

# Pragmalinguistics and Speech-Act Theory as Applied to Classical Hebrew

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## 1. The Domain of Pragmalinguistics

A description of pragmalinguistics, and the related theory of speech-acts, is a complex and delicate task, since this field of linguistics is in continual development, open to heated debate, and often provokes controversial and opposing points of view.

Pragmalinguistic theory is rooted in the thematic rendering of both the plurality and the mean distribution of the functions and uses of language, as in analytic and linguistic philosophy. The two most significant break-throughs in the field of thematic renderings are to be found in the theory of language games (*Sprachspiele*: delineated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, most notably in his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Oxford 1953) and the theory of speech-acts (the topic has been dealt with in detail by John Langshaw Austin in his *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford 1962, 1975<sup>2</sup>)<sup>1</sup>. I shall leave aside Charles W. Morris's concept of

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In addition to works referred to in subsequent footnotes, the following studies are of general relevance: D. Antiseri, *Filosofia analitica e semantica del linguaggio religioso*, Brescia 1969; K. Bach, R.M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, Cambridge, Ma. 1979; J. Barr, *The Language of Religion*, in: L. Honko (ed.), *Science of Religion, Proceedings of the Study Conference in the Methodology of the Science of Religion* (Turku 1973), The Hague 1979, pp. 429-441; G. Brown, G. Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, Cambridge 1983; K. Bühler, *Sprachtheorie*, Jena 1934 (Stuttgart 1965<sup>2</sup>); L.J. Cohen, *Speech Acts, in Current Trends in Linguistics*, 12, 1974, The Hague, pp. 173-208; T.A. van Dijk, *Text and Context. Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse*, London 1977; M.G. Harvey, *Wittgenstein's Notion of 'Theology as Grammar'*, *Religious Studies* 25, 1989, 89-103; R.M. Kempson, *Semantic Theory*, Cambridge 1977; K. Macqueen, *Speech Act Theory and the Roles of Religious Language*, diss. McGill, Montreal 1986; F.J. Newmeyer (ed.), *Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey*, Cambridge 1988; N.R. Norrick, *The Lexicalization of Pragmatic Functions*, *Linguistics* 17, 1979, 671-685; U. Rapallo (ed.), *Linguistica, pragmatica e testo letterario*, Genova 1986; B. Schlieben Lange, *Linguistische Pragmatik*, Stuttgart etc. 1975; J.R. Searle, F. Kiefer, M. Bierwisch (eds.), *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, Dordrecht 1980; J.R. Searle, D. Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, Cambridge 1985; D. Wunderlich (ed.), *Linguistische Pragmatik*, Frankfurt am Main 1972; W.F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, London 1959.

<sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out that the three principal authorities on speech-acts – J.L. Austin, H.P. Grice and J.R. Searle – do not use the term „pragmatics“ in referring to their fields of research.



„pragmatics“, which, in its study of the relations between signs and their interpreters, that is, with those who use signs in order to produce and receive messages, follows the Peircian school; the object of our study is less concerned with semiotic theory and will concentrate on the linguistic theory of actions in speech; the emphasis on the pragmatic phenomena proper to language is fundamental to this<sup>2</sup>.

Generally speaking, pragmatics studies the aspects of language which enable us to understand its use as a tool of communication among individuals and peoples, particularly the ways in which linguistic communication takes place. The following excerpt, by Robert C. Stalnaker,<sup>3</sup> is frequently quoted in defining the specific role which pragmatics plays in linguistics:

Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. There are two major types of problems to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products; second, to characterize features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence. The analysis of illocutionary acts is an example of the problem of the first kind; the study of indexical expressions is an example of the second.

During the brief history of pragmatic linguistics, both deixis and linguistic acts have served as the principal poles of research. It was none other than the theory of deixis which led Dieter Wunderlich to take a critical position on transformational grammar, and elaborate what he dubbed „linguistic pragmatics“ (*linguistische Pragmatik*). For many, however, deixis still remains *in toto* a part of semantics, especially extensional semantics. According to Maria-Elisabeth Conte,<sup>4</sup> deictic terms and linguistic acts both belong to the field of pragmatics, but comprise different classes, and are involved on different levels. The theory of deixis is pragmalinguistic only as far as it is a theory involving terms whose meanings are related through an enunciation, and are therefore determined by that enunciation (particularly in its spatio-temporal coordinates). Deixis thus is interested in the relation between utterance and context.

The primary object of pragmalinguistics is the linguistic act. The theory of linguistic acts is necessary as a reference point for other aspects of pragmatic linguistics, such as pragmatic presuppositions, conversational implicatures, sequential organization of discourse, the organization of linguistic acts into macro-acts, dialogic interaction, discourse analysis, etc... But it also seems important to me, in the study of a language that has been solely transmitted through a limited written *corpus*, to analyze in the greatest detail the linguistic apparatus involving deixis, as it is manifested through the language's morphology and vocabulary, where it is directly functional in the determination of referents, and how it is motivated by the various processes and aspects of the utterance. With this in mind, we may classify the

<sup>2</sup> Morris's concept has, however, given new impetus to both linguistics and logic: cf. his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, Chicago 1938, and *Signs, Language and Behavior*, New York 1946.

