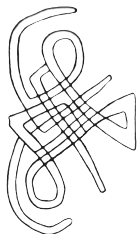**InterLinguistica**
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Collana del DADR
Dipartimento di Ateneo per la Didattica e la Ricerca
in cooperazione con il
centro CLASS dell'Università per Stranieri di Siena

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Verbal Aggressiveness in English:
A Speech Act Theory Approach

Edizioni ETS

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Volume pubblicato con il contributo
del Dipartimento di Scienze Umane dell'Università degli Studi dell'Aquila

Il volume è stato sottoposto a doppio referaggio anonimo

Verbal Aggressiveness in English:
A Speech Act Theory Approach

To my parents

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

1.1. *Overview and aims*

This book is a contribution to ongoing research on aggression, impoliteness and conflict in language from a linguistic pragmatic perspective. It offers a systematic theoretical account of the phenomenon of aggressiveness in interactional speech, with special attention devoted to the cognitive processes, psychological motivations and pragmatic effects involved in its performing. To date, such an account is still missing. The approach to the notion of aggressiveness proposed here combines research on aggressive behaviour carried out in the field of social psychology with the tenets of speech act theory and prototype theory, in order to gain a deeper understanding of verbal aggressiveness as distinct from impoliteness.

Both the concept of verbal aggressiveness and the language prototypically expressing it have so far received unsystematic attention. They have been focused upon mainly in contrast to other connected linguistic phenomena, like politeness and hedging, or dealt with under more general headings, like political discourse or social conflict. This study describes in detail some of the English (para)linguistic means that appear to be privileged in the expression of aggressiveness across speech act types in non-institutional settings and pinpoints the components of the illocutionary force (Searle's model) that qualify a speech act as aggressive.

In social psychology, intent to harm is the defining feature of aggressive behaviour. This conception, which I embrace here, is complemented by the notion of coercion (Tedeschi & Felson 1994) to provide the following definition of verbal aggression used in this work: "any verbal action carried out with the intent to harm the interlocutor or force his/her compliance".

The principal aim therefore will be to identify in verbal actions those modes of expression that mark the presence of an aggressive (i.e. harmful or coercive) intent on the part of the speaker and see if some regularity of occurrence of aggressive forms and functions can be found.

A suitable explanatory framework relating verbal actions to intentions and goals is speech act theory, and among the models available, Searle's (1969) approach has been adopted for placing intentionality at the core of human communicative actions. Intentionality engenders responsibility for action, and in this model an aggressive action typically involves volition and representation. The types of intentions relevant to aggressive actions are both illocutionary and perlocutionary. They are perlocutionary because a perlocutionary intention is "the intention that one's communicative act produce a given perlocutionary effect" (Recanati 1987: 179), i.e. harm or coercion; they are illocutionary because a perlocutionary intention is achieved by the illocutionary intention (3.3.2). Understanding the relation between aggressive behaviour, types of intentions and emotions is another objective of this study.

Starting from the observation that some speech acts lend themselves better than others to an aggressive use, I combine Rosch's (1976, 1978) and Taylor's (1989) model of prototype categorization with Searle & Vanderveken's (1985) classification of speech act verbs by superimposing the first model to the second. This enables me to identify how each class of speech acts can contribute to the expression of aggressiveness and within each class differentiate the aggressive force in terms of degree and quality. Using a perlocutionarily enriched notion of aggressive force, in accordance with prototype theory I identify a set of semantic properties capable of selecting central vs marginal representatives of the class. In the case of aggressive speech acts, the properties I propose as relevant are four, namely mode of achievement, propositional content, sincerity conditions, and perlocutionary intentions. These semantic properties are functional to describing the degree of prototypicality of the aggressive force of the acts and to constructing scales of aggressive prototypicality for each of the five categories of speech act verbs. Other criteria (for example, type of target and transparency) are used additionally to provide extra formal motivations. Each verb in its class represents a set of intensional features, which may or may not have a practical realization in discourse.

