Commitments in Joint Action

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There are important divergences among philosophers on the nature and role of the commitments present in joint action. Some hold that joint commitments, together with the mutual obligations and entitlements they entail, are constitutive of shared intentions and engage a sui generis form of social normativity. Others maintain that while mutual obligations and entitlements are very common in joint action, they are not essential to joint action. In this talk, I shall approach these issues by considering the functions of commitments in joint action. Successful joint action depends on the efficient coordination of participant agents’ goals, intentions, plans, and actions. Motivational, instrumental or common ground uncertainty can hinder coordination. I will argue that commitments in joint action work as uncertainty reduction tools. However, in many ordinary forms of joint action there are typically also other routes to uncertainty reduction. I will discuss the forms of complementarity that exist between commitments and other uncertainty reduction devices.
In a previous work I have discussed the characteristic features of speech actions in deliberation, trying to determine the aspects in which the standard theory of speech acts (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) has to be completed and extended. My aim here is to further advance this analysis by focusing on two of those aspects, namely, (argumentative) turn-taking organization and selection by reception, as determinative of the illocutionary force of utterances in a deliberative exchange. My point of departure will be the Austinian approach to speech acts, which I take to be the most faithful reception of Austin’s original work. The main thesis underlying this approach states that illocutionary acts should be seen as context-changing social actions, affecting and modifying the deontic positions (commitments and entitlements, and other similar modal competencies) of the participants in the interaction (Sbisà 2006, 2014; Witek 2013, 2015).

To a certain extent, deliberation may be seen as highly regulated by a conventional procedure, where the organization of turn-taking and the assignment of the burden of proof (and the burden of rebuttal) are usually prearranged. This may be undoubtedly so in institutional settings, where there is an explicit procedure with which participants must comply. Yet in more informal settings the interactants need to rely on their pragmatic competence, as mutually recognized, and their assumed common knowledge of what the practice of deliberation consists of. In both cases, the goal of the dialogue is that the participants agree on the best available course of action for implementation (Walton and Krabbe 1995, Walton 2013).

My aim is to examine the way in which the argumentative organization of turn-taking in collective deliberative processes answers to the mutual responsiveness of participants and thus contributes to clarify the way in which an utterance can become a speech action with a particular illocutionary force. In this way, I hope to be able to contribute to the question of whether “speech actions play a role in enabling and exercising collective agency”.

References
Collective Intentionality of Law-making Acts and Qualitative Social Ontology
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In accordance with phenomenological accounts of social acts and states (Reinach 1913, Stein 1925), I assume that social acts are speech acts – e.g. promising, requesting, commanding, informing, promulgating a law (Mulligan 1987, 2016 and Smith 1990) –, and I suggest that law-making acts of democratic states are collective and proxy social-speech acts that are modifications of the paradigmatic type of social-speech act (Reinach 1913, Austin 1962, Searle 1969). Unlike the paradigmatic type of social-speech act, which is performed by, and addressed to a single individual, law-making acts are performed by a group of individuals on behalf of a plurality of individuals to which they are addressed. I focus on the peculiar ontological structure of law-making acts arguing that they involve modifications of the constitutive moments of social-speech acts—the subject and its agency, the addressee, the linguistic expression, the uptake of the act. I address issues such as:

(i) Who is precisely the collective subject of law-making acts? Would it be appropriate to ascribe it the classical traits of collective subjects, such as those of Gilbert’s “plural subjects” (2013)?

(ii) Which are the features characterizing the agency of law-making acts? Which notion of collective intentionality accounts better for the collective agency of law-making acts (Searle 1995, 2010; Gilbert 2013; Meijers 2007)?

(iii) Who is the addressee and who has to uptake the acts and how?

(iv) Which kind of authority, and what kind of recognition relations between the agent and the addressee are here in place?

(v) What are the felicity conditions of law-making acts? Which is the relation between the uptake and the performance of the acts, on the one hand, and their enforcement of the other hand?

Also, I argue that law-making acts as collective and proxy social-speech acts play a fundamental role for the quality of existence of the state and thus, more generally, for the quality issue in social ontology – that is, the issue focusing not just on the conditions of existence of social entities, but also on the quality of existence of social entities (De Vecchi 2016). While law-making acts performed by just one individual are a necessary condition for the state to exist, law-making acts as collective and proxy acts are a necessary condition for the state to exist as a democratic state and they represent a necessary moment for the legislator-citizens relations to exist as relations of authorization, recognition and trust, as well as for the state to exist as a common good to share and build up together.