<sup>3</sup> R.C. Stalnaker, *Pragmatics*, *Synthese* 22, 1970, 272-289 (reprinted in: D. Davidson, G.H. Harman [eds.], *Semantics of Natural Language*, Dordrecht 1972, pp. 380-397), esp. 275 (383).

<sup>4</sup> M.-E. Conte, *La pragmatica linguistica*, in: C. Segre (ed.), *Intorno alla linguistica*, Milano 1983, pp. 94-128, esp. pp. 96-97.



principal deictic categories: 1) *Personal deixis*: this involves the grammaticalization of the roles of the participants of a linguistic exchange; it is rendered mainly through verbal morphology and the personal pronoun system; 2) *Spatial deixis*: adverbs and demonstrative pronouns are characterized in terms of proximity and distance, in relation to the personal category. The deictic aspects of verbs of motion should be included here; 3) *Temporal deixis*: temporal deictic adverbs also indicate the proximity to and/or distance from the time of their enunciation. The classification of verbal tenses is both complex and problematic. Furthermore, it should be noted that the verb may also incorporate modal and/or aspectual factors.<sup>5</sup> Modal and aspectual elements are particularly important in the analysis of Classical Hebrew.

Another phenomenon involving deixis is that which Charles J. Fillmore describes as „discourse deixis“, which is to be distinguished from anaphora: „... indicators of structure within any discourse; words and phrases that point to some new stage reached in the discourse.“<sup>6</sup> Such a form of deixis may utilize terms used for both temporal and spatial deixis (an example in Classical Hebrew would be *wyhy*). Fillmore also describes the phenomenon which he calls „social deixis“, which takes into account the influence that social relations between speakers exert on utterances. This phenomenon, however, is not really deictic, since it involves general aspects of the vocabulary which are illocutory (this will be discussed further on), socio-linguistics, and stylistics (for example, the speaker's choice between common or sophisticated terms). Social deixis does borrow, however, personal pronouns from the deictic apparatus, whose usage may vary, depending on the degree of formality in the conversation (the usage of „tu“ or „vous“ in French, or of „tu“ or „lei“ in Italian). The use of epithets as an indication of personal status (such as „your highness“) falls under this category.

### 1.1. Relations between Pragmatics and Semantics

Two opposed views at least may be distinguished concerning the relations between pragmatics and semantics (as well as syntax): one, which is additive, and the other, which is alternative. According to the first view, pragmatics is annexed as a complement to the field of semantics in order to take into account those phenomena which semantics is unable to explain. The field of pragmatics is thus considered a „waste-basket“<sup>7</sup>. According to the second view, pragmatics is not complementary to semantics, but rather its foundation: the theory of language is „engraved“ onto a general theory of action whose fundamental element is comprised by either the linguistic act or communicative interaction. At any rate, it is widely held that it is difficult to conceive of semantics or syntax as being autonomous or independent from pragmatics. Oswald Ducrot states: „Semantics implies a pragmatic aspect“.<sup>8</sup> The Austinian approach redefines notions that are traditionally semantic, such as those involving reference or truth, in terms of the

<sup>5</sup> J. Lyons, *Semantics*, Cambridge 1977, pp. 677ff.

<sup>6</sup> C.J. Fillmore, *Santa Cruz Lectures on Deixis* 1971, Bloomington, Ind. 1975.

<sup>7</sup> So Y. Bar-Hillel, *Out of the Pragmatic Wastebasket*, *Linguistic Inquiry* 2, 1971, 401-407.

<sup>8</sup> O. Ducrot, *Atti linguistici*, in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, Torino 1977, vol. 2, pp. 117-136, esp. p. 136.



speech-act. At the current stage of discussion, an intermediate position may be seen, which, while recognizing that pragmatics is autonomous from semantics, assigns to the former an instrumental role in the solution of those linguistic problems which semantics alone cannot adequately address. It goes beyond semantic theory, bringing into question the latter's abilities without qualitatively transforming it.

## 2. Performative Utterances

Modern pragmalinguistics, without a doubt, begins with the theory of performative utterances. Three authors have identified and elaborated theories about performative utterances from different perspectives, each one independently from the other two, using different terminologies: Erwin Koschmieder, Émile Benveniste, and John Langshaw Austin.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1. Main Theories about Performatives

Koschmieder identified performativity within the framework of a study on grammatical functions,<sup>10</sup> where he speaks of „Koinzidenzfall“, referring to those utterances which fall under the following four syntactic restrictions: 1. in the first person; 2. in the present tense; 3. accompanied by a *verbum dicendi*; 4. always in combination with the term „*Juermitt*“. Koschmieder distinguishes between two types of present tense: a present tense of representation or report („*Berichtspräsenz*“), and a present tense of coincidence.

Benveniste identified performativity in his reflections on the subjectivity of language.<sup>11</sup> „The ability of the speaker to place him or herself as the „subject“ of the discourse permits the usage of the verb, in the first person present indicative, to have a semantic value different from that of the same verb's usage in other conjugations, and applies to both classes of verbs (this asymmetry is hidden in conjugation through the regularity of the paradigm). The two classes of verbs are called, by Benveniste, „*verbes d'opération*“ and performative verbs.

