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## **SPEAKING, INFERRING, ARGUING. ON THE ARGUMENTATIVE CHARACTER OF SPEECH<sup>1</sup>**

**SUMMARY:** Within the Gricean framework in pragmatics, communication is understood as an inferential activity. Other approaches to the study of linguistic communication have contended that language is argumentative in some essential sense. My aim is to study the question of whether and how the practices of inferring and arguing can be taken to contribute to meaning in linguistic communication. I shall suggest a two-fold hypothesis. First, what makes of communication an inferential activity is given with its calculability, i.e. with the possibility to rationally recover the assigned meaning by means of an explicit inference. Secondly, the normative positions that we recognize and assign each other with our speech acts comprise obligations and rights of a dialectical character; but this fact does not entail nor presuppose an argumentative nature in language or speech. Both inferring and arguing are needed, however, in the activity of justifying and assessing our speech acts.

**KEYWORDS:** arguing, inferring, argumentative value, inferential meaning, illocutionary, normativity of speech, Austin, Grice.

### **Introduction**

Some philosophical and linguistic approaches to the study of the pragmatics of language, following Grice (1989), have defended the idea that linguistic communication is an inferential activity. The inferential nature of speech is con-

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nected to a notion of meaning *qua* speaker's meaning, where the speaker's communicative intentions have to be inferred by the hearer. Notwithstanding the reference to psychological attitudes in his definition of speaker's meaning, Grice's view was primarily semantic and philosophical. He aimed at clarifying notions such as those of sentence meaning and word meaning. In the domain of pragmatics, the derivation of implicatures was not intended by him as a psychologically real process, but as a rational reconstruction of how this implicatured meaning might be obtained. Some recent neo-Gricean theories (prominently, relevance theory and contextualism) orientate their approach in a different direction by aiming at a psychologically real, empirically testable theory.

Other approaches to the study of linguistic communication have contended that language is argumentative in some essential sense. Inferentialism, in the form given to it by Brandom (1994; 2000), presupposes in the speakers a pre-theoretical capacity to participate in the practice of giving and asking for reasons. Semantic meaning results from the contribution that expressions make to the inferential relations of the sentences in which they occur. From a different, linguistic approach, the theory of argumentation within language (Anscombe, Ducrot, 1976; 1988) contends that the semantic meaning of words determines the dynamics of discourse, and this in a form that is argumentatively orientated. This theory aims to show how a fact can be differently understood and communicated depending on the linguistic formulation chosen, and this election is taken to determine which other linguistic and argumentative moves are available.

My interest lies in the question of how inferring and arguing can be taken to contribute to meaning in communication. In particular, I hope to clarify how meaning can be said to depend on, or to be essentially related to argumentation. At this point, the formulation of the question must remain broad, since it is intended to comprehend different theories that endorse dissimilar views of this contribution and do so by focusing on different dimensions of meaning and communication. Knowingly, recent views in neo-Gricean pragmatics have developed a view of communication that understands it as an inferential activity, where the hearer's inferential work plays an indispensable role in grasping the speaker's communicative intentions and thus in capturing what can be conceptualized as pragmatic, communicated meaning. Also, the theory of argumentation within language has defended a view according to which semantic meaning in use cannot be dissociated from its argumentative value. And Brandom's normative pragmatics contends that the practice of giving reasons (and evaluating those reasons) is constitutive of meaning at the semantic level. Therefore, the contribution of inference and argumentation to meaning has been taken to impinge on both semantic and pragmatic levels. My aim is to consider in turn both theoretical possibilities by means of studying the influential theories mentioned above, namely, Grice's account of communicated meaning, Brandom's normative pragmatics and Anscombe and Ducrot's notion of radical argumentativity.

Although there have been other theories dealing with this issue,<sup>2</sup> here I shall focus my attention only on the above mentioned ones. I take them to be highly representative of the topic at hand and I expect that discussing their main ideas will help me to give plausibility to my own views. In what follows, my aim is to give support to the following two hypotheses. Firstly, the idea that linguistic communication puts in place the interlocutors' inferential capabilities (together with other competences) is uncommitted and seems to me to be correct. But this fact should not be taken to give support to a stronger thesis, which would make of meaning an intentional entity and would explain linguistic communication solely in psychological terms. Following Grice (1975), I contend that what makes of communication an inferential activity is given by its calculability, i.e. by the possibility to recover an utterance's meaning by means of a rational reconstruction. This normative requirement, already present in Grice's views, is what I have tried to capture by means of a first hypothesis. Secondly, in my view, the way in which some expressions seem to codify certain inferential relations should not be seen as the product of an argumentative nature inherent in language. Argumentation is a special form of communication and interaction, where an arguer gives support to a claim by adducing reasons. This is not pre-codified in language, but an activity performed by giving reasons and assessing those reasons.

In what follows, my aim is to examine the above mentioned relevant theories, focusing on the way in which they have related inference and communication (or communicated meaning), on the one hand, and on the other, argumentation and semantic meaning. I hope this will allow me to clarify the concepts involved and give support to my views.

## 1. Inferring and Arguing

In order to approach the issue of the relation between meaning, inference and argumentation it is advisable to begin by considering the conceptual distinction between inferring and arguing. In a pre-theoretical, intuitive approach, inferring is making the step from a belief to another (in thought or speech). We can be said to infer when we come to believe something on the basis of another previously entertained thought. Nevertheless, this tentative approach is lacking. It makes room for cases in which no reasoning links the first and last beliefs, and it does not distinguish personal, consciously endorsed inferences from other processes in which some belief causes, in a fortuitous or merely associative way, another belief. The idea that there must be a chain of reasoning articulating the step from a belief to another allows for this distinction, but it introduces another concept in

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, Habermas's theory of communicative action subsumed a formal pragmatics in which understanding a speech act amounted to knowing the reasons that might justify it, should this justification be required by other interactants. This interesting theory cannot be addressed here (Habermas, 1981).

need of clarification, namely, that of reasoning. In its turn, reasoning may be said to be drawing inferences, which would be obviously circular.

