Marina Sbisà, 2023, *Essays on speech acts and other topics in pragmatics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

If one has ever wondered if it is worthy in academia to republish papers in volumes or special issues, a quick look at Marina Sbisà's "Essays on speech acts and other topics in pragmatics" would cast any doubt away. If the quick look would be followed by a proper reading, then one may realize that this dense collection of 17 papers, ranging from 1984 to 2020, is a precious overview of the work of one of the most influential contemporary Italian philosophers, timely offered by Oxford University Press both to young scholars and experts in pragmatics and philosophy of language.

Just as a non-linear narration, the essays can be read in any order the reader prefers to: chronologically obviously, if one is interested in how Sbisà's theories developed over the years; or thematically, choosing the parameters among the many lines of research that bring the papers together (in this regard, the Introduction offers very useful suggestions). Here, I choose the latter, grouping the essays according to the tradition in pragmatics they are mostly concerned: Austinian (Essays 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16) Gricean (Essays 3, 4, 5, 9) and, borrowing a term from some recent tendencies in philosophy, "applied" philosophy of language (Mühlebach 2022), which here I use for those papers referring to discourse and contemporary society more explicitly than others, and especially dealing with power imbalance, gender and ideology (Essays 12, 15, 17). In sketching the milestones of Sbisà's arguments across and among those paths, with no claim to be exhaustive, I will highlight that her entire philosophical project, and not only the "applied" directions, could be treated as a prototypical (and *ante litteram*) example of "non-ideal" philosophy of language. As a matter of fact, in Sbisà's framework the distinction between ideal and non-ideal does not hold entirely, in that Sbisà has never abstracted «away from (social) categories and power relations which crucially shape our object of investigation» (Mühlebach 2022).

Marina Sbisà started her career as an expert of John Austin, at a time when very few people knew who John Austin was. The reason for this choice was, in her words, her need for «a non-metaphysical theoretical framework for the study of speech as action» (*Introduction*: 17), such as Austin's. Indeed, one of the main reasons to read the volume is to get to know the father of speech act theory better. In fact, even if speech acts are nowadays pervasive in pragmatics (both in philosophy and linguistics), Sbisà shows very clearly that not everything we assume about them come directly from Austin but rather from Searle and Strawson's subsequent systematization and reformulation (for a detailed overview of the main differences, see Caponetto & Labinaz 2023). These reformulations, although sometimes necessary – Austin's work is not systematic and many notions in his texts do not get a proper definition or explanation – do not come without a price. According to Sbisà, in fact, they weaken Austin formulation in at least two directions: they introduce the notion of proposition (and therefore truth-conditionality) and they reduce the role of the context to mental representations only. In doing so, they make the claim that "speech is action" a mere figure of speech rather than a true explanation of what speech does (Essay 7 and 10).

Concerning this point, we owe to Sbisà an extensive analysis of illocution in terms of conventional rather than cognitive effects and, in particular, in terms of deontic properties. For Sbisà, agents come into interaction bringing rights and obligations which belong to them because of social or interpersonal agreements. These deontic statuses are modified by illocution, which therefore does not concern the recipient only, but the relationship of all the parties involved (Essay 1). To explain these dynamics, Sbisà – a fine connoisseur of semiotics (as shown, among other papers, by the maybe too little recognized Fabbri & Sbisà 1985) – borrows the notion of *actant*, *modal competence* and *narrative schema* from Greimas (1977, among others). Within this view, a speech act affects not two people, but (at least) three actants (that is, three roles): a Destinator and two Destinee.

Sbisà's speech act theory stands out in contemporary philosophy of language for another feature, common to all the essays in the volume, namely the assumption (both theoretical and applied) that the study of speech act presupposes the study of conversation. This does not necessarily mean that speech act theory should be flattened on conversation analysis in goals and method, but that individual speech acts can be fully understood only in the sequence of conversation (the Austinian *total speech situation*). It is in conversation, in fact, that the conventional effects of illocution are fully manifested, through the response of the audience and, possibly through the speaker's response to the audience response (Essay 8). Given this framework, it should be clearer why for Sbisà the uptake (i.e., the audience's recognition of the illocutionary act) is not a cognitive representation but, rather, the very condition that allows certain conventional effects to occur, which can then lead to specific verbal and behavioral responses.

Even if she is best known as an expert of Austin, Sbisà has also worked on Grice as well, whose notions she analyses, in her own words, "from the other side", namely from the perspective of the audience. This move does not come as a surprise given the fact that Sbisà, following Wittgenstein (1953) has always assumed a non-propositional and non-psychological view on meaning. The volume is therefore a great opportunity to get to know this perspective which, as I will shortly show, is not detached from speech act theory but, rather, a necessary complement.

Sbisà's reading of Grice starts from the assumption that the definition of meaning$_{NN}$ has the goal to specify which intentions the audience is willing/capable/justified to attribute to a speaker (Essay 4), without any reference to what role these intentions actually have in the process of production. Similarly, the Cooperative Principle is justified in terms of audience's assumptions about the behavior of the speakers, and in particular about the rationality this behavior will display. Interestingly, the type of rationality Sbisà's defend is not instrumental (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1995) but argumentative: a rational being, for Sbisà, is a being who seeks and gives justifications for what was said and implicated. Most importantly, attributing rationality to another being is for Sbisà the first step towards the attribution of subjectivity, a topic that brings us to the final group of essays.

It is evident that, for Sbisà, both the Austinian and the Gricean lines of research converged very quickly in a view on discourse and society, and in the belief that philosophy can – or rather, should – work together with linguistics to better understand the phenomena we are trying to describe and theorize about. As Sbisà put it: «I thought of the philosophy of language not so much as a set of theoretical claims, but as a methodological framework for the analysis of actual speech» (*Introduction*: 13). For Sbisà, dealing with "actual speech" means, first of all, recognizing that the

social categories involved in speech act sequences and emergent relations of power are constitutive elements of the speech act itself, and not accessory addictions. As it's become increasingly evident in philosophy of language, this implies a need to move away from "ideal" models of language (Beaver & Stanley 2019; Mühlebach 2022). It seems to me that Sbisà's (and Austin's) framework, differently from other descriptions of speech acts, are constitutively immune from this risk of idealization. Putting the deontic properties of agents at the core of illocution, in fact, highlights effectively that the way in which we use and respond to speech acts is, ultimately, a powerful indication of how we are willing to consider and treat others: in other words, of the degree of subjectivity we attribute to them.

The prototypical example of how we can deny subjectivity to another is silencing (Langton 1993, Essay 12): by denying to someone (i.e., a woman) the deontic properties necessary to perform a speech, we deny her/him the very status of subject, which, on the contrary, should be unconditional. Given the stakes, Sbisà working method becomes the most efficient way to deal with gender issues and, more generally, power relationships: only by a systematic study of actual speech acts in actual total speech situations, we can understand how people talk and assign values to these issues, and we can, as philosophers, elaborate strategies to contrast unjust and violent discursive practices which deny subjectivity to other human beings, a task so imperative in the difficult times we live in.

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