Austin introduced the performative concept as an opposition to the constative concept. „I run“ does not express racing, while „I thank“ is used for giving thanks. In cases such as the latter, the stating of the action is equivalent to its performance: hence Austin's term, „performative utterances“.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Conte, *La pragmatica linguistica*, p. 98, states that Lessius had already characterised performative utterances distinctly, writing that the „efficient“ that which (they) „significant“ (Leonhardus Lessius [Lenaert Leys], *De justitia et jure*, Antwerpiae [1605] 1609<sup>2</sup>, p. 219).

<sup>10</sup> E. Koschmieder, *Zur Bestimmung der Funktionen grammatischer Kategorien*, in: *Abhandlungen der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Abteilung, N.F.* 25, 1945 (reprinted in: E. Koschmieder, *Beiträge zur allgemeinen Syntax*, Heidelberg 1965, pp. 9-69).

<sup>11</sup> É. Benveniste, *De la subjectivité dans le langage*, *Journal de Psychologie* 55, 1958, 257-265 (reprinted in: É. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris 1966).

<sup>12</sup> Performativity pertains to performative utterances. By analogy, performativity is metonymically used in reference to verbs: performative verbs are those which are susceptible to a performative use.

For a more detailed description of the theories of Koschmieder, Benveniste and Austin see Conte, *La pragmatica linguistica*, pp. 98-102.



The performative theory was incorporated by Austin into a more ample theory. He does not limit himself to identifying and elaborating theories about performativity, as had Koschmieder and Benveniste. He overcomes the opposition between performative and constative, by improving on the performative characterization through the conception of the speech-act as the basic unit of linguistic theory. The specialized theory of performative utterances thus becomes an integral part of the general speech-acts theory.

## 2.2. Other Hypotheses about Performatives

In addition, one of the most distinctive properties of performative utterances is their capacity for self-realization through usage. By this theory, if the issuing of a performative utterance is „happy“, the utterance itself will be „happy“ as a consequence.

2.2.1. *Delocutivity*. The concept of „delocutivity“ has been formulated by several French followers of Benveniste's thesis. Delocutive verbs (identified and theorized by Benveniste) are verbs which derive from a locution, that is, from an utterance: Latin *negare* (to say „*nec*“). This does not simply refer to utterances that derive from another form of speech, but rather from the usage of that form. Its meaning stems from the reference to such usage (among Benveniste's many examples is the Latin *salutare* which derives from its use in the greeting „*salus!*“ rather than directly from the word *salus* itself. „Non salutem alicui efficere sed salutem alicui dicere“; its English equivalent is „to hail“).

Delbert R. Hillers has dealt with this topic and its connections with biblical Hebrew<sup>13</sup>: „A pair of especially clear examples of delocutive verbs in Hebrew is *ḥšdyq/šiddēq* and *hršy<sup>c</sup>*, ‚to say someone is in the right‘, and ‚to say someone is in the wrong‘, respectively. ... *šiddēq* and *ḥšdyq* do not mean ‚to make someone just‘ or ‚to behave justly‘ as one may expect from the analogy of such words as *gdl* (vb., qal), *gdwl* (adj.) with related piel *giddel* and hiphil *hgdył*. As all agree, *šiddēq* and *ḥšdyq* mean ‚to say that a person is in the right‘. Following this line of thought which Benveniste's study suggests, one soon discovers a related locution. It is the form of words which was used in announcing a judicial decision but used also in pronouncing on the rights and wrongs of other situations. One may compare Ex. 9:27: *YHWH ḥšdyq w<sup>c</sup>ny w<sup>c</sup>my hrš<sup>c</sup>ym* to Deut. 25:1: *whšdyqw<sup>c</sup> t-ḥšdyq whršy<sup>c</sup>w<sup>c</sup> t-hrš<sup>c</sup>“*.

2.2.2. *Aspect*. I would like to add that in dealing with performativity, emphasis is usually placed on the tenses of the verbs in the utterances under study: present indicative. The aspectual factors which characterize the verbs employed in utterances are equally as important, and deserve further analysis.<sup>14</sup>

The notion of aspect involves, not the point or period in time in which the action represented by the utterance takes place in relation to its enunciation, but rather

<sup>13</sup> D.R. Hillers, *Delocutive Verbs in Biblical Hebrew*, JBL 86, 1967, 320-324: quotation from pp. 320-321.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the interesting questions raised by M. Sbisà, *Linguaggio, ragione, interazione. Per una teoria pragmatica degli atti linguistici*, Bologna 1989, pp. 197ff. On aspectuality see P. Tedeschi, A. Zaenen (eds.), *Tense and Aspect (Syntax and Semantics, vol. 14)*, New York etc. 1981.



the perspective from which the action is represented, the way in which it is perceived and ultimately uttered. The performative formulae include, however, the representation of a speech-act, and the category of aspect is absolutely crucial in this respect.

It is my opinion that the analysis of performative utterances in languages such as Classical Hebrew, where verbal aspect plays a dominant role, may be facilitated through its aspectual elements.