Different semantic criteria are identified for measuring the intensity of aggressive strength within the same class of speech acts. A systematic intensity scale is thus provided for each class of speech acts, defined through

a fine-grained analysis of the semantic components of the illocutionary verbs pertaining to the specific class.

The aggressive intent that accompanies an aggressive communicative action may be inferred from textual and contextual cues. The inferential processes whereby some verbal action is perceived and evaluated as aggressive by participants in interaction may become manifest at the level of expression in the form of metapragmatic labels such as *aggressive* or *hostile*. The data that form the dataset for this investigation were retrieved from naturally-occurring conversations in online UK forums, from electronic (web) corpora and fictional sources partly using *aggressive/ly* as the search words, and partly by relying on my own judgement of the aggressive quality of a speech act (or speech act sequence) when the metapragmatic label was not available, which was often the case. As a matter of fact, the absence of metapragmatic comments is not always evidence that no verbal aggression has taken place. As Bandura (1973: 6) rightly points out about physical aggression, the absence of pain reactions may reflect the recipient's endurance rather than properties of the action. *Mutatis mutandis*, aggression labels may reflect characteristics of the person (e.g. susceptibility, hostile bias) rather than of the act. For these reasons I have adopted a mixed approach to data collection and interpretation in assuming both the participants' and the analyst's perspective, that is, I have relied on linguistic choices as indexical signs of an aggressive intent on the speaker's side without ignoring the target's perspective when this was available.

Another aim in this investigation is to highlight the non-reducibility of aggressiveness to impoliteness. In socio-pragmatic research, aggressiveness is seen either as an intensified, exacerbated form of impoliteness, or as the outcome of planned but non-spiteful/malicious behaviour. Hence, aggressiveness is always accounted for within the framework of (im) politeness theory. Although a systematic comparative analysis of the two phenomena is beyond the scope and aims of this investigation, we shall see in Chapter 6 that aggressiveness can be both involuntary and spiteful, that it may coexist with impoliteness and increase it and, more importantly, that it may coexist with politeness.

In this introduction, I discuss the pragmatic concepts that are especially relevant to my account and illustrate my theoretical frame of reference, speech act theory; I take stock of the existing views on verbal aggressiveness in the field of (socio)pragmatics and give an overview of the structure of this study.

1.2. *Relevant pragmatic notions*

1.2.1. *Action theory*

Within pragmatics, language is understood as a system of goal-directed actions within a social frame. Speech acts are actions, and aggressive speech acts are generally used to achieve harmful, coercive and selfish goals. Only intentional aggressiveness is relevant here, not accidental harm due to misunderstandings or ignorance about the target.

Communicative interactions may be either cooperative or non-cooperative (that is, antagonistic), depending on whether interactants engage in the attainment of mutually accepted goals or whether they impose or resist one another's goals. Aggressive verbal actions are typically associated with antagonistic or conflictive social interaction but are not always equatable with antagonistic or non-cooperative behaviour. Reactive aggressiveness or retaliation to verbal attacks such as insults can be considered cooperative insofar as "every participant in a symmetric relationship conversation has the right to retaliate against previous personal attack" (Kienpointner 1997); whereas from this same perspective silence counts as non-cooperative behaviour. Therefore, aggressiveness may be said to coincide with cooperativeness in the sense of convergent antagonistic speech behaviour, as illustrated within the Speech Accommodation Theory (Thakerar *et al.* 1982; Giles & St. Clair 1979).

Verbal actions are intentional (i.e. they are stimulated and accompanied by intentions) and goal-oriented (i.e. they have a purpose). Speech acts may have more than one goal, hierarchically organised. This can be illustrated with the following example from Castelfranchi & Parisi (1980: 339). An annoyed tone of voice used to give the answer "It's five o'clock" to the question "What time is it?" communicates that the request has disturbed the speaker (goal); while the speaker's choice of communicating his irritation by replying serves the supergoal of discouraging further questions. In the case of instrumental aggression, harmdoing may be subordinated to the achievement of a non-aggressive goal.