References


Forgiveness is an essential act in human relations. In Hannah Arendt’s words, if it weren’t for forgiveness we would all “be confined to one single deed from which we would never recover” (1958). With the recent rise of truth and reconciliation commissions in countries plagued by mass atrocities, and the ever more frequent scene of politicians asking their constituents for forgiveness, the following question arises: can groups forgive? Although some philosophers have argued for a variant of group forgiveness, I do not think any has done this sufficiently (see Digeser 2001; MacLachlan 2012; Wolterstorff 2013). In the paper, I give two arguments that support the claim that groups can forgive, although in a more limited way than individuals can forgive. The first, which relies on traditional definitions of forgiveness, argues that groups can forgive because a group can fully reconcile. I argue that full reconciliation requires forgiveness. From this notion of forgiveness, I defend the claim from two objections against its collective forgiveness. In the second part of the paper, I express my concerns that the traditional account of forgiveness is too narrow, and attempt to generalize it. This more generalized definition poses no problem for group forgiveness. I do not anticipate this paper solving the issue definitively, but I do think it forces one to severely rethink her notion of what it means for groups to forgive. My hope is that the results achieved will provide a new lens in seeing how groups traditionally at odds with each other can work towards a peaceful, and healthy, coexistence. A group here is defined as an entity composed of individuals that is nevertheless distinct from just the sum of its individual members. For example, teams, nations, or ethnic groups are examples of groups.

References
On Discursive Antagonism, Accommodation, and Communication
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In November 2014, American TV pundit Sean Hannity invited a local political leader, Patricia Bynes, from Ferguson, Missouri onto his show to discuss the shooting of Michael Brown. The show opened with the following dialog:

_Hannity:_ Commiteewoman, you've said this is an issue of police brutality. Were you there at the shooting?
_Bynes:_ Was I there at the shooting? I was not present for the shooting.
_Hannity:_ You weren't there. So you don't know if this case is about police brutality, do you?
_Bynes:_ Um, no, I do know that this case is about police brutality —
_Hannity:_ —but you weren't there! Let me educate you, commiteewoman...

Hannity violates what has been called the _rule of accommodation_ — the principle by which ‘conversations...tend to evolve in such a way as is required in order to make whatever occurs count as correct play.’ [Lewis 1979a]. Accommodation has been brought in to account for a range of linguistic phenomena — including the semantic value of definite descriptions and vague predicates, presupposition, conventional implicature, conversational implicature, the force of imperatives and permissives, and uptake of speech acts more generally ([Lewis 1979b], [Stalnaker 1978], [Stalnaker 2002], [Thomason 1990], [von Fintel 2000], [von Fintel 2008], [Camp forthcoming], [Langton and West 1999]). But what is the status of this rule? What is its normative strength? In short: what makes what Hannity does above not just impolite, insincere, or misleading, but defective, inappropriate, or infelicitous?

In this paper I describe violations of the rule of accommodation in the context of discursive antagonism more generally — activities like bad listening, ignoring, intrusive interruption, undue skepticism, and willful obtuseness. I argue that such behavior is unified insofar as it violates a set of regulative social norms that ground and guide communication. These regulative metalinguistic norms include the much-discussed rule of accommodation, but also turn-taking conventions and principles of joint attention and low collaborative effort ([Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974], [Clark 1993], [Tomasello 2008]). These norms are importantly different from ‘constitutive norms’ of e.g. assertion on the one hand, and more general epistemic norms of honesty, trust, and sincerity on the other. Reflection on regulative metalinguistic norms of this kind helps us better understand traditional concepts in philosophy of language (such as the ‘conversational scoreboard’ and ‘common ground’), but also help us understand the genealogy and value of communication itself. Discursive antagonism gives us a reason to take the ‘commons’ in Common Ground seriously — that is, to think of communication as a public good. In support of this, I review one popular scheme for public goods — the collective pool resource system — and show what such a model might suggest about the value and limits of linguistic cooperativity, coordination and context.

References


Collective Agency, Intentionality and Communicative Intentions: The Case of the Legislature
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Statutes are drafted by multiple persons, often with conflicting objectives (Easterbrook 1994). The communicative intentions behind a legislature’s speech act range then from those of who proposed the bill to those of who approved its final text without having read it; furthermore, these intentions may be incoherent too, as it happens when members voted for the bill intending its text as suggesting contents that are mutually incompatible. Although these circumstances question the intentionality attributable to the legislature as a collective agency (for a review, Wright 2006), they do not weaken the effectiveness of its speech acts. Once a bill is enacted, the communicative agency has shifted from the legislature to its text (Tiersma 2003, Wright 2006) and what undergoes the process of interpretation are the meanings that (competent) readers may build from its text by relying both on customary arguments of interpretation and on the context of adjudication (Scalia and Garner 2012, Marmor 2016). The shift of communicative agency from the legislature to the enacted text suggests that opting for the intentions with which the legislature produced a statute may be considered as an argument of interpretation to be weighted against others.

