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PROMISE: SEMANTIC, COMMUNICATIVE AND TEMPORAL ASPECTS

Abstract

The article touches upon different aspects of promise – as a speech act, as a means of communication. The theme of promise is analysed in its relation to various areas of philosophical studies: the problem of the subject’s identity, the problem of society as a system of interpersonal interactions, the problem of performative utterances and etc. The methodological basis includes primarily the speech act theory developed by J. Austin and J. Searle’s speech-act theory, genetically related to it. Interpretation of promise in its ontological aspect is considered mainly by comparing the views of F. Nietzsche, J. Derrida and P. Ricoeur.

Keywords: performative, perlocution, communication, iteration, presence.

Introduction

Although understanding the word “promise” can hardly cause difficulty in the framework of ordinary language practice, its strict meaning and most adequate linguistic formulation have been and remain the cause of heated discussions within the framework of the philosophy of language and beyond.

We will begin our study by defining the approximate external semantic boundaries of the concept of “promise”, considering, for example, how it differs (and whether or not it differs at all) from semantically close to its “intention”, “obligation”, a mere notification about future action (“I will come” and “I promise I will come”), etc. Further, we will try to analyse promise as a type of social connection created by it, that is, the

communicative aspect of promise. Finally, we will take a look at a promise from the point of view of its temporal organisation – to what extent it corresponds to different ideas about the impermanence and constancy of the world.

A starting point and, at the same time, a solid foundation for all reflections on the classification of speech acts (which “promise” in the context of speech practice undoubtedly is) can be the work by J. Austin (1962) “How to Do Things with Words”. The basic principle of Austin’s theory is the division of speech acts into performatives (mandatory linguistic elements of various actions) and constative (descriptions of one or another state of affairs). Being an element of action, a performative is evaluated by action criteria; that is, it can be either successful or unsuccessful. Being a description, a constative may be true or

false. With this division, a statement with the verb “promise” can be performative if the verb is used in the first person and the present tense: “I promise”.

Theoretical Framework Promise in the Framework of the Speech Acts Theory

Austin (1962, pp. 9, 32) attributed the “awe-inspiring” performative “I promise” to the so-called “explicit performatives”, that is, performatives containing a highly significant and unambiguous expression, which distinguishes them from both implicit (not clearly defined) and primary performatives (or performatives in their simplest grammatical form, for example, “I will come” instead of “I promise to come”). Austin (1962, p. 69) explains the difference between the latter and promise as follows: the phrase “I will come” can be interpreted as “I promise to come” (explicit) and as “I am going to come” (message of intention).

Further, in his classification of performative acts, Austin (1962, p. 156) attributes promise to the so-called commissive, that is, statements, the main feature of which is the commitment of the speaker to a certain course of action. Austin attributed to this class a considerably large group of performative verbs, some of which can be attributed to “intentions” (plan, intend, purpose, etc.) and some to “obligations” (vow, swear, contract, guarantee, engage, dedicate myself to, etc.). Austin’s theory, while not defining a certain performative utterance, allowed, nevertheless, to delineate its semantic boundaries by incorporating it into narrowing semantic classes of performatives. Thus, promise in Austin’s theory is characterised as a statement-action (performative), having a clear and unambiguous nature (explicit performative), and connecting the speaker with a certain line of conduct (commissive).

The class of commissives, including a promise, is distinguished in the classification of speech acts by J. Searle (1976) as well. However, Searle excludes from this group the verbs of intent and obligation, which were “close relatives”

of promise in Austin’s model. At the same time, in Searle’s interpretation, the promise becomes closer to request, which he includes in the group of “directives” suggested by him.

The class of commissives, including a promise, also remains in the taxonomy of speech acts developed by K. Bach and R. M. Harnish (1979). However, according to it, promises are in the greatest semantic proximity to “offers”. Promises are acts of obligating oneself, while offers are proposals to obligate oneself (Bach & Harnish, 1979). Both of these speech acts constitute, according to Bach and Harnish, the class of commissives. At the same time, a promise is a kind of generalising concept in relation to several speech acts, such as “contracting” and “betting”. In addition, in the Bach-Harnish classification, there are several “hybrid acts”, such as swearing, guaranteeing, inviting, etc., which are also related to promises (Bach & Harnish, 1979, p. 41).