Within a goal-oriented communicative activity, speech acts and linguistic choices represent strategies adopted by interactants towards goal attainment. Functionalism is an appropriate explanatory model that "combines acts/actions with their goals and goals with oparations that may serve to attain them" (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 15). The type of functional explanation that will be used here to analyse aggressive verbal

actions is the one that holds for "goal-intended behaviour in purposive, conscious actions" (Dressler 1995: 13), whereby actions are to be related to the goals of their performers following the social and culture-specific conventions for those action patterns.

1.2.2. *The components of social interaction*

Communication takes place in social settings or situations where participants interact through verbal actions (i.e. speech events). The speech situation includes participant roles (e.g. agent, victim, beneficiary) with their cognitive properties, psychological attitudes and interrelations; place, time and setting of communication; and "conventional verbal and non-verbal means of communication available to the participants" (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 5) such as conventional implicatures.

Participant roles may be covered by speaker (text producer), addressee (direct recipient), side-participants (audience considered by speaker) and bystanders. The expression of aggressiveness and its intensity may vary according to the presence or absence of side-participants, which can inhibit or favour the use of certain modes of expression (e.g. taboo language, swearwords, sarcasm).

Interrelations between participants are also important to aggressiveness. For example, the degree of social power tends to be directly correlated with the degree of imposition on the interlocutor (see 5.6.). The type of personal relationship (e.g. familiar, informal, intimate) contributes to determining aggressive strategies (direct vs. indirect aggressiveness) and linguistic choices and can even redefine as jocular commonly insulting expressions (i.e. banters).

Among the participants' properties, their attitudes (cf. Van Lancker & Pachana 1998: 304), motives, emotions, sympathy vs. antipathy, are more relevant to aggressiveness than cognitive properties (defined by Nuyts-Verschueren 1987) such as experiences, previous knowledge and beliefs. Psychological and social distance between speaker and addressee is also a relevant variable.

Place, time and setting of communication are useful in differentiating between written (e.g. forums, blogs, newspapers) and oral communication, especially if considered from a diachronic perspective.

Conventional verbal and non-verbal means of communication available to the participants include conversational maxims and implicatures, presuppositions and global cognitive patterns such as frames and

scripts. Conversational implicatures derive from the flouting of the four conversational maxims (Grice 1989: 26-27) of quantity ("Make your contribution as informative as is required"); quality ("Try to make your contribution one that is true"); manner ("Be perspicuous/orderly/ brief") and relation ("Be relevant") in which the Cooperative Principle is articulated. The maxim of manner is, for example, flouted by the obscurity of expression which may serve threatening or insulting purposes.

Both implicatures and presuppositions induce processes of inferencing in receivers. In my study this typically applies to cases of sarcasm, where the addressee is confronted with a literal semantic meaning contradicted by contextual evidence. Conventional implicatures are instead independent of the Cooperative Principle. They are "pragmatic implications which are derived directly from the meaning of words, rather than via conversational principles" (Leech 1983: 11). Conventionally offensive and derogatory expressions belong here.

The speech event includes the verbal and non-verbal actions regulated by social norms. Participant's volition, intentions, goals and supergoals, conversational implicatures and speech acts are elements of the speech event.

1.3. *Speech Act Theory*

The two main strands in contemporary research in speech act theory take either Searle's (1969) or Austin's (1962) work as their points of reference. Here I shall adopt Searle's model, the more suited to my purposes. A full and detailed comparison between the two approaches is beyond the scope of the present work, therefore I will just mention the main reasons for my choice. These are the notion of meaning as intention and the relevance accorded to inner states (intention being a mental state itself). As we will see in Chapter 3, the defining criterion of verbal aggressiveness is intentionality (consisting of volition and representation); while inner states (including emotions and attitudes) are always involved in the mechanisms of aggressive linguistic behaviour, which they often motivate.

Searle's (1969) and Searle & Vanderveken's (1985) taxonomy of speech acts is based on differences in illocutionary point, the most important component of an illocutionary force. An illocutionary point is "that purpose which is essential to an illocutionary act to its being an act of that type" (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 13). The authors identify five illocutionary points:

1) "The assertive point is to say how things are" (e.g. in blames).
2) "The commissive point is to commit the speaker to doing something" (e.g. in threats).
3) "The directive point is to get other people to do things" (e.g. in orders).
4) "The declarative point is to change the world by saying so" (e.g. in naming or appointing somebody).
5) "The expressive point is to express feelings and attitudes" (e.g. in deploring).