### 3. Speech-Act Theory

The critical evaluation of the theory of performatives has led to the theory of speech-acts, as earlier stated. Austin realized that there is no clear opposition between constatives and performatives: observations are acts, as are assertions.

The role of assertion may be explicitly depicted in an utterance by means of a performative formula such as: „I assert that...“. This feature of action is inherent in all forms of language; performative utterances are but the most conspicuous examples of language as action.<sup>15</sup>

Performative utterances, while different from constative ones, may nonetheless count truth value terms among their felicity conditions: *hnh nty lkm ʔt-kl-ʕsb zr ʕ zr ʕ ʔšr ʕl pny kl-h ʔrs*, „I hereby give you every herb bearing seed, which is upon all the earth“ (Gen. 1:29). A felicity condition implied by this utterance is, for example, the proposition: „there are seed-bearing plants on the earth“.

A declarative utterance with a performative verb in the first person present indicative does not satisfy performative requisites. For example, „I'm training“, if said by an athlete to someone with limited or no knowledge of sports, as an explanation of why he is performing a certain exercise, is not the execution proper of that action but an interpretation or description. Furthermore, the verb does not necessarily have to be in the first person (or for that matter, that there be any verb at all), in order for the utterance to be performative. There are cases, like that of a jury which, when asked to pronounce its sentence, simply replies: „Guilty“. The word used by itself in this instance functions as a performative utterance.

#### 3.1. The Structure of Speech-Act

A speech-act is comprised of partial acts; speech-acts, furthermore, are subject to sub-grouping.<sup>16</sup>

3.1.1. *Partial Acts*. According to Austin, three partial acts are performed in a speech-act: 1) locutionary act; 2) illocutionary act; 3) perlocutionary act. The locutionary act is merely the issuing of an utterance, endowing it with a grammatical structure and a meaning. The illocutionary act consists of the issuing of an utterance with a particular force, that is, with a communicative function or purpose. The perlocutionary act consists of the effect exerted by an utterance on its listeners.

<sup>15</sup> See Conte, *La pragmatica linguistica*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>16</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius, Protagoras was the first to classify four types of discourse: prayer or desire, question or interrogation, answer, and injunction or command. See Conte, *La pragmatica linguistica*, p. 109 n. 30.



Locutions have always been an object of grammatical study, while rhetoric tended to deal with perlocutionary acts, as part of the theory of persuasion. It was Austin who first conceived of the illocutionary act as a central point of speech-acts (that is, that an utterance may be used in making a promise, passing judgement, or giving orders). The „illocutionary act“ is often equivalent to the „speech-act“, and speaking about speech-acts often means speaking about the illocutionary force. Illocutionary force is merely an abstraction: an utterance that occurs in a communicative situation is always issued with an illocutionary force.

John R. Searle expanded<sup>17</sup> Austin's theory, providing variants: he rejects the distinction between „locutionary“ and „illocutionary“, in favour of a distinction between propositional and illocutionary acts. Searle intends to show that different speech-acts may share the same propositional content. He gives an explicit formulation of the conditions which dictate the success of a speech-act, and uses this as the basis for the formulation of the constituent rules of speech-acts.

H. Paul Grice,<sup>18</sup> in brief, defined meaning in terms of the ‚speaker‘, rather than in relation to words or sentences. His definition connects the meaning of linguistic units to the speaker's intentions of producing a desired effect on the listener, precisely through the latter's acknowledgement of the former's intentions. With respect to Grice's definition, the concept of illocutionary force is interpreted as being connected primarily to the speaker's intentions, rather than with the „conventions“ almost legalistically dictated by Austin.<sup>19</sup> Use of Grice's positions has recently been made in research on „discourse analysis“ and language acquisition; both Searle's and Austin's theories are among those widely applied in the analysis of written texts.

**3.1.2. *Illocutionary Force Indicators.*** Every language possesses a variety of formal components (lexical, syntactic, prosodic), which may be called force-indicating devices, and characterize an utterance's potential illocutionary force.

The most noteworthy of these indicators are: explicit performative formulae („I promise that...“), sentence-types<sup>20</sup> (declarative, imperative, interrogative), verbal moods (subjunctive, jussive, imperative), modal verbs („to have to“/„must“, „to be able“/„can“), verbal tenses and aspects, specific adverbs and particles, intonation (usually difficult to determine or measure in a written text; pertinent notation may, however, be provided). None of these formal devices univocally identifies the illocutionary force of an utterance.

John Lyons's formulation of the relation between utterances and illocutionary force is especially enlightening:

Sentences are systematically associated, in terms of their phonological, grammatical, and lexical structure, with the illocutionary acts that may be performed in uttering them. There is no one-to-one correspondence between grammatical structure, in particular, and illocutionary

<sup>17</sup> J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, London 1969; id., *A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts*, in: K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, Minneapolis 1975, pp. 344-369.

<sup>18</sup> H.P. Grice, *Meaning*, *Philosophical Review* 66, 1957, 377-388; id., *Utterer's Meaning and Intention*, *Philosophical Review* 78, 1969, 147-177.

