

## Permanent Speech Acts

### 1. The Issue

(1)

NO TRESPASSING !

According to standard assumptions, a sign like (1) put up at an appropriate place clearly realizes an act of warning or prohibiting, with

- (a) Speaker = Owner P of the property X
- (b) Addressee = Potential reader A
- (c) Propositional Content = not ( A enters X )
- (d) Illocutionary Force = Command of P

These standard assumptions would become problematic in view of thesis (2), proposed for visual communication in terms of "visual acts" (or "picture acts"):

(2) In contrast to speech acts, a picture does not take the place of the words, but that of the speaker. (Bredenkamp 2010, p.51)

The assumption underlying this thesis is, that the visual sign - due to its physical nature - creates direct communication between picture and recipient, without the sender interfering. Bredenkamp, in fact, develops a fascinating, but misleading theory of the visual act, which is based on two crucial conditions:

- (3)(a) Pictures are essentially iconic, relying on (some kind of) similarity with the represented facts
- (b) Pictures are permanent (except movies, pantomimes,...where change is iconic)

While language differs from pictures by its fundamentally symbolic (conventional) nature, written language shares with pictures the usually permanent signals.

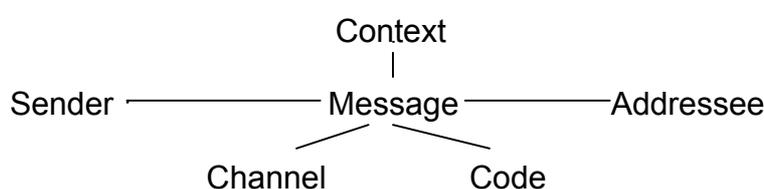
Putting aside iconicity (which language neither excludes nor requires), one is left with the permanent nature of visual signs, raising the barely discussed, but not trivial question:

Does written language have different speech acts?

### 2. Conditions of Communication

For the sake of discussion, (4) schematizes the basic factors of communication, roughly along the lines of Jakobson (1960):

(4)



The basic specificities of written language apply to Channel and Code:

- (5) The essential aspect of written vs. spoken language derives from the properties of the channel, viz. the visual structure of signs with possibly permanent duration.
- (6) The code of written language adds to Grammar and Lexicon the elements and rules of the Writing system, providing an additional aspect of coding.

Different channels (like electricity or flash light) might be connected to additional systems of coding (like Morse).

Due to the different physical aspect of the message, the character and specificity of sender as well as addressee may subject to a different range of variability in spoken vs. written speech acts:

- (7)(a) The sender has to include (but need not be identical with) the producer of the message (e.g. in legal judgement or directions for use)
- (b) The addressee might be fixed (e.g. in a personal letter) or change according to time and occasion e.g. in public announcements or traffic directions.

In any case, felicitous acts are subject to standard preparatory and sincerity conditions. This holds - with appropriate amendments - for the relevant Context:

- (8) The Context of written speech acts includes in addition to standard reference requirements and other preparatory conditions circumstances of presentation, access and especially their time course.

Messages like tax declaration, donation, membership cancellation etc. rely furthermore on the tight interaction of speech acts with different social institutions.

### 3. Time Structure of Written Speech Acts

A dominant (and usually intended) effect of written communication is the time difference between issuing and receiving the message. For the sake of clarification, the following distinctions may be made with respect to a message M:

- (9)(a)  $P(M)$  = time of producing M
- (b)  $R(M)$  = time of perceiving M
- (c)  $perl(M)$  = time while the intended perlocution is valid

For ordinary speech acts,  $P(M)$  is identical with  $R(M)$ , while  $perl(M)$  normally starts with  $R(M)$  and has act-dependent duration. For a permanent speech act  $M'$ , however, the temporal structure is more complicated, depending on additional factors:

- (10)(a)  $P(M')$  is the time of issuing (or posting or making available)  $M'$
- (b)  $R(M')$  is normally later than  $P(M')$  - depending on A's access to  $M'$
- (c)  $perl(M')$  starts with  $R(M')$  and depends on the content of  $M'$

Notice:  $P(M')$  normally belongs to a temporally located event, while  $R(M')$  might be uncertain or belong to multiple acts (reading by different recipients, e.g. directions for

use, duplicated invitations etc.).