A possible way out of this conceptual difficulty is offered by Frege's views. He writes, "To make a judgment because we are cognizant of other truths as providing a justification for it is known as inferring" (Frege, 1979, p. 4).<sup>3</sup> The burden of this definition lies on the high-level notion of justification on which it relies. In Frege's theoretical framework, however, we may safely assume that he is implicitly considering the availability and application of formal rules of a deductive kind. Notwithstanding this, his normative requirement in order for a transition from one judgement to another to qualify as inferring is that truth be transferred. Although Frege's definition seems in principle only related to theoretical reasoning (due to its presupposed connection between justification and truth), a similar view with a broader scope is due to Grice. In a preliminary approach, he says, "reasoning consists in the entertainment (and often acceptance) in thought or in speech of a set of initial ideas (propositions), together with a sequence of ideas each of which is derivable by an acceptable principle of inference from its predecessors in the set" (Grice, 2001, p. 5). Notwithstanding Grice's appeal to rules of inference, his notion of reasoning is broader than Frege's in that it is not limited to deductive rules and comprises practical reasoning as well. For Grice, inferential rules should be seen as transitions of acceptance which guarantee the transmission of some value of satisfactoriness, truth being but a particular case.

The appeal to rules of inference may seem unduly restrictive, if also our informal, ordinary reasoning has to be accounted for. Grice himself suggests that inferential rules can be seen as directives and their observance as a desideratum, but he carefully avoids conjecturing about their nature. It may be useful at this point to take into account the distinction put forward by some recent theories between two distinct processing modes or types of reasoning. The first one is characterized as automatic, fast, and non-conscious; it also is described as associative, heuristic or intuitive. The second one is controlled, conscious and slow; it is also taken to be rule-based, analytic or reflexive (Kahneman, 2011; Frankish, 2010). Intuitively, it seems that only the second mode of reasoning could be related to both Frege's and Grice's notion of inference and their appeal (tacit or explicit) to rules. Yet this conclusion would be hasty, in view of what I take to be an essential aspect in both of their views. It concerns the normative role played by inference rules, in that they should guarantee the transmission of some value among judgements. From this perspective, what is at stake in both Frege's and Grice's accounts does not need to be a psychologically real process. Instead, inferring is seen from a normative viewpoint, as a process in which a transition is effected from a judgement to another (in thought or language), and such that this

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Boghossian (2014, p. 4). Boghossian's own proposal is to understand inferring as a matter of following a rule of inference in one's thought. Although this is an interesting view, it cannot be discussed here.

process can be assessed according to a normative requirement of transmission of correctness (truth for Frege, in theoretical reasoning; a value of satisfactoriness for Grice, in both theoretical and practical reasoning). From now on, this is the notion of inferring that I shall be considering here.

It can thus be said that we infer when we make the step from one judgement to another, in thought or language, in such a way that the transition we perform is in principle subject to assessment as to its preserving correctness (truth or otherwise practical correctness). Inferences are the product of acts of inferring, and reasoning is drawing inferences. From a logical point of view, inferences in reasoning can be represented by means of entailments between propositions (propositions being representational units with complete truth conditions, hence a theoretical object), and those entailments can in turn be reconstructed as carried out by virtue of certain rules. On the pragmatic level, however, real acts of inferring are not necessarily guided by formal rules. Our ordinary reasoning can and seems largely to be carried out through material inferences, which rely on conceptual, non-formal relations. Acknowledging this fact does not amount to pointing out the difference between abstract inferences, conducted within a formal system, and psychologically real ones. Rather, it endeavours to highlight the relation between actual inferences, seen as the product of the activity of inferring, and their susceptibility to assessment according to independent criteria of correctness.

Even if the above approach to acts of inferring is broad and remains intuitive, it should help us to realize the difference between inferring and arguing. Here, I am going to consider argumentation as a communicative activity that fulfils an essentially epistemic function. Argumentation consists in adducing reasons in order to justify a claim and in assessing those reasons. My approach is not intended as a formal definition, but as a very general and intuitive characterization. Moreover, here I endorse the widely held view according to which argumentation articulates three dimensions, namely, logical, dialectical, and rhetorical, respectively related to its product, its procedure, and its process. Although this is not a universal view,<sup>4</sup> the distinction stands as a useful one in characterizing theoretical proposals.

My own approach is pragmatic in that I am considering argumentation as a type of communicative and interactional activity. I take it that adducing reasons can be seen as a speech act of the assertive family,<sup>5</sup> internally related to the speech act of concluding a claim (another speech act of the same family). What makes of these acts an act of arguing is the internal connection between them. From a logical point of view, this internal relationship is what Toulmin (2003)

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<sup>4</sup> Wenzel (1992) is usually credited with having put forward the idea that there are three perspectives in the study of argumentation, namely, logical, dialectical, and rhetorical. More recently, there is a wide consensus among scholars that these perspectives should be better seen as three dimensions of a single practice or form of activity. For an alternative view, centred on arguments, see, e.g., Blair's (2012).

<sup>5</sup> The idea that a group of different types of speech act belong to the assertive family is due to Green (2018).

termed *warrant*. In his view, warrants are inference-licenses or canons of argument, able to be made explicit in the form of hypothetical statements, and such that “authorise the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us” (Toulmin, 2003, p. 91). Warrants can be made explicit but will usually remain tacit or implicit. Although making a warrant explicit usually entails the adoption of an analytic stance on acts of arguing, this element (*qua* inference-license) must be seen as an essential component in them. When it is lacking, the resulting speech acts would be two assertions not argumentatively related to each other. Whenever data *D* is adduced as reasons in support of claim *C*, we can take it that the internal relation between *D* and *C* is to be captured, in an analytic form, by means of a warrant. Toulmin sets forward a tentative, general formulation in the following terms, “Data such as *D* entitle one to draw conclusions, or make claims, such as *C*”, or alternatively, “Given data *D*, one may take it that *C*”. Even if making this form explicit (whenever it is left tacit or implicit) presupposes the adoption of an analytic point of view, no piece of speech or discourse can be seen as argumentative unless this component relationship is part of the performed act.