Beside illocutionary point, an illocutionary force is defined by six other components:

1) Degree of strength of the illocutionary point (e.g. commanding is stronger than requesting and requesting stronger than suggesting).
2) Mode of achievement, that is, the "special set of conditions under which illocutionary point has to be achieved in the performance of the speech act" (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 15). For example, in commanding, the speaker invokes a position of authority over the hearer.
3) Propositional content conditions, that is, what can or cannot be the propositional content of a speech act. For example, the propositional content of a promise must represent a speaker's future action, not a past course of action.
4) Preparatory conditions, that is, the "conditions which are necessary for successful and nondefective performance of an illocutionary act" (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 17).
5) Sincerity conditions, that is, conditions for expressing a psychological state in agreement with the specific propositional content (for example, beliefs, intentions, contempt, anger, etc.)
6) Degree of strength of the sincerity conditions, because "the same psychological state can be expressed with different degrees of strength. The speaker who makes a request expresses the desire that the hearer do the act requested; but if he begs, beseeches, or implores, he expresses a stronger desire than if he merely requests" (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 19).

Speech act theory has been criticised for being confined to single speech acts, and therefore for not providing a fully adequate framework for the analysis of real-life speech (cf. Searle (1992) on this). Problems have arisen with speech act classification and the empirical identification of some speech acts. For instance, it is sometimes hard to differentiate complaints

from criticisms or criticisms from reproaches, because "utterances are often equivocal in force" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 10). Still, Searle's framework remains the best suited for my purposes, that is, for analysing aggressive linguistic devices across illocutionary types and for locating aggressiveness within the composite (i.e. illocutionary and perlocutionary) nature of the aggressive force of speech acts.

In Searle's (speaker-centred) view of interaction, communication is successfully achieved if by uttering a sentence in certain circumstances with a certain intention (e.g. of greeting, insulting, etc.) the speaker gets the hearer to recognise his/her intention (illocutionary effect). The speaker's intention will be recognised if the hearer understands the meaning of the sentence, that is if he/she understands that under certain circumstances its utterance counts as a certain speech act (a greeting or an insult). It is clear that the meaning which is being referred to is illocutionary meaning, while the speaker's intention is the illocutionary intention. And since Searle deals with meaning as an aspect of force, understanding the illocutionary meaning of an utterance is understanding its illocutionary force. Therefore, to recognise the speaker's communicative intention does not mean to recognise just the illocutionary point of his/her utterance, as argued in Sbisà (2001: 1795), but the illocutionary force as a whole.

This point is crucial when accidental aggression resulting from wrong attribution of communicative intentions is considered. For example, assertions and complaints have the same illocutionary point but differ in terms of their sincerity conditions and preparatory conditions. In mistaking an assertion for a complaint, the addressee does not attribute the wrong illocutionary point to the utterance, but the wrong illocutionary force. In (1) taken from Sam Shepard's (1979) *Buried Child*, Dodge acknowledges Tilden's assertion as an accusation:

(1)   Tilden: (*pause*) Could I have some of that whiskey you've got?
      Dodge: What whiskey? I haven't got any whiskey.
      Tilden: You've got some under the sofa.
      Dodge: I haven't got anything under the sofa! Now mind your own damn
         business! Jesus God, you come into the house outa the middle of nowhere,
         haven't heard or seen you in twenty years and suddenly you're making
         accusations.
      Tilden: I'm not making accusations.
      Dodge: You're accusing me of hoarding whiskey under the sofa!
      Tilden: I'm not accusing you.
      Dodge: You just got through telling me I had whiskey under the sofa!