This conclusion is questioned by two opposite stances upon the balance of power between the legislature and the courts: hard textualists hold that the legislative intent should play no role in interpretation (Scalia and Garner 2012), whereas for intentionalists the shift of communicative agency to the statute is only partial and then the legislative intent should be recognised a primary role in interpretation (Solan 2005).

The issues will be discussed using as an example the genesis and the textual structure of art. 20 of act n.76/2016 (the Italian legislature’s speech act that created a legal institute for same-sex couples), with a focus on the role implicit meanings had in reaching the compromise through which the bill was approved, and on how they affect now its effectiveness.

References
Boats and Identities. Reflections Over Common Sayings and Collective Agents
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In my contribution I analyze the common saying “We're on the same boat”, in the attempt to reflect over the role of speech actions in enabling collective agency.

§1. If we focus on the conditions for the appropriate use of the expression “We're on the same boat”, we find out that it is a powerful means to create a collective. This is especially true in periods of crisis, since it presents a “we”, in which people share a common fate – usually, the expression is used to suggest the opportunity of mutual help, since our boat is going astray or even sinking.

§2. I introduce the distinction among the holistic and the distributive understanding of the “we” involved in the expression “We're on the same boat” (see List and Pettit). First, I focus on the holistic approach, showing that this is the way in which Margaret Gilbert conceptualizes collective agency. I show that the holistic approach focuses on the perception of a common fate in the creation of collectives. This has the advantage of explaining the sense of belonging and the above mentioned disposition to help, evoked by the feeling of being on the same boat: sharing a collective identity leads to high degrees of inter-group cooperation.

§3. Alas, the holistic understanding of collective agency also has negative consequences. One of the main risks is that the formation of a “we” includes the recognition that there are “others”. Zizzo experimentally shows that when people adopt a collective identity on the base of the perception of a common fate, discriminative behaviors against outgroup people increase. I present some examples from the newspapers, showing how variations on the theme of “being on the same boat” can promote discriminative and racist behaviors. The risk is that the emphasis on collective identities leads to the worsening of social conflicts.

§4. I argue that the distributive understanding of the “we” can ground inclusive collective identities, in which the identity is due to the pursuing of a common goal, rather than to the perception of a common fate. Inclusive collective identities can be promoted by certain uses of the language, leading to the recognition of the common goal. Intergroup cooperation and unity can be enhanced without increasing outgroup discriminations.

References
Do We Need Mutually Shared Beliefs to Coordinate Our Joint Actions?
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According to a widely accepted view (Lewis 2002, Stalnaker 2002, Clark 1996, Pinker et al. 2008), interacting agents coordinate their parts in joint activities using mutually shared background information or mutually shared beliefs. After arguing that merely shared beliefs fail to constitute a sufficient basis for coordinating joint activities, the proponents of this view jump to the conclusion that successful coordination requires mutually shared beliefs. Roughly speaking, a belief that \( p \) is mutually believed by agents \( A \) and \( B \) only if \( A \) believes that \( p \) and \( B \) believes that \( p \), \( A \) believes that \( B \) believes that \( p \), \( B \) believes that \( A \) believes that \( p \), and so on \( ad \) \( infinitum \).

Even though I agree that merely shared beliefs fail to provide a sufficient basis for coordinating joint actions, I reject the concept of mutually shared beliefs. Following Thomasson (1990), I assume that the participants in a conversation are working together to build a \textit{shared date structure} (henceforth SDS) construed of as a set of their shared beliefs, desires, intentions, expectations, and so on; more specifically, they cooperate to keep their own \textit{representations} of the SDS sufficiently aligned, that is, they work together to achieve \textit{mental coordination} construed of as a preferred correspondence between what they believe, desire, intend, expect, and so on. I also claim that illocutionary conventions — construed of as patterns of speaker-hearer interaction — play a key role in the mechanisms responsible for producing mental coordination between conversing agents.

My talk is organised into three parts. I start by presenting an interactional account of illocutionary practice (Witek 2015a, 2015b), which builds on elements of Millikan’s (1998, 2005) biological model of language and Sbisa’s (2002, 2009) model of illocutionary conventions. Next, I argue that the proper function of illocutionary conventions — construed of as complex patterns of cooperative interaction — is to produce mental coordination between conversing agents. Finally, I argue that mental coordination achieved with the help illocutionary conventions provides a sufficient basis for coordinating joint actions.

References