<sup>19</sup> See M. Sbisà (ed.), *Gli atti linguistici*, Milano 1978, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> In Stephen C. Levinson's terminology: see his *Pragmatics*, Cambridge 1983, p. 243.



force; but we cannot employ just any kind of sentence in order to perform any kind of illocutionary act.<sup>21</sup>

3.1.3. *Indirect Speech-Acts*. The topic of indirect speech-acts is the object of debate among both linguists and philosophers of language; anthropologists and sociolinguists show a particular interest in the motivation behind speech-acts. On the matter of indirect speech-acts, Searle writes<sup>22</sup>: „In such cases a sentence that contains the illocutionary force indicators for one kind of illocutionary act can be uttered to perform in addition another type of illocutionary act“. The (so-called) „rhetorical question“ is a paradigmatic case of an indirect speech-act.

3.1.4. *The Classification of Speech-Acts*. It should first be pointed out<sup>23</sup> that both performative and illocutionary verbs, as well as speech-acts, are usually classified without making distinctions. But these groups do not reciprocally correspond one to the other: all performative verbs are illocutionary, although not all illocutionary verbs are performative. While speech-acts belong to the general phenomena of language, performative verbs differ from language to language, and are specific to a given language. For example, the Hebrew verbs *š'ʔl* and *bqš* both correspond to the English verb „to ask“.

The classification proposed by Austin<sup>24</sup> contains five classes:

- 1) *Verdictives*: acts which denote discretion such as judgement, description, evaluation, and calculation;
- 2) *Exercitives*: acts involving the exertion of powers, rights, or influences; some verbs typical of this class are „to nominate“, „to fire“/„dismiss“, „to command“, „to beg (of)“;
- 3) *Commissives*: acts which engage the speakers in certain actions, such as: „to allow“, „to bet“. Verbs denoting „declaration of intent“, such as „to consent“, „to participate“/„belong to“, „to oppose“ are also included here;
- 4) *Behabitives*: acts which represent the reactions to one's own or another's behaviour and future, including verbs such as „to apologize“, „to thank“, „to congratulate“, „to dare“;
- 5) *Expositives*: acts which include the expression of opinion, the marking of the course of a discussion, and the classification of meanings, such as „to ask“, „to answer“, „to admit“, „to uphold“, „to define“.

(This classification has raised several objections, principally that this is a classification of illocutionary verbs rather than acts).

The first four classes form a separate group from the fifth.<sup>25</sup> Each of the classes belonging to the first group is characterized by a different hierarchical organization of their respective felicity conditions (which allow for both the execution of an illocutionary act and its proper execution). An example of this is the condition

<sup>21</sup> Lyons, *Semantics*, p. 733.

<sup>22</sup> J.R. Searle, in: K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, Minneapolis 1975, p. 359.

<sup>23</sup> See Conte, *La pragmatica linguistica*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> See *How to Do Things with Words*, ch. 12.

<sup>25</sup> See M. Sbisà, *Pragmatica*, in: (various authors), *Prospettive di teoria del linguaggio*, Milano 1983, pp. 349-461, esp. pp. 401-403, and id., *Linguaggio, ragione, interazione*, pp. 97-130, 174-185.



which requires the existence of accepted forms in order to obtain a desired illocutionary effect, or the condition that requires the suitability of persons and circumstances. Expositive acts seem, instead, to consist of those linguistic practices which may be described, qualified, and/or announced through linguistic means, but whose execution is not clearly performative.

Searle's classification<sup>26</sup> also contains five classes based upon three criteria of classification. The principal criterion is represented by the „illocutionary point“, that is, the intent which bestows a *raison d'être* on the illocutionary act. The other two are respectively defined as „direction of fit“, that is, the type of relation that a propositional content has with the world, and the classification of „psychological states“ which may be expressed through speech-acts.

Reviving a well-known Aristotelian theory, Conte<sup>27</sup> distinguishes between acts of „*praxis*“, which are the simple reproduction of a type of speech-act (giving thanks, allegation) through the production of a „token“ of that type, and acts of „*poiesis*“, which are complex acts which determine, as well as reproducing, a type of act or a state, and modify reality (verbs of this class include „to excommunicate“, „to resign“, „to bet“, „to abrogate“).

#### 4. Developments in Pragmalinguistics

Present pragmalinguistical research (for which the speech-act remains a fundamental concept) extends to forms of verbal interaction as well as to both discourse and conversational analysis, and has studied in detail specific linguistic phenomena, such as the usage of modal particles and of connectives, and the problems modality poses in general. Furthermore, speech-acts have come to play an important role in literary theory, in particular in questions regarding the definition of genres in literature, and more specifically, the definitions of poetry, novels, and drama.

#### 5. Notes on the Application of Pragmalinguistics and Speech-Act Theory in the Study of Classical Hebrew

The *corpus* of Classical Hebrew is mainly represented by the biblical text, whose features appear favourable towards the application of the speech-act theory.<sup>28</sup> The Bible is not intended as a tractate on systematic theology: biblical language and narration are often organically dramatic, vividly depicting events. Biblical stories are highly scenic: in recounting a particular event, the author sets a stage where nearly all the players are present, and where actions follow one another with little recourse to „flashbacks“ or explicative stitching.<sup>29</sup> The reader's or the listener's

<sup>26</sup> In K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, Minneapolis 1975, pp. 344-369.