It is worth stressing that the notion of warrant, as introduced by Toulmin, belongs to the logical dimension of argumentation. To that extent, it can be seen as an abstract, theoretical notion that tries to capture what should have a pragmatic realization. There have been different suggestions that address this issue. To mention but a few that are, perhaps, closer to my outlined position, warrants have been understood as general practical statements (Hitchcock, 1985), as correlated to implicit assertions (Bermejo-Luque, 2011), and as Gricean conversational implicatures (Labinaz & Sbisà, 2018). In my view, a pragmatic account in speech-act theoretical terms should try to identify the speech act or acts, if any, whose role can be captured on the logical (semantic) level by means of Toulmin’s notion of warrant. Up to this point, I am not in a position to give a complete and satisfactory account. My intuition is that these “warranting” acts are not full-fledged speech acts, and that whenever made explicit, they acquire also the character of verdictive speech acts.

Moreover, taking into account not only the act of adducing reasons, but also that of assessing those reasons makes of my approach a dialectical one.<sup>6</sup> This assessment can be carried out by means of questioning and criticizing the adduced reasons, by questioning the support that the adduced reasons lend to the claim (the relationship captured by means of the notion of warrant), and also by

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<sup>6</sup> The dialectical perspective on argumentation sees it as a special form of communicative interaction, where certain regulated procedures guide and allow the participants to produce and assess their acts of arguing (cf. Wenzel, 1992; also, Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). My focus here is on argumentation as a communicative practice that consists of putting forward acts of arguing; and I take it that these, in their turn, answer to certain felicity conditions. To the extent that these felicity conditions can be understood to be regulating the practice, they allow the participants to adopt a normative stance and assess other participants’ (and their own) acts and arguments.

It is in this sense that I consider my approach to be pre-eminently dialectical.

presenting conditions of rebuttal.<sup>7</sup> By virtue of this process of adducing reasons, and of criticizing those reasons (in themselves, and in their internal relationship with the corresponding claim), acts of arguing have epistemic value. Notwithstanding the different goals that argumentation can fulfil,<sup>8</sup> it allows us to give support and thus to justify our claims. This is, in my view, what can be taken to be essential in argumentation.<sup>9</sup> When we argue, we put forward the reasons that, according to us, give support to the claim we purport to be true or otherwise correct. This support amounts to argumentative justification and provides an epistemic basis for the rational acceptance of the claim at issue.

Now, it should be easier to see why inferring and arguing are not one and the same concept. From a logical point of view, as pointed out before, the steps we perform in reasoning can be represented by means of implications between propositions, of a form that is evaluable as to their preserving correctness. Arguing is an epistemic activity, conducted communicatively, in which we adduce reasons in order to give support to and thus justify a claim. Following Toulmin, it can be said that in acts of arguing the transition from reasons to claim becomes legitimate by virtue of an inference-licence that authorizes it. While in reasoning the inferential steps we make (in thought or speech) do not need to invoke such legitimated or authorized character, the fact that arguing is a communicative activity makes of this requirement an essential component of a correct performance. In arguing, we interact with others and their assessment or appraisal has an effect on our own performance. The activity of arguing cannot be detached from the activity of adducing reasons to justify a claim, which entails a commitment by the arguer (possibly tacit) to the inference-licence that authorizes the step. Acts of arguing cannot be understood unless an interpersonal or social context is given, where the adduced reasons and their relationship to the raised claim can be assessed.

Still, it is possible to doubt whether both inferring and arguing are on a par in that both can be assessed as to correctness or incorrectness.<sup>10</sup> The difference here, to my mind, lies in the fact that an act of arguing is an action, is an act performed according to certain conventional felicity conditions, in the same sense in which any speech act is so. This is not the case of an inference. From an analytical point of view, both inferences and arguments can be approached as

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<sup>7</sup> In this, I am following the classic characterization due to Toulmin, Rieke and Janik (1984), for whom argumentation is “the whole activity of making claims, challenging them, backing them up by producing reasons, criticizing those reasons, rebutting those criticisms, and so on” (p. 14).

<sup>8</sup> See Mohammed (2016) for a review and critical discussion of the many goals that theoreticians have considered central to argumentation.

<sup>9</sup> Bermejo-Luque (2011) has convincingly contended that the constitutive goal of argumentation is to show a target-claim to be correct. Although I do not share all the details of her proposal, I am indebted to her for the discussions we have maintained in relation to this topic.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this doubt.

products and the analysis can be focused on their logical proprieties. But acts of arguing have conditions of felicity or, as I have also put it, of pragmatic correctness, to which acts of inferring are not subjected. In particular, an act of arguing requires, together with the acts of adducing a reason and of drawing a conclusion (or of raising a claim), that these acts be connected through a further act, namely, a warranting act that is performed by the speaker and, if recognized by the interlocutors, legitimizes the step from reason to claim. This is not to say that the interlocutors take the resulting argument as strong enough or convincing. But the speech act can be recognized as an act of arguing. If the warranting act is lacking, we would not say that the speaker is arguing. She would be presenting two speech acts without an argumentative connection.

Whenever speaker and interlocutors recognize that an act of arguing has taken place, this speech act can be assessed on different levels. In many cases, a very relevant dimension of assessment corresponds to the fulfilment of certain objective conditions. These objective conditions can be determinant in establishing that an act of arguing is good, cogent, solid, etc. For example, if the speaker says: "It is raining, you should take your umbrella", an objective condition for the speech act to be good is that it is actually raining. But these conditions have a different character from the pragmatic conditions of correct performance. In the latter, together with the conditions for verdictive speech acts (the acts of adducing reasons, and of concluding or raising a claim), the corresponding conditions for the pragmatically correct performance of a warranting act have to be fulfilled, in order for the speech act to be possibly recognized as an act of arguing.

