

Transubstantiation: Metaphor, Performative or both?

In the days prior to Christmas 2015, Dutch newspaper *Trouw* published an essay by writer Willem Jan Otten, about Joost van den Vondels play *Gijsbrecht van Amstel*. At some point in the essay, Otten writes the following about the ritual of the Eucharist:

‘During this ritual, the priest says: “Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you”. (...) This sort of utterance is called a ‘performative speech act’. The fact that God is present in a piece of bread is constituted by the sentences of the consecration.’¹

In this paper we will focus only on the following words from the liturgy, as quoted by Otten:

1. This is my body.²

Even during a holy meal, saying of a piece of bread that it is in fact your body seems blatantly absurd. How, then, can we explain the meaning and power of this utterance from the viewpoint of pragmatics? We will adopt three distinct approaches. First, we will determine whether (1) can indeed be viewed as a performative speech act, according to J.L. Austins definition(s) (1962: 5). In addition, we will briefly adopt a Gricean and finally a Relevance Theoretical approach to the metaphorical nature of (1).

¹ Otten, Willem Jan. ‘Een tak wordt de stok, een poppetje het Kind’. *Trouw*, ‘Letter & Geest’, December 19, 2015. The translation is my own.

² Unfortunately, due to the 1000-words limit of this paper, I have been forced to leave the rest of the citation out of my analysis for now. Then again, an analysis of these clauses would perhaps not be very interesting. For example, in the case of ‘take this, all of you, and eat of it’, the two imperatives have an obvious type of illocutionary force, namely that of a command, which means that, applying Austins terminology, we can categorize these as primary, exercitive performatives (1962: 154). Paraphrasing these as explicit performatives, then, would give us: ‘I command all of you to take this and to eat of it.’ As said, this conclusion is rather trivial, because, even when uttered by the *filius patris* himself, these words are no less an ordinary speech act than any other.

Starting with Austin, taking (1) at face value, it has the appearance of a basic (though false) constative. This would mean that the notion of illocutionary force does not play a role here, and that the utterance is definitely not a performative. However, we could rephrase (1) as follows:

2. (I announce/declare/proclaim/testify/affirm/swear etc.) this is my body.

Placing these performative verbs in the ‘first person present indicative active’ (ibid.: 60) in front of (1), turns the utterance into an explicit performative. However, we need to ask ourselves whether this is justified, i.e. whether (1) *necessarily* means (2), or if this is merely the case in some particular situations – and if so which ones. (1) is of course in itself a biblical sentence, spoken by Jesus Christ at the Holy Supper, and this sentence is in turn quoted by the priest during Mass. It seems that, for the sake of clarity, we need to highlight this distinction before we proceed. Thus, we identify two situations (*S*) in which (1) is uttered:

S1: Christ uttered (1) during the Holy Supper.

S2: The priest utters (1) in the Eucharist ritual, in order to re-enact *S1*.

In *S1*, it is quite likely that Christ never intended (1) to mean (2), but that he used these words metaphorically, in order to communicate a certain point, for example:

3. This is (a symbolic sign that refers to) my body.

Conversely, in *S2*, the priest utters (1) by means of consecration, and ‘to consecrate’ is a performative verb.³ When (1) is uttered by a priest in the context of the Mass, all the right conditions listed by Austin for the ‘happy’ functioning

³ ‘Consecrate’ is not on Austins list of performative verbs (ibid.: 152-162), but I would argue it is an exercitive, like ‘announce’ and ‘declare’.

of a performative' (ibid.: 14) are in place, so that (1) actually *does* mean (2).⁴ In fact, this is the whole point of the Eucharist ritual: the consecration of the host, validated by the dogma of the transubstantiation, constitutes that the bread becomes the body of Christ. Therefore, in all cases where the context of (1) is *S2*, (1) functions as a performative speech act. Schematically, this would give us:

S1: (1) means (3) = metaphor

S2: (1) means (2) = performative

Now let's take up the other two approaches of pragmatics suggested above.