<sup>27</sup> *La pragmatica linguistica*, p. 118-120.

<sup>28</sup> Inscriptions may also be suited to our type of analysis in many instances: if we take the Šiloah inscription, for example, we are provided with a sort of commentary which condenses an event's relevant acts in order to transmit them to future generations with the vividness, solemnity and authority of one who has witnessed the event, or celebrates its occurrence.

<sup>29</sup> See J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 28-33; also E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern 1946, ch. 1.



attention is made to concentrate on the action taking place, on the spoken word. Collisions, debates, and direct discourses are all predominant.

Reflections upon the nature of religious language are especially characteristic of studies of Classical Hebrew, with its instances of the languages of ritual, of magical formulae, and of miracles.<sup>30</sup> One may surmise that the biblical authors understood the speech of God and the prophets as „performative“: *kn yhyh dbry ʾšr yš ʾ mpy lʾ-yšwb ʾly ryqm ky ʾm - ʿšh ʾt-ʾšr ḥpšty whšlyh ʾšr šllhtyw*, „So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I please, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it“ (Is. 55:11). I should add that, in the Gospels, it is said of Jesus that he would speak to the crowd „as one who has authority“ (ἐξουσίαν), and not like the Scribes, (Matt. 7:29).

The divine and prophetic *dābār* is thereby presented as a word which proclaims and accomplishes that which it has uttered, or otherwise calls upon the listener to accomplish it. This does not in the least contrast with the fundamental questions raised by James Barr on the matter of *dābār*.<sup>31</sup> What interests us here is the typology of the utterance, its moods and its effects. If we can show that one may do things with words in all languages, and that even a common mortal's speech is, given the right conditions, performative, we may better understand that which to some appears to be an exclusive trait of Classical Hebrew, opening the way to dangerous semantic misconceptions.

I believe it is possible to proceed in a more systematic way, through the identification and cataloguing of the performative and illocutionary verbs of Classical Hebrew; through the study of their semantics and the description of the ways in which the speech-acts of biblical characters could be qualified and eventually classified. This global endeavour would be of great interest. In the meantime, very limited studies on individual textual areas<sup>32</sup> have shown that in the discourses of Deuteronomy, or within the prophetic call narratives, the speech-acts attributed to the Divinity or to the prophets are heavily verdictive or exercitive with respect to the speech-acts of characters who do not play an authoritative role. When God speaks to man, he does not use, in this case, colloquial models of dialogue, but proclaims, commands, makes promises, conforming His word to the *Machtwort* of the absolute sovereign. This contradicts some of the theories of

<sup>30</sup> I.T. Ramsey's book, *Religious Language*, London 1957, particularly ch. 3, has long been considered a classic in this field; see also W.J. Samarín (ed.), *Language in Religious Practice*, Rowley, Ma. 1976 (esp. the article of P.L. Ravenhill, *Religious Utterances and the Theory of Speech-Acts*, on pp. 26-39); R. Wonneberger, H.P. Hecht, *Verheißung und Versprechen. Eine theologische und sprachanalytische Klärung*, Göttingen 1986; and finally S.J. Tambiah, *Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View*, in: R. Horton, R. Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought*, London 1973, pp. 199-299. Valuable data are also to be found in the study of juridical language.

<sup>31</sup> See J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford 1962, pp. 129-144.

<sup>32</sup> See I. Zatelli, *La comunicazione verbale nel „Deuteronomio“ in rapporto all'espressione del divino*, *Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere „La Colombaria“* 44, n.s. 30, 1979, 1-13; id., *La chiamata dell'uomo da parte di Dio nella Bibbia al vaglio della „discourse analysis“*, *Rivista Biblica* 38, 1990, 13-26.



advocates of dialogical theology, such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (who have proposed a personal relationship, „Ich und Du“, between man and the Divinity).

Performativity and „directiveness“, at their maximum, are encountered in the first creation story in the Bible. God creates the universe through His word.<sup>33</sup> *yhy ʾwr*, „Let there be light!“, of Gen. 1:3 is a paradigmatic performative formula in the intentions of the speaker (as well as the author), even though it is not expressed in a grammatically canonic form (that is with a verb in the first person perfective). It is a plain act of commandment, expressed – as is possible in Classical Hebrew – through the jussive mood. In this case, the written text is careful to specify in addition the happy result of the performative: *wyhy ʾwr*, „and there was light“.

Another well-known example of a highly directive biblical speech-act concerns the imperative found in Gen. 12:1: *lek-lʿka*, „Get thee out...!“, as God demanded of Abram. Just as for the words further on in Gen. 12:4 (*wylk ʾbrm k ʾšr dbr ʾlyw YHWH*, „So Abram went, as the Lord had commanded him...“), I feel it is opportune to resort to verbs such as „to command“ in translations, as a means of specifying further the meaning of *ʾamar* and *dibber*. It would also be very interesting to re-read of Abraham’s splendid and daring intervention (not just a dialogue between peers) on behalf of Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33), in the light of the speech-acts theory, paying special attention to the perlocutionary effects. Here Abraham manages, in a crescendo of rhetoric („Behold, I pray, I take upon me to speak unto the Lord...“; and „Oh let not the Lord be angry...“), to persuade God to promise that he will spare the city if ten just men can be found within it.