In the case of acts of inferring, from a logical point of view it is in principle possible to assess if the step from premises to conclusion has been made in accordance with some rule. Alternatively, it is also possible to assess whether correctness is transferred from reason to claim. This assessment can be accomplished without attributing any further act to the agent. My intuition is that what we have here is a process, not an action performed, where there are no conditions of pragmatically correct performance that should be taken into account, and on which it would depend that the act of inferring is such an act.

## **2. Speech as an Inferential Activity**

The idea that inferring is an essential mechanism in the interpretation of utterances is an explanatory hypothesis widely held in neo-Gricean pragmatics. Communication is also a rational activity, in that it requires from the speaker to choose the most promising means for her to convey her communicative intentions to a hearer. As is well known, Grice defined the notion of speaker's meaning as a complex, reflexive intention, in which the speaker has the intention to induce an attitude in their audience, together with the intention that her first intention be recognized by the audience, and the further intention that the recognition of the first intention be in part the reason that the audience has to adopt the purported attitude.



When Grice states the third clause in his definition of speaker's meaning, he writes, "*U* intended the fulfillment of the intention mentioned in (2) to be at least in part *A*'s reason for fulfilling the intention mentioned in (1)" (Grice, 1969, p. 153). The speaker, *U* had the intention that the recognition of her first intention, namely, to induce an attitude in the audience *A* were, "at least in part", the reason *A* has to have the attitude. Grice does not clarify the notion of reason, or of "having a reason" that he is assuming in the quoted essay. As it stands, the notion seems to require from the audience an explicit awareness of the speaker's intentions for her utterance to be successfully communicated. And it fulfils a clear normative role, namely, that of making of the audience's induced attitude a rational, justified one.

Grice's emphasis on seeing communication as a rational activity also becomes manifest in his theory of implicatures. The capacity to carry out inferences plays, as is well known, an indispensable role in the particular case of conversational implicatures. In Grice's model of communication, the meaning of what is said (a semantic level of meaning) is supplemented with an additional level of implicatured meaning. Implicatures get communicated by virtue of an inferential process in which inferences are guided by the cooperative principle and its maxims. Although the type of inferential processes that allow hearers to grasp implicatured meaning do not need to be conscious, Grice claimed that conversational implicatures must be calculable, i.e. that it should be possible, at least in principle, to carry out an explicit reconstruction of the inferential process that covers the steps from the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the cooperative principle and any available information (linguistic and non-linguistic) to the communicated meaning. This reconstruction was not aimed at describing a real, psychological process. Grice's idea is that

The presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can in fact be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a CONVERSATIONAL implicature. (Grice, 1975, p. 50)

Here, the concept of argument that Grice takes into account is in line with his concept of inference (as seen in the preceding section). In his posthumous (2001), Grice considers the difficulty of connecting ordinary reasonings to patterns of complete argument which are valid by canonical standards, by which he means that a systematization by formal logic could be expected. He then distinguishes two concepts of rationality, those of "flat" and "variable" reason. The first one is manifested through a (non-degree-bearing) capacity of applying inferential rules that are transitions of acceptance in which transmissions of satisfactoriness are to be expected (including non-deductive cases). Variable reason is of the kind we can find exemplified in real life. Flat reason is not only manifested in variable reason, but provides an inferential base for determining the nature of variable reason itself.

It seems safe to interpret Grice as seeing flat reason as an abstract, unconditioned capacity and the source of the inferential rules that play the normative role of directives in our ordinary reasoning. And, since this flat reason manifests itself in variable reason, the latter is the kind of rationality that can be granted to our ordinary reasonings. If this interpretation is correct, then the requirement that conversational implicatures must be capable of being worked out in the form of an explicit argument is two-fold. Firstly, this methodological procedure can guarantee that the candidate implicatured meaning satisfies the directives of rationality in communication. It does so by showing how the steps from data to implicature meet forms of transition that are acceptable principles of inference, as assessed according to the requirements of flat reason. Secondly, Grice's point of view seems not merely that of the speaker, whose communicative intentions can be expected to be known for her, nor the point of view of a theoretician formulating an empirical hypothesis about the speaker's intentions. The possibility of an explicit reconstruction guarantees the rational availability of the intended implicature for the audience. It is thus the audience's point of view, together with the assumption that speaker and audience share a common rationality, what makes the communication of implicatures possible. Flat reason, and variable reason understood as a manifestation of the former, guarantee that the same standards are available for speaker and audience.

Grice sets the requirement of explicit calculability only for conversational implicatures. It is worth remembering that he considered linguistic meaning to be a standardization or conventionalization of communicative intentions, and took the linguistic meaning of a sentence to express a complete proposition with complete truth conditions. In contrast to some recent neo-Gricean views in contemporary pragmatics, he did not endorse the view that has been stated as the thesis of underdeterminacy of linguistic meaning. According to this thesis, the linguistically encoded meaning of an utterance inevitably underdetermines its explicitly communicated propositional content (see, e.g., Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Bezuidenhout, 1997; Carston, 2002; Recanati, 2004). For Grice, and from an abstracted point of view, the semantic meaning of what is said by uttering a sentence was to be equated with the truth conditions of the sentence, and these truth conditions were also supposed to be linguistically codified. Any additional non-truth-functional meaning would be communicated meaning and should thus be obtained in the form of implicatures. The level of pragmatic, implicatured meaning includes not only conversational, but also conventional implicatures. In this latter case, there is a conventionalization of meaning as linked to certain expressions, but this meaning does not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance and is seen by Grice as pragmatic. All this should allow us here a generalization: the requirement according to which it must be, in principle, possible to recover the meaning of an utterance by means of a rational reconstruction (by working out an argument, in the sense above) must be applicable to the complete meaning of the uttered sentence, both to its semantic and pragmatic levels. Semantic meaning and logical form are guided by linguistic codification (and are

thus so susceptible of reconstruction); pragmatic, communicated meaning (implicatured meaning) is susceptible of being worked out, in the form of an explicit inference.<sup>11</sup>

