

# Linguistic underdeterminacy: A view from speech act theory

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reformulate the Linguistic Underdeterminacy Thesis by making use of Austin's theory of speech acts. Viewed from the post-Gricean perspective, linguistic underdeterminacy consists in there being a gap between the encoded meaning of a sentence uttered by a speaker and the proposition that she communicates. According to the Austinian model offered in this paper, linguistic underdeterminacy should be analysed in terms of semantic and force potentials conventionally associated with the lexical and syntactic properties of the *pheme* uttered by the speaker; in short, it is claimed that the conventionally specified *phatic meaning* of an utterance underdetermines its *content* and *force*. This Austinian version of the Linguistic Underdeterminacy Thesis plays a central role in a contextualist model of verbal communication. The model is eliminativist with respect to rhetic content and illocutionary force: it takes contents and forces to be one-off constructions whose function is to classify individual utterances in terms of their representational and institutional effects, respectively.

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## 1. Introduction

John L. Austin famously distinguished between two aspects of what he called “the total speech act in the total speech situation” (Austin, 1975:148): the locutionary act and the illocutionary act. This distinction is theoretically motivated and conceptually clear: it corresponds to the contrast between saying and doing understood as two different functions of verbal utterances. According to Austin, to make a locutionary act is to say something (Austin, 1975:94) or, in other words, to produce a locution construed as a linguistic representation of a worldly state. For example, the speaker can use a sentence of the form “I will do *A*” to say that she will do *A* or, to put it in different terms, to produce a locution that represents her doing *A* as a future event; by the same token, she can use a sentence of the form “Do *B*!” to produce a locution that represents the hearer’s doing *B* as a future event. The illocutionary act, in turn, is an act made *in* saying something (Austin, 1975:99). Successful or felicitous illocutionary acts *take effect* (Austin, 1975:117) by bringing about certain changes in the domain of normative or institutional facts such as entitlements, rights, commitments, obligations, and so on (see Sbisà, 2007, 2013). For example, a successful promise made in uttering a sentence of the form “I will do *A*” results in the speaker’s being committed to perform action *A* as well as in the hearer’s being entitled to expect her to perform this action; a felicitous command made in uttering a sentence of the form “Do *B*!” brings about the speaker’s right to expect the hearer to perform action *B* as well as the hearer’s obligation to perform this action.

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A central tenet of Austin's theory of speech acts is that "the locutionary act as much as the illocutionary is an abstraction only: every genuine speech act is both" (Austin, 1975:146). By saying this, he rejected his initial distinction between constatives and performatives, i.e., the contrast between utterances whose only job is to describe states of affairs to be found in the world and utterances whose sole function is to create conventional or institutional facts. According to Austin, almost every speech act performs these two functions simultaneously and, as the corollary of this, can be ascribed, first, "with a certain more or less definite 'sense' and a more or less definite 'reference'" (Austin, 1975:93), which together constitute the central aspect of the act's *locutionary meaning*, and, second, with a certain more or less definite *illocutionary force*, e.g., the force of asserting, warning, commanding, promising, and so on.

Another observation made by Austin is that the illocutionary force of an utterance and its locutionary meaning are underdetermined by its lexical and grammatical properties. He claimed, for example, that in uttering an imperative sentence — e.g., "Shut it!" — one can, depending on context, perform the act of making "an order, a permission, a demand, a request, an entreaty, a suggestion, a recommendation" (Austin, 1975:76–77), and so on. He also argued that the same sentence — or, to put it in his own words, the same *pheme* understood as a structured sequence of words (Austin, 1975:92) — "may be used on different occasions of utterance with a different sense or reference" (Austin, 1975:97). In other words, Austin maintained that the locutionary content of an utterance — i.e., what the speaker says — is constituted in context and as such goes beyond the meaning that can be attributed to the utterance in virtue of its lexical and syntactic properties (see Kissine, 2009:125). Unfortunately, he was very unspecific about the nature and aspects of the locutionary meaning (see Sbisà, 2013:27); as Robert M. Harnish observed, Austin "had almost nothing novel or constructive to say about speaking, beyond vague allusions to speech sounds, traditional grammar, and even more obscurely, meaning, sense and reference" (Harnish, 2005:12). Nevertheless, the general idea behind Austin's theory of speech acts (Austin, 1975) seems to be sufficiently clear. Namely, it says that in most, if not all, cases, the actual meaning and force of an utterance are linguistically underdetermined or, more precisely, that the lexical and grammatical properties of the utterance fail to provide a sufficient basis for determining its locutionary content (i.e., what the speaker says) and its illocutionary function (i.e., what the speaker does in saying what she says). The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on this idea and, as a result, develop an Austinian account of the phenomenon of linguistic underdeterminacy. In other words, my aim is to reconsider Austin's contribution to the study of verbal communication. It should be stressed, however, that I do not want to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the conception presented in *How to Do Things With Words* (Austin, 1975). Rather, in what follows I focus on some conceptual distinctions drawn by Austin and consider the role that they could play in accounting for the phenomenon of linguistic underdeterminacy.

In the remainder of this paper I proceed as follows. In section 2 I provide a brief review of the current debate on linguistic underdeterminacy and claim that the received version of the Linguistic Underdeterminacy Thesis — according to which the decoded meaning of the words uttered by the speaker fails to determine the proposition that she communicates (Bach, 1994, 2001; Carston, 1999, 2002, 2004; Recanati, 2001, 2004; Sperber and Wilson, 2002) — focus on the locutionary aspect of verbal activity. In section 3, I discuss elements of Austin's conceptual framework: in section 3.1, I focus on phatic and rhetic acts construed as abstract components of locutionary acts; in section 3.2, in turn, I elaborate on Austin's idea that locutions and illocutions are nothing but abstract aspects of "the total speech act in the total speech situation" (Austin, 1975:148). In section 4, I develop an Austinian model of linguistic underdeterminacy: in section 4.1, I formulate an Austinian version of the Linguistic Underdeterminacy Thesis; next, in section 4.2, I offer a brief presentation of Austinian contextualism, which takes the form of eliminativism about force and content. Finally, in section 5, I discuss the main conclusion of this paper.

## 2. Linguistic underdeterminacy and the Gricean tradition

The phenomenon of linguistic underdeterminacy is extensively examined and discussed by scholars working within the Gricean tradition in pragmatics (Bach, 1987, 1994, 2001; Carston, 1999, 2002, 2004; García-Carpintero, 1998, 2001, 2006; Korta and Perry, 2006, 2007, 2011; Recanati, 2001, 2004; Sperber and Wilson, 2002). Despite differences in details, they share a general picture of verbal communication. First, they adopt the view that communicating with language involves the expression and recognition of Gricean communicative intentions (Sperber and Wilson, 2002; Carston, 2002). Second, they accept the Gricean idea that the overall meaning communicated by the speaker can be analysed into two aspects (Carston, 2004; Recanati, 2004; García-Carpintero, 2006): the primary meaning (i.e., what is said) and the secondary meaning (i.e., what is conversationally implicated).

For Grice, the primary meaning of an utterance is "closely related to the conventional [or encoded] meaning of the words (sentence) [the speaker] has uttered" (Grice, 1989:25), and "is specially and appropriately connected with what the signifying expression (or its user) says as distinct from implies, suggests, hints, or in some other less than fully direct manner conveys" (Grice, 1989:360); to identify the primary meaning of the speaker's utterance, then, the hearer uses his knowledge of the language the speaker speaks and, if necessary, allows for any contextual information needed for disambiguation and fixing indexical reference (Grice, 1989:25). The secondary meaning of the utterance, in turn, is not

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