Speech acts may have consequences for the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the participants in the speech event (Austin 1962: 101). These consequences are the perlocutionary effect (e.g., hurt, amusement), and the acts producing such effects are perlocutionary acts. Directives, for example, are a type of illocutionary acts which have perlocutionary effects associated with their meaning. Perlocutionary acts are only marginally considered by Searle (1969: 25) and Vanderveken (1990), because they "have no or almost no semantic relevance. […] Unlike illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts are not determined by sentence meaning" (Vanderveken 1990: 69).

Perlocutionary effects may be produced unintentionally, unlike illocutionary effects. For this reason, they are not considered as an aspect of the force of a speech act, but as an additional element. As pointed out by Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 28), perlocutionary effects and perlocutionary sequels belong to the sociocultural area of pragmatics rather than to the linguistic area. Therefore, in my linguistic approach to aggressiveness I feel more confident in dealing with illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions, even though perlocutionary effects will not be overlooked, as they may contribute to the assessment of the speaker's aggressive goals.

1.4. *Verbal aggression in (socio)pragmatics: a sketchy overview*

Verbal aggressiveness is a complex and elusive communicative phenomenon involving pragmatic, psychological and cognitive aspects. Due to this complexity, (socio)pragmatists have approached the issue from specific angles. A number of studies have been devoted to single speech acts types such as complaints (e.g. Olshtain & Weinbach 1993; Trosborg 1995; Drew 1998; Tatsuki 2000; Vásquez 2011), disagreements (e.g. Gruber 1998; Kotthoff 1993; Locher 2004; Angouri & Tseliga 2010; Langlotz & Locher 2012; Sifianou 2012; Bolander 2013); insults/slurs (Jucker 2000; Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000; Mateo & Yus 2013; Meibauer 2016; Schauer 2017) and insulting epithets (Bortoluzzi & Semino 2016; Winberg 2017); threats (Fraser 1998; Limberg 2008, 2009; Gales 2015; Biscetti 2015; Muschalik 2018); reproaches (Günthner 1996; Margutti 2011; Biscetti 2015; Klattenberg 2020).

Other studies, both linguistic and psycholinguistic, have been addressed to taboo and swear words (Montagu 1967; Murray 1990; Allan & Burridge 1991, 2006; Hughes 1991, 2006; Jay 2000, 2009, 2018; Hom 2010; Christie 2013; Goddard 2015; Widlitzki & Huber 2016), or to less direct and more

elaborated forms of aggression like sarcasm (Adachi 1996; Jorgensen 1996; Haiman 1998; Attardo *et al*. 2003; Musolff 2017; Kreuz 2020; Whalen *et al*. 2020). Common to these studies is the association of conflictive discourse with more or less intense emotions such as anger, rage, irritation, annoyance, or contempt on the part of both speaker and addressee.

Conversation analysts have focused on aggressive behaviour in specialised discourse such as political debates (Blommaert 1997; Agha 1997; Montez & Brubacker 2019) and courtroom discourse (Penman 1990; Archer 2011), or on conflict-related interactional phenomena like interruptions (Mulac & Van Dyke 1992; James & Clarke 1993; Bresnahan & Cai 1996; Gnisci *et al*. 2018; Jacobsen 2019) and corrections (Harness Goodwin 1983).

More importantly, the same linguistic phenomena that form the object of this study have been described either as *aggravation* (Lachenicht 1980) or as (aggravated/coercive) *rudeness/impoliteness* (Kienpointner 1997; Culpeper 1998, 2011; Pearson *et al*. 2001; Locher & Watts 2008; Archer 2008; Bousfiled 2008) and accounted for within the framework of (im) politeness theory. In these studies, verbal aggressiveness comes under the heading of impoliteness as an intensified or exacerbated form of it, or it is seen as a hyperonym of impoliteness (i.e. impolite behaviour is a type or sub-category of aggressive behaviour).

Although the two phenomena may coexist and even overlap within the same speech act, a good example showing that they can be kept distinct is as follows (cited in Ickes *et al*. 2012: 75):

(2)   Off with their heads!

This speech act, addressed to Prince Charles and Camilla's car by student protesters who were angry at a proposed tuition increase, is rude because it infringes on the norms of deference and respect for the Royal Family, but the propositional content (representing physical harm) and the way in which it is delivered (shouted and accompanied by aggressive gestures) are aggressive.

