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When Words Do Things: Perlocutions and Social Affordances

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3.1 Introduction

When my spouse once asked me ‘Where’s the milk?’ I thought that my answer ‘In the refrigerator’ was fine. Turns out, I was less helpful than I thought I was. The intended effect of my utterance turned out to be different from what it actually brought about. This feature of utterances is especially salient in discussions of perlocutionary acts, which are utterances that cause an effect in others (Austin 1975: 101). On the one hand, an utterance is produced by the speaker and so facts about the speaker’s mental life should play an important role in understanding what perlocutions are. On the other, perlocutions are what they are because they bring things about in the world, whether the speaker likes it or not.

Gu (1993) argues that this is but one of a handful of serious problems faced by the Received Model (to be discussed in detail below) of Austin’s theory of perlocutions. Consequently, Gu argues that Austin’s theory of perlocutions requires abandonment. I argue in this paper that Austin’s theoretical contributions are sound but require a different interpretation to avoid the problems Gu introduces. The interpretation I argue for – the Social-Ecological Model – endorses Austin’s central claims about perlocutions but avoids the problems entrenched in the Received Model.

After a brief review of key features of perlocutionary acts, I introduce two key concepts from ecological psychology for fleshing out the Social-Ecological Model: attunements and affordances (Gibson 1979). In Section 3, I discuss some details of the Social-Ecological Model. In Section 4, I present Gu’s objections to the Received Model and how the Social-Ecological Model handles Gu’s objections.
3.2 Background: perlocutions and ecological psychology

In this section, I’ll introduce the relevant background information about Austin’s theory of perlocutions and Gibson’s ecological psychology for discussing the Social-Ecological Model in Section 3.

3.2.1 Austin’s theory of perlocutions

A perlocution is an utterance that produces an effect in the hearer. Austin, in lecture VIII of How to Do Things with Words, writes:

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them. (1975: 101)

For example, I can alarm hearers by uttering ‘look out!’ and intimidate hearers by uttering ‘don’t make me call the police on you.’ Naturally, though, not any utterance can produce any effect. I can’t (reasonably) expect to intimidate you by uttering ‘The moon is in waning gibbous’¹ nor by uttering ‘You are now intimidated.’ But we discover through interactions with social agents the sorts of utterances that do and don’t intimidate. And in finding out what kinds of utterances do and don’t intimidate (or alarm or whatever) communicative agents discover that perlocutionary utterances can have their effects independently of a speaker’s intentions.

Austin provides a taxonomy of perlocutionary acts (see Figure 3.1).²

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[Figure 3.1] Taxonomy of perlocutionary acts