propose to analyze such normativity in terms of relationships of interpersonal responsibility that people create by sharing communicative intentions. While much work is needed to work out the details, we believe that our proposal allows for a better comprehension of the social structure of communication and of the normative aspects of interpersonal relationships.

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