Some works that do not suggest their own classification of speech acts contain, nevertheless, a number of clarifications regarding promise concerning its relationship with semantically close speech acts, that is, having a classification character. Thus, from the point of view of A. Melden (1956), promises should be distinguished from concluding contracts and other similar actions of social cooperation since the latter imply mutual obligations. He also believes that promise should be distinguished from obligation as such, since otherwise, “the statement ‘I am obligated because I promised’ becomes tautological” (Melden, 1956, p. 51). P. Árdal (1968) has a similar point of view. In his opinion, “Austin is wrong to tie promising more closely to obligation than to the expression of intention” (Árdal, 1968, p. 231). In confirmation of his thought, Árdal (1968, p. 227) compares the statement “I promised, but I am not obliged to”, in which there is no logical contradiction, with the statement “I promised, but I do not intend to”, where it is undoubtedly present. This relation of promise to statements of intent is also characterised by a certain duality. Promise definitely implies a certain intention of the speaker, but this intention

cannot be declared in it (Árdal, 1968, p. 227). This was noted by Austin; the primary performative “I will come” can be interpreted both as an explicit (“I promise to come”) and an implicit (“I intend to come”). Since the second statement characterises one’s intention at the moment and does not refer to a future event, Searle (1989) justifiably derives such statements from a number of performatives, relating them to descriptions of a certain state of affairs.

However, the relation of primary and explicit performatives (presented by Austin as concretisation and, in a certain sense, amplification of the first by the second) is interpreted by some authors in a different, to a certain extent, even opposite sense: as the bringing into the primary performative of additional reflective meaning “I promise”, possessing the meaning of self-reference (“I promise” is considered in this case as an auto characteristic of a speech act) (Johansson, 2003; Corredor, 2009).

Finally, in some works, it is suggested to consider promise as a type of speech act of perlocution (to which Austin referred actions under a general attribute “to try,” that is, situations of persuasion, threat, etc.). A number of authors believe that even though characterising promise as an illocution (Austin’s term for verbal actions (gift, commitment, etc.)), Austin sometimes gave it a perlocutionary meaning (Barker, 1972; Munro, 2013).

Now, what can be said about promise on the basis of a brief review of the various classifications of speech acts that contain it? The fact that it does not fully correspond to the conclusion of contracts (which are too formal and imply bilateral obligations) and obligations as such (which are often impersonal in nature and usually are not voluntary). Vows and oaths seem too similar to promises, but in them, the “promise aspect” is mixed with something different. It is often not so much a matter of an action that has a specific addressee but rather obtaining a new social status. The promise and proposal are not completely identical. In the latter, the “temporary gap” that is usually present in a promise is less noticeable.

Promise definitely has a “perlocutionary force”, that is, the force of influence on the situation and particularly on the recipient of the promise. However, it also has a “reflexive force” determining the speaker themselves. Here, we should perhaps return to the general classification of speech acts, for example, Austin’s classification, in order to emphasise a circumstance that seems to have not received much attention. With the exception of promise, almost all speech acts are either defined by social conditions (for verdicts, orders, naming, etc., an appropriate status is required) or appeal to external reality (“I state that my opinion corresponds to reality”, “I admire what is worth admiration”, etc.). In all these cases, the “self” of the speaker seems to merge with something greater and, in a certain sense, is diminished, while in promise, it is, in a certain sense, stated. A promise is primarily characterised by the property of being “non-transferable” to another person, which some authors consider the main property of performatives: “the performative utterances are non-transferable, and the constatives are transferable” (Jacobsen, 1971, p. 359). However, if so, then what exactly gives promise to such a property? To answer this question, one needs to look at a promise from the point of view of its communicative function.

Promise as Communication

In his classification of possible “failures” in carrying out a performative act, Austin (1962, p. 22) mentions the type of failures arising from “incomprehension”, illustrating it again by the example of promise: “It is obviously necessary that to have promised I must normally (A) have been heard by someone, perhaps the promisee; (B) have been understood by him as promising”. However, he does not dwell on this in any detail, considering the performance act, first of all, from the point of view of its source (sincerity and authority of the speaker), as well as the observance of the relevant conventional procedures. Searle, who took Austin’s classification of mistakes and failures of performative action as a basis, turned

it into a list of conditions and rules of a successful speech act, paying much more attention to the comprehension of words and intentions of the speaker (in his example it is also someone making a promise). The first condition of a “successful promise”, according to Searle (1969, p. 57), is the condition of a “normal input and output”, combining both of the above-mentioned cases of Austin’s classification since by input and output, Searle understands a combination of intelligible speech and comprehension. Searle (1969) formulates nine conditions of a successful promise, of which the final two (the eighth and the ninth), summarising all the previous ones, determine the conditions for understanding a promise on the part of the recipient. Note that here the listener’s correct interpretation of the speaker’s intentions is considered rather than the meaning of spoken words. They are supposed to understand what a promise is and to know the language sufficiently (Searle, 1969, p. 60).