From the perspective of Gricean pragmatics, we recognize that with (1) we are indeed dealing with a metaphor. Grice mentions metaphor briefly in 'Logic and Conversation', when he gives a number of examples of how speakers may flout the first maxim of Quality ('Do not say what you believe to be false'). With metaphor, he explains, 'the contradictory of what the speaker has made as it to say will, strictly speaking, be a truism; so it cannot be THAT that such a speaker is trying to get across' (1967:53). As we have seen, such a definition seems suitable in *S1*, since it is highly doubtful that Christ thought (1) was really true, and more likely that he meant it as (3). Furthermore, as was to be expected, Grice's definition of metaphor does not apply as neatly to (1) in *S2*, because there (1) *becomes* true by uttering the metaphor. We have here a perfect illustration of how Gricean and Austinian pragmatics are compatible: (1) shows how a speaker can flout a maxim by omitting information from (3), in order to speak metaphorically, which forms an utterance that, under the right conditions, can be used to perform an act, as in (2).

A third possible approach to (1) is that of Relevance Theory. Sperber and Wilson define metaphor as an utterance that entails 'a range of contextual effects which can be retained as weak or strong implicatures' and for which it can be said that 'the wider the range of potential implicatures (...), the more poetic the effect,

⁴ Obviously, the possessive 'my' in (1) does not refer to the priest, but to Christ. This is actually an important semantic issue, which I can, however, not discuss in this paper, due to the word limit.

the more creative the metaphor' (1995: 236). When we evaluate (1) as (3), it becomes clear that this is in fact a *highly* creative metaphor with many weak implicatures.⁵ This may partially explain why (1) has inspired Christians to participate in the Eucharist for at least twenty centuries.

In conclusion, we have seen that Willem Jan Otten was right in saying that the consecration of the host in the Eucharist ritual functions as a performative speech act. In addition, we have seen how Gricean and neo-Gricean pragmatics help to explain the profound meaningfulness of the bread-body metaphor.

References

Austin, J.L. (1962). *How To Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Grice, H.P. (1975). *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech acts*. Cole *et al.* "Logic and Conversation", pp. 41-58. New York: Academic Press.

Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson (1995). *Relevance* (2nd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

⁵ Some intuitive examples of weak implicatures contained in the metaphor 'This (piece of bread) is my body' are: 'I am here for you', 'I am at your service', 'If you take me I will sustain you', 'I am essential for your well-being', 'I can feed your hunger', 'I can be distributed among many people', 'I am your humble servant', 'I am silent but helpful', 'I am innocent yet important' etc.

Argumentation Theory

(to be included in chapter 5 of Siobhan Chapmans book *Pragmatics*)

In the mid-1970's, a new theory that incorporates both classical and modern pragmatics emerged, called Argumentation Theory. This theory was first advocated by the linguists Jean-Claude Anscombe and Oswald Ducrot, and is still being developed further today. As its name suggests, AT proposes that language is intrinsically argumentative, and that human communication is 'fundamentally a matter of regulating and assessing others, with exchange of information being secondary' (Verhagen 2008: 311).

More recently, the incorporation of results from studies of animal communication has enabled supporters of AT to put forth convincing empirical evidence to prove that human language, like animal communication, may fundamentally involve an argumentative, *dyadic* relationship (speaker/hearer), with built into it, as it were, a referential, *triadic* system (speaker/object of joint attention/hearer) (ibid.: 308). Research has shown for example how chimpanzees use an 'intentional structure comprising the communicator's social intention, as his fundamental goal, and his "referential" intention, as a means to that goal' (Tomasello 2008: 50-51).

So how does all this show in human language? Anscombe and Ducrot explain how even purely descriptive statements, such as:

1. There are seats in this room.

provide arguments, inviting the hearer to make certain inferences that point towards a conclusion. With (1), an inference would be that there is a certain amount of comfort in the room. This shows from the fact that when this inference is cancelled, the additive conjunction gives us an incoherent sentence, as in (1a):

1. There are seats in this room.
 - a. *And moreover, they are uncomfortable.

Obviously, this entails serious implications for the semantics/pragmatics distinction, because in this view, the intentions of speakers partially determine the truth-conditional content of an utterance, which means that language involves a pragmatic form of compositionality, due to which ‘the meaning of the word is its contribution to the argumentative value of utterances in which it occurs’ (Verhagen 2008: 314).

References

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28-10-2016

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Words (excluding references and footnotes): 1260