Other approaches in neo-Gricean pragmatics have suspended this requirement in what concerns the level of semantic meaning, termed what is said or explicature. A common idea in these theories is that the recovery of the content of an utterance in context involves additional pragmatic processes of conceptual enrichment, which allow the interpreter to obtain a complete representation of the logical form of the speaker's utterance. Success in communication depends on the interpreter's being able to sufficiently grasp by these means the speaker's communicative intentions. It is commonly held that certain processes are associative, heuristic and non-inferential, even if there is disagreement as to what components are recovered in this form. Yet, in order for these different proposals to give plausibility to their hypotheses, an important methodological resource is that of explicitly reconstructing in theoretical terminology a plausible inferential path from the explicit information available (linguistic and non-linguistic) to the purported complete meaning of the utterance.

Even if there are empirical research and solid arguments giving support to the view of neo-Gricean pragmatics as an empirical, psychological theory of utterance interpretation, my point here is that Grice's approach was not empirical and psychological, but analytic and philosophical.<sup>12</sup> He aimed at providing a rational representation of meaning in communication, under the assumption that communication must be seen as a rational activity and also as a cooperative one, inasmuch as it is orientated to goals. In my view, Grice's tenet that communication is an inferential activity cannot be detached from his core assumption that commu-

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<sup>11</sup> In my view, Grice considered it safe to assume that the meaning of what is said is given with the linguistic codification of the uttered words (i.e. certain linguistic conventions), together with a determination of the referents of referential expressions, and the time and place of the utterance (cf. Neale, 1992, p. 520). Neale also explains that when the sentence uttered is in the indicative mood, "what is said will be straightforwardly truth-conditional". And, where the sentence is in the imperative or interrogative mood, what is said "will be systematically related to the truth conditions of what U would have said, in the same context, by uttering the indicative counterpart" (Neale 1992, p. 521). This does not entail that there cannot also be linguistically conventionalized meaning that is pragmatic, as is the case of conventional implicatures. Conventional implicatures do not contribute to the truth-functional meaning of what is said, and thus belong to the pragmatic level of meaning.

<sup>12</sup> According to Carston (2005), three different general tendencies can be distinguished in contemporary pragmatics. Those following Grice see it as a philosophical project; other views concentrate on its interaction with grammar; finally, cognitive pragmatics focuses on an empirical psychological theory of utterance interpretation (she refers to them as the Gricean, neo-Gricean and relevance-theoric). Here I am focusing on the first and third projects, since, as far as I know, it is here that an appeal to inferential processes plays a main role.

nication is a manifestation of reason and hence, communicated meaning must be capable of being explicitly represented by means of assessable inferences.

The discussion so far suggests a hypothesis that aims to relate utterances in context, communicatively used, with the inferential character of pragmatic processing. A tentative formulation would be the following.

- (H1) *Hypothesis 1.* Communication in speech is an inferential activity to the extent that it is calculable, i.e., to the extent that it is, in principle, possible to recover the pragmatic meaning of an utterance in context by means of a series of explicit inferences—and eventually, by means of an argument justifying that the corresponding meaning be ascribed to the utterance.

But notice that this explicit, rational reconstruction does not need to have psychological realization in the interactants' minds. It fulfils a normative role, that of justifying the assignment of a certain pragmatic meaning to the utterance. Moreover, it allows us to see the interlocutors as rational and as competent in deploying this rationality in their speech and action. I have suggested that this perspective is not merely that of an individual speaker who intends to convey their communicative intentions, but that of an audience which interprets the speaker's utterance with the help of a common rational capability. The explicitation of the pragmatic meaning of an utterance in context, its explicit recovering by means of a reconstructed inferential process is not a representation of the speaker's cognitive context, or that of the audience. This methodological requirement situates the recovering of the speaker's meaning in the interpersonal and social context of what can be linguistically explicitated and normatively assessed by means of explicit reasoning and argumentation.

### 3. The Argumentative Nature of Language and of Discourse<sup>13</sup>

Hypothesis 1 would seem to be questioned, in a straightforward way, by other theoretic models dealing with pragmatic meaning and linguistic communication. Notably, inferentialism contends that a sentence's meaning can be accounted for by considering its inferential relations with other sentences. Another relevant theoretical view that can be seen as against H1 is the theory of argumentation within language.<sup>14</sup> My aim in this section is to critically consider some of the

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<sup>13</sup> A terminological precision is needed here. In linguistic pragmatics, discourse is the process of meaning-creation and interaction, either in writing or speech (cf. McCarthy, 2001, p. 96). It is thus a notion belonging to the pragmatics of language. Although my discussion takes discourse, particularly in speech, as its target, the consideration that the semantic level of language is argumentative in its very nature has import on my own views and I also address this perspective.

<sup>14</sup> The reason why the two theoretical views here considered can seem in conflict with hypothesis 1 is that it does not accord a constitutive role to the inferences that lead to the ascription of a particular meaning to an utterance. As already stated, these inferences are

main ideas in each model, in order to suggest in the next section an alternative view of pragmatic meaning and linguistic communication that does not need to endorse the idea that speech and language are argumentative in nature.

In the version of inferentialism due to Brandom (1994; 2000), a sentence's inferential relations are bestowed by the agents' normative attitudes or commitments (and entitlement to those commitments) in the practice of giving and asking for reasons, i.e. of making assertions and challenging or evaluating the assertions of others. Assertions are the minimal units of language for which we can take responsibility within this practice. The inferential relations that result can thus be seen as conferred by the very practice of giving and asking for reasons. Moreover, the semantic content of a sentence is itself the product of its inferential relations. Propositions are what can serve as premises and conclusions of inferences, which means that they stand in need of reasons. Brandom contends that it is by virtue of their use within this practice that sentences acquire their semantic contents, as resulting from the inferential relations in which those sentences stand.