Obviously, the recipient of a promise in Searle’s understanding is also its interpreter, which significantly increases his communicative meaning. As K. Bach and R. Harnish (1992) noted, the explicit form of promise described in the “conditions” given by Searle actually likens a successful promise to successful communication. From their own point of view, a performative is a form of indirect speech when one communicative intention is identified by the audience through another (Bach & Harnish, 1979, p. 103).

Searle’s understanding of promise as a unidirectional action is also criticised by D. Barker (1972, p. 23), who believes that the fundamental and, at the same time, historically primary form of promise does not have a categorical form (“I promise to do it for you”) but a hypothetical one (“if you do this for me I will do that for you”). The hypothetical form of promise is considered by Barker to be the most common and natural as it creates conditions for the fulfilment of the promise, causing in the promise the expectation of reciprocal service. From Barker’s point of view, “categorical promising is odd because, in such promising situations, there is no point in

eliciting trust in the promise” (Barker, 1972, p. 27). In this regard, it is closer to a gift. If one understands promise based on its categorical form, as Barker believes, it remains unclear why the failure to fulfil a promise is evil, while the hypothetical interpretation of promise explains the evil of non-fulfilment by the deceived trust.

The expectations initiated by promise underlie the legal interpretation of promise by S. Stoljar (1988), who emphasises that the one making a promise does not just do what allows “to open the eyes of expectations, as a Shakespeare play puts it” (p. 193), but does it intentionally, that is, the recipient’s response is included in the intention of the one who promises (p. 203). At the same time, as Stoljar (1988, p. 194) says, “promises and expectations are logically distinct”: expectations can be caused merely by words of intent and, on the other hand, “empty promises” do not necessarily raise any expectations. Stoljar (1988) determines several rules for “serious” promises and promises that have legally binding force: the promise must match the capabilities of the promise maker; the failure to fulfil a promise, which did not directly depend on the personal forces of the promise maker still implies their responsibility (failure to fulfil a contract by the employees, etc.); the promise should relate to the future but not a distant one; the promise is to be desirable for the recipient. Stoljar (1988) attributes particular importance to the latter, which is also shared by Searle, because due to it, “a promise is thus significantly more than a communication of an intended act; only if the act is wanted can it give rise to the kind of expectations a promissory intention is meant to create” (p. 198).

Trust for the future declared by promise is considered by many authors as the main function of promise in social life: “The practice of promising is necessary in social life, in order that we may take it on trust that people’s future behaviour will be of a certain sort” (Árdal, 1968, p. 236). However, as Árdal notes, consistency can also come from the recipient (and in fact, this is probably more often the case), when, for ex-

ample, before leaving for France, one tells a friend: “I will bring you a bottle of liquor”, without considering this a promise and forgetting their words. However, on his return, when the friend asks, “Where is my bottle of liquor?” he “retroactively” turns the promise maker’s words into a promise (Árdal, 1968, p. 233). However, when the initiative to fulfil a promise comes from the promise maker, the promise to a larger extent preserves the nature of communicative interaction than, for example, an order, the unidirectional nature of which is much more pronounced (on this basis, in J. Habermas’s typology of communicative acts, an order is related to “weak” communicative acts and promise is related to the “strong” ones) (Nielsen, 2018). It is precise because of its bi-directionality, “bipartite nature” (Stoljar, 1988, p. 202) that promise, from the point of view of many authors, is at the bottom of sociality itself since “it is difficult to imagine a so-called ‘pre-promising’ (or a ‘non-promising’) society” (Stoljar, 1988, p. 204).