In socio-pragmatics, impoliteness is substantially conceived of as addressee-oriented, as lying in the eye of the beholder (Culpeper 2011) and as always involving negative emotional consequences for the target. Thus, impoliteness is understood not so much as an intrinsic property of (verbal) behaviours but rather as the result of the observer's/interactant's cognitive process of appraisal based on social norms of appropriateness. Of course, there is no denying that aggressive behaviour may qualify as objectionable

or morally condemnable (Kádár *et al.* 2019) behaviour. But reducing impolite/rude and aggressive behaviour to inappropriate behaviour can result in a failure to acknowledge possible differences between the two phenomena, such as the fact that impoliteness, unlike aggressiveness, can be realised *in absentia* through omissive verbal behaviour (e.g. refusing/ failing to reciprocate a greeting).[1] This discrepancy can be taken as empirical support against viewing impoliteness and aggressiveness as pragmatically coextensive and conflatable.

Kádár *et al.* (2019) distinguish aggression from conflict but they do not address the question of a possible difference between aggressiveness and impoliteness. In fact, the two terms are used interchangeably in Parvaresh & Kádár's (2019) introduction to the same (special) Issue of the *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* hosting Kádár *et al.*'s (2019) paper. The conflation of aggressiveness and impoliteness is consistent with assuming a maximalist view on rudeness/impoliteness. This view is common in linguistic pragmatic studies on the phenomenon and explains why even behaviours that may cause offence accidentally (such as lying, Meibauer 2014) are considered aggressive.

To the best of my knowledge, the only attempt made in language pragmatics to differentiate verbal impoliteness from aggressiveness is Archer's (2008, 2011) papers on historical and modern courtroom discourse. Her approach consists in using Culpeper *et al.*'s (2003: 1546) model of impoliteness based on Goffman's (1967) category of intentional face threat and extending it to Goffman's categories of incidental and unintended face threat. Archer assumes that only impolite linguistic behaviour is intentional and motivated by "some personal sense of spite" or malice. Verbal aggression is instead nearly coincident with incidental face threat, that is, with offence arising "as an unplanned but sometimes anticipated by-product of action" (Goffman 1967: 14) because the coercive verbal activity of the lawyers is planned rather than unplanned, and therefore Archer (2011: 2014) postulates an intermediate category or zone (that of strategically ambivalent FTAs) between malicious/spiteful face damage and incidental face damage.

Even if I concur with Archer on the incidentally aggressive character of a lawyer's verbal activity in the courtroom, I cannot share the original as-sumption that assigns malice and spite to impoliteness only, and implicitly denies the existence of malicious and spiteful aggressiveness, because ag-

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[1]   In psychology, systematic omissive or ignoring behaviour counts as passive aggression. This view cannot be shared for occasional omissive behaviour in a linguistic pragmatic approach.

gressiveness can be spiteful and incidental just like impoliteness. Moreover, the need to introduce an intermediate pragmatic zone between intentional and incidental face attack to account for (planned) aggression in the courtroom appears as a way of forcing the model to fit the data and highlights the scarce explanatory adequacy of an impoliteness-based framework for verbal aggressiveness.

1.5. *Structure of the book*

This book is organised as follows. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the conceptions and definitions of aggression available in the field of social psychology, where aggressive behaviour was first investigated and theorised. Chapter 3 draws upon some of the features illustrated in Chapter 2 to propose a pragmalinguistic framework of verbal aggressiveness which integrates the social psychology perspective with speech act theory. In Chapter 4, illocutionary and perlocutionary criteria are used to select the speech act verbs that within each of the five illocutionary types (Searle's taxonomy) lend themselves better than others to an aggressive use. These verbs are then arranged into five scales of aggressive protoypicality, and, in Chapter 5, of aggressive intensity according to the degree of strength of their illocutionary force. Chapter 6 is devoted to the analysis of data according to speech act type. Chapter 7 summarises the main findings and offers conclusive remarks.

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