An analysis which follows the discourse categories, identified mainly by Austin, may facilitate not only the grammatical description of Classical Hebrew, but also its translation and interpretation in a number of passages. The performative value of certain oath formulae is very evident, for example, in Gen. 14:22: „And Abram said to the king of Sodom: ‚I lift up (*hārimōti*) my hand unto the Lord Most High, Maker of heaven and earth, (v. 23) that I will not take a thread nor a shoe-latchet nor that which is thine...“ The words which accompany his ritual gesture sanction and accomplish that which has been solemnly stated.

Another example may be found in Deut. 32:40: *ky-ʾšʾ ʾl-šmym ydy w ʾmrty hy ʾnky lʿlm*, „I lift up My hand to heaven and say (the equivalent of „I swear“): ‚As I live forever‘.“ The commonplace verb *ʾmr* also has a very marked illocutionary force in its second occurrence in 2 Sam. 19:30: „And the king said unto him: ‚Why speakest thou any more of thy matters? This is my decision (*ʾāmarti*): Thou and Šiba divide the land‘.“

Another element which may underline the presence of performative utterances, or at least of acts with a pronounced illocutionary force, in Classical Hebrew, is the presence of actualizers, such as *hnh*, *hywm*, *wʿth*, which are common in other languages such as English („hereby“) or German („hiermit“), but not easily encountered in languages such as Italian. I believe that the values and functions of these particles should be further explored in Classical Hebrew. *hnh nty ʾt-hʾrš*

<sup>33</sup> Compare this with the reflections of certain medieval mystics, such as those of Cusanus (Nikolaus von Cues), who gives as one of his definitions of God: „Where creation coincides with speech“ (De visione Dei, X-XI).



*bydw*, „Hereby I give the land into his hand“ (Jud. 1:2), is clearly a performative utterance.<sup>34</sup> *hnh ymym b<sup>2</sup>ym n<sup>2</sup>m-YHWH wkrt<sup>2</sup>y t-byt ysr<sup>2</sup>l w<sup>2</sup>t-byt yhw<sup>2</sup>dh bryt ḥdšh*, „Behold (thereby [I solemnly declare (that)]) the days shall come – the oracle of the Lord – when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah“ (Jer. 31:31). *hnh* introduces a commissive speech-act (the solemn declaration), but *wkrt<sup>2</sup>y* is not performative (and for that matter, neither is it perfective).

Formulae such as *hrbh<sup>2</sup> rbh*, „I will greatly multiply...“ (Gen. 16:10) and *šm<sup>c</sup>ty*, „I hear, I hear Ephraim grieving...“ (Jer. 31:18) could be newly read in an illocutionary light, and thereby be considered as acts of covenant, assurance, etc...

New perspectives may open up as well in the study of the deictic aspects of Classical Hebrew. Especially pertinent are the fact that, in certain biblical contexts, deictic indicators are highly concentrated, and their potential for both concentration and variety: ... *ky t<sup>2</sup>nw nḥnw th ph hywm klnw ḥyym*, „... but with us, even us, these things here today all of us being alive“ (Deut. 5:3); ... *šr nk<sup>2</sup>y dbr b<sup>2</sup>znykm hywm*, „... which I speak in your ears (figuratively and possibly emphatically meaning „to you“) today“ (Deut. 5:1).<sup>35</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that, in the analysis of entire utterances and their modes of expression, we come up with a fuller and more detailed linguistic description than we would, say, in analysis of individual lexemes by their distinctive features. Classical Hebrew appears to be particularly favourable towards this application of the speech-act theory for a number of its characteristics (texts through which the language is transmitted tend to be more mimetic than diegetic; the presence of verbal aspects, etc.). Being a dead language, Classical Hebrew is about as limited in the application to it of pragmalinguistics and speech-act theory as it is in the application of other linguistic theories, notably because of the absence of speakers – the competence (better still, performance) of native speakers – and the lack of possibilities for the study of intonation, one of the most significant elements of the speech-act.

Nevertheless the existing *corpus* seems to offer sufficient matter for adequate and profitable study; it should be pointed out that the *corpus* is strongly characterized by the presence of religious language, and especially prophetic language, a sub-species of the former. Although samples of „everyday“ language are certainly not lacking, our results will largely be the analysis of a language in its application to a certain group of texts, rather than that of a given language as a complete system. Finally, in dealing with a written text instead of with the speech-acts of live people, the authors' intentions, with their creative ability (or the veracity of their account) need to be reckoned with.

<sup>34</sup> The example is cited in: W. Schneider, *Grammatik des biblischen Hebräisch*, München 1985, p. 204.

<sup>35</sup> See Zatelli, *La comunicazione verbale*, 5-6.



*Annotated Bibliography*

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G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, London 1980

[A convincing and well documented section regarding the performative usage of the Bible's language is to be found on pp. 20-25.]

R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, London 1979

[This work contains an in-depth examination of the illocutionary force of prophetic language.]

P. Cotterell, M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, London 1989

[Chapter 7 is devoted to the topic of Discourse Analysis; examples of deixis taken from the Bible are provided. The work is of great interest: it deals mainly with textual interpretation.]