Promise and Time

Does the recipient of a promise really just pick up the intention that comes from who gives that promise? Is there no such thing as forced promises? Would such promises not be way more one-sided than orders? Where will their performative power be directed, and will they retain their ethical meaning? Austin casually mentions the case of such promise without going into its detailed consideration: “Little Willie’s anxious parent will say ‘Of course, he promises, don’t you, Willie?’ giving him a nudge, and little Willie just doesn’t vouchsafe. The point here is that he must do the promising himself by saying ‘I promise’, and his parent is going too fast in saying he promises” (Austin, 1970, p. 242). Certainly, in this situation, the child is not able to refuse the promise, and therefore, he does not have to promise. At the same time, almost for everyone, this is the primary experience of the promise and the words of Nietzsche, uttered, however, somewhat differently, are quite appro-

priate for his illustration. Nietzsche (1887, p. 49) speaks of the youth of mankind and not of man: “In this society, promises will be made; in this society, the object is to provide the promiser with a memory; in this society, so may we suspect, there will be full scope for hardness, cruelty, and pain”. Nietzsche’s interpretation of a person as “a great promise” (Nietzsche, 1887, p. 78; Nurgali, Assanov, Shashkina, Zhumabekov, & Kultursynova, 2018, p. 100) should obviously be interpreted in the sense of a “great obligation”, and then the adjective “promising” can show its threatening side to a person who is referred to in this way.

Now, does one have to keep their promises? Nietzsche’s answer is quite categorical: “No, there exist[s] no law, no obligation, of this kind; we have to become traitors, be unfaithful, again and again[,] abandon our ideals” (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 199). However, why is a promise – even being forced and responding to a certain kind of violence – so bad? Because Nietzsche (1966) answers, it cannot be fulfilled: the future will inevitably change everything – the recipient of the promise, the promise maker and what was promised – the sameness of the present and the future affirmed by the promise maker will not bring them anything except suffering and guilt. Therefore, one has to ask themselves “...whether these pains are necessarily attendant on a change in our convictions, or whether they do not proceed from an erroneous evaluation and point of view. ...man of convictions is not the man of scientific thought; he stands before us in the age of theoretical innocence and is a child, however, grown up he may be in other respects” (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 199).

Nietzsche’s idea that promise inevitably ends up in the gap that separates the present, and the future brings one to the problem that can be called “promise and time”. As will be shown below, Nietzsche’s idea of a time gap, creating the impossibility of a promise, is precisely the thought that is at the forefront of criticism of Austin’s performative theory by Jacques Derrida.

Derrida (1988b, p. 13) writes that Austin’s

concept of performative acts is “relatively new” because it connects the success of such acts not to the transfer of meaning (“the performative does not have its referent”) but with what Derrida (1988b, p. 13) calls “communicating a force through the impetus [impulsion] of a mark”. Such interpretation, which implies the presence of participants in performative communication, as well as their involvement in the situation of a communicative act (sincerity, the seriousness of intentions, understanding of what is happening), constantly presents Austin with the problem of distinguishing authentic performative communications from the imaginary ones. This task, according to Derrida (1988b), is deliberately unsolvable since there are not and cannot be any strict criteria for distinguishing sincerity from insincerity, seriousness from unfoundedness, understanding from misunderstanding, etc. The reason for this is “a rupture in presence” contained in any communication (Derrida, 1988b, p. 8), which makes communication participants opaque to each other. The most obvious example of such a gap is a letter in its everyday sense, a letter from someone to someone. As a means of communication, a letter, says Derrida (1988b), has two different and even opposite features: 1) it is preserved, even despite the death of the sender and the addressee, it remains as a letter, that is, it continues to be readable; 2) it gets separated from its context, in particular from the intentions of the writer, who literally “disappears” during the writing of the letter. This self-disappearance of the author is not just the vagueness of his intentions for the addressee or a random reader but also the obscurity of the intentions even for the author themselves at a subsequent time point; that is, it is not so much a communicative gap but rather a time one.

Nevertheless, Derrida (1988a) insists that a letter continues to remain structurally readable, reproducing certain rules or codes, that is, being, in the broad sense of the word, a quotation. Derrida (1988a) calls this feature of the persistence of the message contained in a letter its “iterability”. Responding to the criticism by Searle

(1977, p. 201), who thought that Derrida had “a simple confusion of iterability with permanence”, Derrida (1988a, p. 119) says that iteration is not just repeatability but “alterability of this same”.