This reflects, by the way, the fact that successful speech acts require the recipient's participation (which is, moreover, the rational aspect of Bredekamp's theory of the visual act).

#### **4. The Temporal Structure of Donation - an Illustration**

Donation as an act of property transfer is primarily realized by means of written utterances.

Suppose (a bit artificially), A wants to make a donation to her favourite string quartet by writing something like (11):

(11) I hereby support the work of the Haydn-Quartet by the donation of 10000 €.

P(11) is the time of A's writing (and perhaps delivering) (11), while R(11) depends on address and delivery of (11) - its arrival at A's lawyer or the head of the quartet or A's bank. Finally per(11) is the time of transfer of the sum from A's bank to the quartet.

Variations of this sort in the time structure of donation depend on extra-linguistic aspects of communication, not on linguistic conditions of speech acts.

#### **5. The Counterpart: Instant Speech Acts**

As noted above, there are further possible variants of the channel of communication, using additional systems of coding. Particular far reaching consequences come with electronic communication:

In contrast to writing, which allows the signal to become permanent, the electronic channel allows it to be practically timeless. This has dramatic effects e.g. for acts of property transfer, where banking systems have already established the interaction of speech acts with electronically mediated property assignment.

Close to timelessness, electronic acts of banking can thus create huge amounts of property transfer, escaping natural control of underlying intentionality.

Comparable observations apply to other domains of internet operation, bringing communication out of personal commitment.

Without going into any of the complex details, it should be clear that these phenomena depend on social and other institutions and their implementation, rather than on the nature and type of speech acts.

#### **6. In Conclusion**

Permanent Speech Acts, realized primarily as written utterances, are due to the availability of the writing system, which must be added to the knowledge of language.

(12) On this basis, Permanent Speech Acts highlight an important fact about Speech Acts in general: Felicitous Speech Acts involve two different types of intentional activity - production and interpretation of the message.

(13) The crucial point about Permanent Speech Acts is: production and perception are in general temporally and spatially separate acts.

(14) Without technical means (like telephone etc), temporal and especially spatial separation is restricted primarily to permanent acts.

Various phenomena are related to the properties noted in (13):

- Permanent messages allow for repeated or multiple acts of perception

-The permanent signal allows different participants to be involved in production and delivery of the message (e.g. public announcement of regulations)

-Permanent messages provide for different types of interaction with extra-linguistic conditions and institutions, which depend on the permanent character of the visual signal (e. g. advertising, route-directions, traffic-regulations)

(15) In any case, there doesn't seem to be reason, to stipulate separate types of permanent speech acts in the sense of Searle (1979):  
What can be written, can normally also be pronounced.

And the intrinsic condition of separable production and perception of the same message, which permanent speech acts rely on, is inherently present for spoken acts: The addressee of a felicitous speech act is necessarily an active participant.

There are strong reasons to finally exemplify the strength of permanent speech acts by the following case of a very powerful and felicitous Expressive act:

**CONGRATULATION, DIETER !**

## References

Bredenkamp, Horst (2010) *Theorie des Bildakts*, Suhrkamp, Berlin

Jakobson, Roman (1960) Linguistics and Poetics, in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.) *Style in Language*, Cambridge, Mass.

Searle, John R. (1979) *Expression of Meaning*, Cambridge University Press

## **Postscriptum**

As Marga Reis remarked in the discussion, "Permanent Speech Acts" is a misleading term - just for the reasons under discussion. Hence a more appropriate title would be "Speech Acts with Permanent Message" (or may be "Permanent Signal"). As noted above - the speech act in question has (at least) two components: an act of production and an act of comprehension, the permanent component of which is the physical part of the message. (Correspondingly, the notion of "Instant Speech Act" turns into something like speech acts with a kind of instant signal.)