Brandom's normative pragmatics gives to social practices, notably to the discursive practice of giving and asking for reasons a constitutive value in the institution of semantic content. The representational properties of semantic content are explained as consequences of the practice of inferring, which is seen as essentially social. In this sense, the traditional representational vocabulary has an expressive role, namely, that of making inferential relations explicit in virtue of the way in which it figures in *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitudes. Brandom aims to so account for the objectivity of concepts, inasmuch as the representational vocabulary (words like "of", "about", "represent") specifies the particular inferential structure that the practice of giving and asking for reasons must have in order for this practice to institute norms of application that answer to the facts.

This form of inferentialism thus equates semantic content with inferential import, which in turn must be seen as instituted by the social practices of arguing and inferring. It represents a powerful proposal in setting a notion of semantic meaning that results from those practices. Notwithstanding this, there are, I think, two points that raise doubts as to Brandom's theoretical success. The first one concerns the perspectival character of asserting. The second is related to the pre-eminent role played by assertions with respect to other types of speech acts.

Regarding the first point, Brandom claims that the game of giving and asking for reasons has a perspectival nature in a double sense. On the one hand, the "score" of commitments and entitlements corresponding to each interlocutor is socially kept and, given that everyone can have non-inferentially acquired commitments and entitlements corresponding to different observable situations, no two interlocutors will have exactly the same beliefs or acknowledge exactly the same commitments, and thus the same score cannot be attributed to each of

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seen as rational reconstructions that, as such, legitimize or justify the corresponding ascription, but do not constitute meaning as such.

them. On the other hand, scores are also kept by each interlocutor, so that part of the activity of giving and asking for reasons consists in keeping track of the commitments and entitlements of other interlocutors. Brandom writes, "What *C* is committed to according to *A* may be quite different, not only from what *D* is committed to according to *A*, but also from what *C* is committed to according to *B*" (Brandom, 1994, p. 185). As a result, a sentence's inferential relations are also ultimately relative to each interlocutor's perspective. This perspectival character of the practice of giving and asking for reasons raises doubts as to its epistemic efficiency. Even if a common structure is accorded to the practice, in Brandom's account there seems to be no normative requirement which is independent of the interlocutors' perspectives and with which these must comply. Nor is it apparent how an argumentative exchange should help the interlocutors to agree on a common conclusion, given the irreducibly perspectival character of their respective ascriptions of commitments. Since the propositional content of a claim or commitment can be specified only "from some point of view" (Brandom, 1994, p. 197), and it would be different for different interlocutors occupying different perspectives, its epistemic import is at stake.

The second point that raises doubts concerns the pre-eminent role assigned to assertion and the subordination to it of other possible types of speech acts. Brandom's normative pragmatics accounts for different speech acts in terms of how the corresponding performances affect the commitments (and entitlements to those commitments) acknowledged or otherwise acquired by those who perform the speech acts. But, at the same time, he writes, "Performances count as propositionally contentful in virtue of their relation to a core class of speech acts that have the pragmatic significance of claims or assertions" (1994, p. 629). In my view, this form of subordination, which is entirely coherent with the inferential role semantics that Brandom has put forward, cannot do justice to the concept of speech act *qua* illocution that originates from Austin (1962). Within this latter framework, the felicity conditions for the correct performance of illocutionary acts must be kept apart from the semantic dimension of analysis of those acts. Although acts of asserting can bring about certain obligations and rights related to their justification and assessment, and thus to perform them can give rise to entering the game of giving and asking for reasons, this possibility also affects other types of speech act. And conversely, the correct performance of an illocution different from an assertion does not necessarily seem to be in a constitutive dependency with the assertive speech acts with which it could be related; this performance necessarily depends on the set of (pragmatic) correctness conditions which make of the speech act the illocution it is, as these conditions are socially known or interpersonally acknowledged. In the next section, I suggest the idea that speech acts bring about certain obligations and rights which have a dialectical character; but I think that this fact cannot give enough support to the thesis that Brandom defends.

Another theoretical view seemingly in conflict with Hypothesis 1 is the theory of argumentation in language set forth by Anscombe and Ducrot (1976; 1988). According to these authors, sentences (and not merely the utterance of

those sentences) have argumentative connections with each other that cannot be seen as inferred (in a formal-logical way) from their informative contents. They contend that such argumentative relations have to be seen as a “brute fact” within language (*langue*), not derived from its use. The semantic value of a sentence consists in the sentence’s putting forward and imposing certain argumentative viewpoints. This thesis finds support by showing how the meaning of words constrains the dynamics of discourse and how a fact can be understood in different ways depending on the linguistic formulation chosen to communicate it. In a more detailed way, it is alleged that the semantic value of a sentence is distributed in asserted value and presupposed value, which means that an assertion of the sentence conveys pieces of information that can be either asserted or presupposed. According to Anscombe and Ducrot, both values are argumentative, in that they introduce certain argumentative constrictions by allowing or prohibiting certain types of conclusion.

It is worth considering some examples in order to have a clear idea of the theoretical tenets in play. In the sentence

1. Je pars demain, puisque/car tu dois tout savoir [I am leaving tomorrow, since you need to know everything] (Anscombe, Ducrot 1976, p. 7)

the connective *puisque* (alternatively, *car*) imposes a point of view according to which the second part of the sentence, “tu dois tout savoir”, must be seen as informing of the reason that explains the first part of the sentence. Given that it is not possible to make sense of the explicitly asserted sentence, “Je pars demain”, as being the fact that is explained by means of “tu dois tout savoir”, it must be inferred that there is a presupposed content, namely, a semantic representation of the act that the speaker is performing, “Je t’annonce que” (I announce to you that), which the second part of the sentence explains:

- 1’ (Je t’annonce que) Je pars demain, puisque/car tu dois tout savoir [(I announce to you that) I am leaving tomorrow, since you need to know everything].