T. Eagleton, J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah, in R.M. Schwartz (ed.), *The Book and the Text. The Bible and Literary Theory*, Oxford 1990, pp. 231-236

[This is a sophisticated essay which briefly subjects to analysis a sample of prophetic utterances. It concludes: „The only successful prophet is an ineffectual one, one whose warnings fail to materialize.“ (Instead of catastrophe, as announced, the people's repentance is attained). The work often refers to the deconstructionist literary theories of Paul de Man; it could, however, make more profitable use of Austin's and Searle's analysis of perlocutionary acts.]

D.D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator*, London 1963

[This is the first work to apply Austin's theories to the usage of the divine word in the Bible. An important and complex treatise, with both theological and hermeneutic aims.]

T.J. Finley, *The Proposal in Biblical Hebrew: Preliminary Studies Using a Deep Structure Model*, ZAH 2, 1989, 1-13

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M. Goldberg, *God, Action, and Narrative: Which Narrative? Which Action? Which God?*, *Journal of Religion* 68, 1988, 39-56

[Characteristically theological, this work takes on a debate with Thiemann (1985).]

W. Heimpel, G. Guidi, *Der Koinzidenzfall im Akkadischen*, Wiesbaden 1969

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[This encompasses much useful material for the comprehension of performative utterances in Classical Hebrew.]

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[Much interesting material for the history of the research on performative functions is contained here.]

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[The work applies concepts pertinent to performative language in Jeremiah's confessions, according to the theories of Austin and Evans.]

A.J. Poulter, *Rhetoric and Redaction in Deuteronomy 8. Linguistic Criticism of a Biblical Text*, Diss. University of Cambridge 1989

[The author keenly combines the results of traditional redaction criticism with the latest contributions of linguistic theory. The linguistic analysis of the text is studied on three levels: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.]

W. Schneider, *Grammatik des biblischen Hebräisch*, München 1985

[This seems to be the only recent Hebrew grammar which proposes somewhat detailed observations on performative utterances (performative Äußerungen) in biblical Hebrew (pp. 204-205).]

W. von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik*, Roma 1952

[On p. 104, the concept of „Koinzidenzfall“ is introduced in dealing with the perfect: „*aštaprakum* „ich schreibe dir hiermit“ (d.h. durch diesen Brief); die Aussage ist hier zugleich die Handlung selbst“.]

R.F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, Notre Dame, Ind. 1985

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A.C. Thiselton, *The Supposed Power of Words in Biblical Writings*, *JTS* 25, 1974, 283-299

[An acute essay, which develops the tradition of earlier theologians, such as Procksch and von Rad, who regarded God's word as being very different from that of man's (from a biblical and oriental view). Thanks in part to the introduction of the Austinian categories, the author proposes a more adequate philosophy of biblical language.]

H.C. White (ed.), *Speech Act Theory and Biblical Criticism*, *Semeia* 41, 1988

[An in-depth and stimulating anthology of essays, which up to now comprises the most complete and organic attempt to analyze the Bible according to the speech-act



theory. The Bible is essentially regarded as a literary *corpus* (rather than a linguistic *corpus*). The discussions on the rapport between speech-acts and literature are both predominant and insightful. Reference is often made to textual deconstructionist theory (currently in decline in European schools). This highly important work may help towards a better understanding of the role that the author or narrator plays in the literary text.]

R. Wonneberger, H.P. Hecht, Verheißung und Versprechen. Eine theologische und sprachanalytische Klärung, Göttingen 1986

[A particularly complex, varied and articulate study on the religious and profane value of promise and its meaning in the Bible. It bases itself upon the speech-acts theory which is utilized in order to bridge the gap between exegesis and ethics.]

I. Zatelli, La comunicazione verbale nel „Deuteronomio“ in rapporto all'espressione del divino, Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere „La Colombaria“, 44, n.s. 30, 1979, 1-13

[A linguistic analysis, based upon the speech-act theory, of the modes of communication proposed by the discourses of the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy.]

I. Zatelli, La chiamata dell'uomo da parte di Dio nella Bibbia al vaglio della „discourse analysis“, Rivista Biblica 38, 1990, 13-26

[An application of the speech-act theory to the Hebrew text of the prophetic call narratives, which depicts the roles of the players in the action.]

*Abstract:*

In the complex and still fluid domain of pragmalinguistics, those linguistic phenomena related to deixis and speech-act theory are given special consideration. In the analysis of Classical Hebrew, the language of the Bible and of the coeval inscriptions, the description of such phenomena sheds further light upon its grammatical peculiarities, semantic values, and interpretative aspects. The dramatic narrative which is typical of the Bible, more mimetic than diegetic, reveals a good degree of performativity, or illocutionary force, in many expressions. For example, dialogues occurring between the Divinity and mortals are often highly „verdictive“, that is, their character is not simply conversational. This may be further seen in the various verbs meaning „to say“, which at times would be better translated by „to order“, „to command“. The analysis of complete utterances and their modes of expression, along with proper references as to context, offers a more complete linguistic description and a series of semantic peculiarities which may otherwise go unobserved.

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