Both features of a letter – iterability and discontinuity (which are essentially the same, since the first one means the possibility for the message to exist outside of any context, and the second one means the possibility of separation from the initial context) – are also applicable, according to Derrida’s logic, to the practice of conversational speech, making it fundamentally “grammatical”. In response to Searle’s criticism (according to which Derrida has in mind some “inner” intention of the author, whereas their letter or verbal message express their (author’s) intentions, “The sentences are, so to speak, fungible intentions” (Searle, 1977, p. 202) and can be understood by anyone who knows the language used by the sender) Derrida makes a “promise” (sincerely or ironically) to be “serious” in his analysis of Searle’s arguments and at the end of his long text, in which he repeatedly encourages himself “to be serious”, he sums up: “I promised (very) sincerely to be serious. Have I kept my promise?... I do not know if I was supposed to” (Derrida, 1988a, p. 107).

Similarly, with the help of the performative “promise”, Derrida (1988a) illustrates the gap between a message and its recipient, playing with a sign of promise as a source of good for the recipient. Suppose Derrida writes, “I promise to criticise each thesis of my opponent” (that is, Searle). According to Searle’s “Speech Acts”, this will not be a promise but a threat. But what if the opponent (subconsciously) wants to be criticised? “There would thus be two speech acts in a single utterance. How is this possible?” (Derrida, 1988a, p. 74).

Subsequently, Derrida (1988a) reinforced the thesis of the combination of promise and threat, making the future a source of this compound. The future, in fact, is where promises and expectations associated with it are directed. Derrida (1999, pp. 250-251) writes that there is a para-

doxical experience of the performative of the promise (but also of the threat at the heart of the promise) that organises every speech act, every other performative, and even every preverbal experience of the relation to the other; and, on the other hand, at the point of intersection with this threatening promise, the horizon of awaiting [attente] that informs our relationship to time - to the event, to that which happens [ce qui arrive], to the one who arrives [l'arrivant], and to the other.

In other words, Derrida, like Nietzsche earlier, associates the possibility of cancelling a promise or its distortion with the invasion of event time into the identity of “now” and “later” declared by promise. It is unforeseen events that force one to abandon themselves and give the same message the power to break with the context that generated it. It is exactly what forces one to abandon their old selves and gives the message identical “in itself” the force of a gap with the context from which it originated.

The controversy of Searle and Derrida concerning Austin’s theory became a very frequent subject of discussion among authors dealing with the problem of performatives. Some accepted Derrida’s arguments (Williams, 2014), while others took a rather neutral position, agreeing with Searle that Derrida dogmatised Austin’s theory (Alfino, 1991) according to his goals. They also wrote that the controversy between the two philosophers was far from being a model of academic correctness (Alfino, 1991). What is important is that by bringing together promise with its opposite, threat, Derrida clearly demonstrated that inherent in the promise was a “shadow of negativity”, as Ricoeur (2005, p. 10) called it.

Is promise able to oppose anything to this unpredictable eventfulness? Neither Nietzsche nor Derrida answer this question negatively – they both say “maybe”. Paul Ricoeur (2005, p. 130), in his urge “to celebrate the greatness of promises,” gives this “maybe” some weighting, but he puts promise on par with memory, testimony, and forgiveness, and only then – with communi-

cation or performativeness as such. In a “vector” sense, promise and memory are counter-directed, but in the sense of relation to something different in time, they are rather similar. Memory is not an area of one’s “self” where the past is stored – it will be more accurate to say that it is one’s ability to remain faithful to the past. This ability is always faced with its own negativity, with two partly opposing types of it – the threat of oblivion and the threat of traumatic memories.

Conclusion

One’s self-identity, says Ricoeur (2005), is formed precisely through confrontation and, at the same time, includes the negativity of memory and promise. Promise, according to Ricoeur (2005, p. 110), is a kind of memory directed to the future: if “with memory, the principal emphasis falls on sameness ... in promising, the prevalence of ipseity is so great that the promise can easily be referred to as the paradigm case of ipseity”. Testimony, Ricoeur (2005) continues, also acts as a guarantor of self-identity. It is a socially-oriented analogue of promise: a witness speaks in front of others as a kind of representative of some event in the past, and, at the same time, “the witness is then the one who promises to testify again” (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 131). Similarly, a pardon is a directed to the future promise not to remember, “freeing from bonds”, as Ricoeur says, “the retort to the irreversibility” (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 132), which “allows human action to ‘continue’” (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 131).

What unites memory, testimony and forgiveness, the elements of the semantic series, in which Ricoeur places promise as well? They are not so many actions (behavioural or speech) but rather positions, lines of coordinates that define a position in an ontological and, at the same time, axiological universe. Perhaps, this is that context, which, while avoiding definitions and classifications, entrusts the concept of promise, elusive for theoretical thinking, with semantic meaningfulness.

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