A second example concerns the comparative expressions *aussi... que* [as... as] and *le/la même* [the same]. Let’s consider

2. Pierre est aussi grand que Marie [Pierre is as tall as Marie].
3. Pierre est de la même taille que Marie [Pierre is the same height as Marie] (Anscombe, Ducrot 1976, p. 10).

Here, the authors say that the two sentences are *quasi*-synonyms. But their negations do not have the same behaviour. Compare:

- 2' Pierre n'est pas aussie grand que Marie [Pierre is not as tall as Marie]  
(meaning: Pierre is shorter than Marie);
- 3' Pierre n'est pas de la même taille que Marie [Pierre is not the same height  
as Marie] (meaning: Pierre is either taller or shorter than Marie).

The semantic difference between both expressions, *aussi... que* and *le/la même*, affects the informative content in the negative construction, but not in the affirmative one. This difference determines the conclusions that are logically pertinent in each case.

In general, the authors claim that the discursive articulation between an argument-sentence and a conclusion-sentence is always made effective by virtue of general principles that they term *topoi*, which cannot be seen as formal, deductive principles of inference. They clarify this last point by explaining that, if from a sentence *A* another sentence *B* follows, it is not because *A* points out to a fact *F*, *B* to a fact *G*, and the existence of *F* makes *G* unavoidable. Rather, it is because sentence *A* presents fact *F* in such a way as to make legitimate the application of a *topos* (or of a chain of *topoi*) leading to a sentence *B* in which a linguistic casing for fact *G* can be discerned. The general thesis states then that the meaning of a sentence is the set of *topoi* whose application is authorized by the sentence in the very moment of its utterance. Whenever a speaker chooses to utter a sentence (rather than another), she is choosing the exploitation of certain *topoi* (and not others). In this sense, the semantic value of a sentence consists in its imposition of certain argumentative points of view before the facts (cf. Anscombe, Ducrot, 1994, p. 207; 1988, Chap. v, Sec. 4).

It seems to me that, from a more overarching perspective, some of the “brute facts” of language that the theory of argumentation within language is studying could be analysed in alternative theoretic terms, e.g. as conventional implicatures (in the terminology of Grice, 1975) or even implicatures (see Bach, 1999). Some others, provided that the corresponding expressions contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance, would be taken to be part of the meaning of what is said or explicature (in neo-Gricean pragmatics). My interest here is not to proceed to such a discussion, but to take at its face value Anscombe and Ducrot's idea that their theory captures an argumentative value which is already present in language. Contrary to Brandom's normative pragmatics, here the origins of those values cannot be traced back to the use of language, but are located at the semantic level of meaning and have to be seen as primitive data. In Brandom's theory, the inferential contribution of certain expressions (including the logical connectives) is a consequence of the material inferences<sup>15</sup> that are socially attributed or

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<sup>15</sup> The notion of material inference, as developed by Brandom, stems from Sellars (1953). In opposition to formal inferences, which are a function of the syntactic structure of language, material inferences do not depend only on syntactic structure, but are based on internal conceptual relations. A well-known example is the inference from “It is raining”



otherwise acknowledged in the practice of giving and asking for reasons. As we have seen, this idea generalizes to a notion of meaning as the content that results from the contribution made by expressions to the inferential relations of the sentences in which they occur. The theory of argumentation within language proceeds in the opposite direction. Here, the argumentative relations that an utterance of a sentence may have with others are constrained by the argumentative value of the sentence used and of the words that compose that sentence.

In the case of Brandom's inferentialism, I have suggested that the theory unduly extends certain conditions characterizing the speech act of assertion to other speech acts. In Anscombe and Ducrot's theory, what seems to underlie their proposal is a reluctance to see the use of language as conferring meaning, together with an assignment of meaningfulness to the term "argumentative" that places the notion at the semantic level. The authors refuse to use the term "inferential" because they take it to refer to formal-deductive inferences. Yet it seems to me that, taking into account the wider notion of inference we have considered above, what Anscombe and Ducrot are aiming at is a notion of inferential import that is codified in language and can thus be seen as part of the conventional meaning of words and sentences. But I think we should resist the idea that this conventional meaning is argumentative in a strict sense.

If argumentation is seen as a communicative activity, as I have been endorsing here, then only in discourse, either in speech or written form, can we find acts of arguing. For only in the activity of using language do we adduce reasons in support of a claim, draw a conclusion, or otherwise object, criticize and oppose an argument, etc. Moreover, from the perspective introduced by Hypothesis 1, any consideration whatsoever about the inferential or argumentative character of our sentences, assertions and speech acts is a consideration on whether and how the corresponding relationships should be reconstructed. In my view, this type of reconstruction is guided, in its turn, by an effort to understand and justify or assess our speech actions.

My suggestion is that both Hypothesis 1 and the above considerations can find articulation and support in an approach to discourse that takes into account its normative dimension. In the next section, my aim is to make explicit the main features of such an approach. In so doing, I shall be assuming that a piece of written discourse can also be analysed in the terminology of speech acts, and, therefore, that the same theses can be applied to it.

#### 4. The Normative Dimension of Speech

By referring to the normative dimension of speech, I am pointing to the way in which our illocutions bring about certain obligations and commitments, entailments and rights, and similar normative stances. In this concern, I am endors-

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to "The streets will be wet". It is the web of material inferences in which a word or expression is involved in that determines its meaning.

ing the Austinian approach to speech act theory that has been put forward by Sbisà (2002; 2006; 2009). According to this view, speech acts can be characterized by saying how they change the social and interpersonal context of the interlocutors. These changes affect the interlocutors' normative positions by modifying certain obligations, responsibilities and commitments; as well as rights, authorizations and licenses, as these are socially recognized and/or mutually ascribed.<sup>16</sup> Sbisà contends that these changes in the interlocutors' normative positions can only be effected if there is interpersonal or social recognition of the fact that they have been produced. In this sense, the effects can be seen as conventional. She suggests that in this way, Austin's (1962) original idea that there are conventional procedures explanatory of the illocutionary force of speech acts and of their conventional effects can be generalized to ordinary, non-institutional speech.

The Austinian framework outlined above<sup>17</sup> can be applied to the case of assertion in those cases in which asserting is an illocution (pre-eminently, a verdictive speech act, in Austin's terminology).<sup>18</sup> This is in general the case of making a claim, and also in particular that of adducing reasons. In illocutionary acts of asserting, the speaker presents herself as cognitively competent and incurs the obligation to give the reasons that could support her claim, if and when this is required by her interlocutors. Correspondingly, her interlocutors acquire the right to ask for justification, express doubts and objections, or otherwise accept the assertion. Whenever they recognize and accept the speaker's assertion, they become entitled to make other assertions (and possibly other speech acts as well) that are based on or supported by the former. What I would like to highlight here is that acts of asserting introduce certain obligations and rights (and other similar normative positions) that have a dialectical character. By this I mean that these obligations and rights are fulfilled and exercised as new moves in the argumentative dialogue. They comprise the obligation to justify, the right to critically question the assertion, and also the authorization to other assertions that are supported by it.

Assertion is not the only illocutionary act that brings about dialectical obligations and rights. Illocutions in general can be described by saying how they change the normative stances of the interlocutors, and some of these are, in my view, dialectical rights and duties. For example, acts of advocacy (which belong to the group of exercitives) presuppose some form of authority or authorization on the part of the speaker and assign to the interlocutors the right to accept or otherwise question this presupposition, as well as to accept or question the rea-

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Witek's (2015), for an accurate presentation and defence of this approach. Witek puts forward an original view which emphasizes the interactional effects of speech, contending that the force of an illocution depends on what counts as its interactional effect (see also Witek, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> I have also tried to present and develop this framework in former works, by applying it to presumptions, the dynamics of discourse and speech acts in deliberation (Corredor, 2017; 2019; 2020).

<sup>18</sup> My precaution here is related to the possibility of using some speech acts of the assertive family to perform a different act from that of a verdictive, e.g., in narrative fiction.

sons given in support of the advocated case (a person, organization, idea, etc.). Here, certain dialectical rights are in force. But there are other cases of exercitives where the effected changes do not need to have a dialectical character. For example, in cases of institutional acts such as a judicial sentence or an arbitral decision, provided the speaker's authority is granted, the conventional effect of the illocution is related to assigning (or cancelling) rights or obligations to other interactants. But this effect does not need to be seen as dialectical, as allowing or requiring a new argumentative move. In commissive acts, such as a promise, the Austinian approach takes it that they presuppose the recognized capacity to perform the act on the part of the speaker; moreover, they bring about the speaker's commitment or obligation to comply with her promise, and assign to the interlocutors the right to a legitimate expectation that the promise will be fulfilled. Here again, the obligations and rights brought about by the performance of the illocution need not be seen as dialectical.

Notwithstanding this, to the extent that our illocutions are recognized as introducing changes in the normative positions of the interlocutors, it is possible for those interlocutors to assess how the obligations and rights so introduced are fulfilled. Moreover, it becomes legitimate to ask the speaker for justification, before granting their recognition. In this way, the normative dimension of speech makes possible a dialectical practice of justification and assessment of our illocutionary acts. In my view, this does not entail that speech has an argumentative nature. But it seems to me right to say that illocutions are performed in virtue of the recognition, social or interpersonal, of certain duties and rights, some of them of a dialectical character.

The above considerations give support to a second hypothesis, which would complement the first one (H1). It could be formulated as follows.

(H2) *Hypothesis 2.* The normative positions that we recognize and assign each other with our speech acts comprise obligations and rights of a dialectical character. They also make possible a dialectical practice of justification and assessment of our speech acts.

This normativity of speech does not bring with it, however, that the semantic contents or pragmatic meaning of our utterances have an inferential or argumentative nature.

If H2 is correct, then we should resist the idea that it is the inferential or argumentative potential of a sentence what yields its semantic meaning.<sup>19</sup>

In the approach to speech acts endorsed here, the idea that discourse, in writing or speech, is essentially argumentative can be clarified by taking into account the conventional effects and conditions of correct performance that make of an illocution the illocution it is. In the particular case of acts of asserting, the Austinian approach makes explicit the justificatory obligation undertaken by the

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<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this clarification.

speaker and the corresponding dialectical rights acquired by her interlocutors. Other forms of illocution also comprise rights and duties of a dialectical character, as pointed out above. Moreover, the fact that our speech acts are subject to conditions of correctness and in need of recognition allows for their justification and critical assessment. But from that it does not follow that argumentation is the basis of meaning either at the semantic or pragmatic level.

## 5. Conclusion

I have examined some relevant proposals in contemporary pragmatics and in the semantics of language in order to consider two theses that relate language and communication to inference and argumentation. According to the Gricean framework, communication is an inferential activity. I have tried to clarify the notion of inference that can be originally attributed to Grice, and explored its possible applicability to the communication of meaning. I have also taken into account the constitutive role that acts of giving and asking for reasons play in normative pragmatics. Finally, I have studied the main thesis put forward by the theory of argumentation within language, according to which the semantic import of words and sentences is in part an argumentative value. In my discussion, I have argued for a twofold hypothesis. Firstly, what makes of communication an inferential activity is given with its calculability, i.e. with the possibility to recover the pragmatic meaning of utterances by reconstructing a series of inferences or an explicit reasoning. In this light, arguing is a practice of adducing and evaluating the reasons that justify (or could justify) what is communicated. Secondly, the normative stances that we recognise and assign to each other with our speech acts comprise obligations and rights of a dialectical character. However, I have suggested that this fact does not presuppose or entail an inferential or argumentative nature of speech.

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